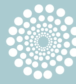

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN NEW RELIGIONS AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES

The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema

Edited by
Tessel M. Bauduin
and Henrik Johnsson

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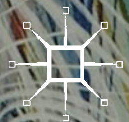

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Editors

The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Conceptualizing Occult Modernism

Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson

Any student of literature and the arts is bound to sooner or later come across the concept of 'the death of the author', made famous by literary scholar Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1993–1995 [1968]).[1] In his discussion of the relationship between author and text, Barthes argued for a style of literary criticism in which the biographical author recedes into the background and is rendered irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. Barthes used surrealism as an example of a movement that sought to do away with the author, instead championing an 'authorless' text that has written itself, as it were. Similarly taking his cue from surrealist automatism, literature critic Maurice Blanchot also considered automatic writing as a means of liberating text and language from the constraints imposed by the conscious mind. Automatic writing transforms the writer's hand into an 'independent force', a hand that 'could not and knew not how to do anything—except write' (Blanchot, 1955, 187). In the end, both Blanchot

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and Barthes argued for a redefinition of the relationship between author, text, and reader.

While the similarities between their texts should not be overstated, one that is of particular interest here is the fact that neither discusses the history of automatism. As both highlight the importance of automatic writing to surrealism, one might get the impression that automatism (a term signifying not only automatic writing but also automatic drawing) was a surrealist invention—which it was not. Blanchot still does provide a hint to the origins of automatism when he poetically describes the writing hand as akin to the 'hand of glory that magic speaks of' (Blanchot, 1955, 187). The origins should, however, not so much be sought in the realm of magic per se, but in that of the occult, specifically in nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the attempts of spiritualists to communicate with the dead through the use of automatism. After an initial phase in which spirit communication occurred by means of knocks, raps, and moving furniture, spiritualist séances soon came to offer a setting in which the medium, having invited a spirit to take control of their body, proceeded to create texts, drawings, and watercolours without, as was claimed, the conscious mind being involved in the process. To all appearances the spiritualist work was the creation of the spirit and not the medium. The creative results can be found in the oeuvres of several mediums, not least that of Victorian medium Georgiana Houghton, who realized many impressive watercolours made under spirit (and spiritual) guidance; an example is *Glory Be to God* (c. 1868) (Fig. 1.1).

While the surrealists acknowledged the origins of automatism in Spiritualism (Bauduin, 2014, 41 ff, 2015b), Barthes and Blanchot do not. One could argue that those origins are not relevant to their line of reasoning. Yet a concept rooted in occultism, here specifically in spiritualist practice, has, mediated by surrealism, come to inform the writings of two prominent literary critics of the twentieth century, without this fact being acknowledged. One may fairly wonder whether this is due to simple ignorance of the history of automatic writing or, perhaps, to active avoidance. In both cases the risk of falsifying history and representing both modernism and occultism incorrectly becomes apparent. Complete ignorance on the part of the media and the general public of the cross-fertilization between occultism, modernism, aesthetics, and creativity—its far-reaching consequences to some extent defining art, literature, and cinema even today—is the result. Even more than the amazement with which the recent exhibition of Houghton's work at the Courtauld Gallery, London,

Fig. 1.1 Georgiana Houghton, attributed by her to the spirit of 'Correggio', *Glory Be to God*, c. 1868. Victorian Spiritualists Union Inc., Australia/Courtauld Institute, London

was met by the press, the qualification of her work as '*out* of time'—while it is a perfect example of its own time—underscores the necessity of further critical inquiry into the topic (Courtauld Gallery, 2016; Jones, 2016).

In scholarship the relationship between occultism, on the one hand, and modernist literature, art, and cinema on the other hand has been either dismissed as inconsequential or insufficiently explored. Although the topic has attracted an increasing amount of academic attention during the past few decades, the magnitude of the neglect it has suffered cannot only be explained by oversight. This propels our desire to address the subject of modernism in relation to occultism, and our aim to redress possible misrepresentations of that relationship. Allowing for a certain degree of generalizing, we argue that disciplines such as literary studies and art history have too often considered occultism to be either irrelevant to any analysis of modernist literary texts or visual art works, too trivial to devote more than mere mention to, or simply undeserving of serious inquiry. A dismissive attitude towards the question of how occultism contributed to both the creation and the reception of modern literature and art, and

although less so, to cinema, has resulted in a lack of awareness of the fact that this impact is documented, not least in the works of canonized authors and artists who are rarely associated with an interest in the occult. Furthermore, extant scholarship dealing with the topic is still rife with unaddressed methodological and theoretical issues.

Therefore, this volume sets out to address—or at least, to *begin* to address—such oversights of earlier scholarship. We find that the impact of occultism, its history, concepts, and practices, upon modernist literature, art, cinema, and other media, is varied and multiform, sometimes tangible and traceable, sometimes vaguely implied—and in each case, deserving of careful exploration, consideration, and analysis. We refer to the variety of interactions between occultism and modernist artistic expression as *occult modernism*.

Below we will define this concept, to start with. This will be followed by a discussion of and reflection upon methodological and theoretical considerations, remarks on how earlier scholarship has approached the topic, a proposal for a new typology when dealing with works of occult modernism, suggestions for how scholarship could proceed when investigating occult modernism further, and finally, a discussion of the contributions to this volume as a brief presentation of the case studies of the intersections between occultism and modernism that form the heart of this book.

Defining Occult Modernism

Occult modernism refers to the interaction between occultism and modernist artistic expression. That is to say, occult modernism is the field in which the discourses of occultism and modernism intersect with each other, as well as with other discourses (most prominently science, religion, and modernity). Such intersections are heterogeneous and pluriform. They manifest in objects of so-called 'high' as much as 'low' culture; in modernist, avant-gardist, and arrière-gardist art; and in works of any (material and immaterial) medium.

Occultism. Occultism and modernism have a shared historical background in the processes of societal modernity undergone by Western societies in the period spanning roughly from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Occultism has its roots in the various heterodox religious movements usually referred to by the umbrella term 'Western

esotericism', such as alchemy, Christian *kabbalah* and Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, and Neoplatonism. In the nineteenth century, a resurgence of interest in esotericism can be seen, in combination with a redefinition of the metaphysical questions asked by esotericism. This process results in the formation of new movements that, having developed in the age of modernity, also tend to have adapted to the worldview and concerns of modernity (else risking being rendered obsolete). Examples include movements such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and ritual magical groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (the essential work for information about and definitions of these and other movements is Hanegraaff et al., 2005). The appearance of similar movements is often framed in terms of a nineteenth-century 'occult revival'. Yet more than mere "revival", we are here concerned with invention—including of tradition. All of this leads us to define occultism as *esotericism adapted to modernity*. In other words, occultism is the attempt to integrate the conditions of modernity with the metaphysical worldviews of esotericism. If one were to posit, for instance, that modernity is characterized by a belief in rationalization and the primacy of science, then occultism would refer to a type of esotericism that identifies itself as a 'higher' science, spiritual *and* rational, which further defends itself from criticism by applying (or at least claiming to apply) a scientific methodology.

We further argue that modernity cannot simply be reduced to a matter of science triumphing over religion, with the advance of secularism resulting in a Nietzschean death of God. Building on an assumption that the divine gradually becomes relegated not just to the private sphere but out of the mind of modern man altogether, modernity is often portrayed as the culmination of Enlightenment belief in rationality and a teleological development towards complete secularization. This understanding of modernity takes for granted the idea, most often associated with Max Weber, that the modern world has had its magic and mystery stripped away; it has become disenchanted. The concept of disenchantment or *Entzauberung* is often used to explain what it is that actually makes modernity modern. This standard narrative of disenchantment is now being challenged by scholars arguing that modernity was never disenchanted to begin with (see Asprem, 2014, as well as Faxneld's discussion in Chap. 5). Modernity does entail a process of religious change and a reconfiguration of the concept of the divine, but this does not necessarily result in a general loss of faith. Instead, one finds that modernity necessitates an

uneasy compromise between science and religion, with the religious landscape becoming fragmented into forms of established religion and alternative religious movements. Occultism belongs in the latter category. Claims to the 'Eastern' origins of occultism notwithstanding—made not only by occultists but also by certain scholars—it should be noted that occultism is a distinctly *occidental* phenomenon, not least on account of its use of Orientalizing discourses.

Modernism. Modernism is here understood broadly and inclusively as all artistic expressions that engage with modernity while striving to formulate a new aesthetic. Societal modernity gives rise to modernism in the arts; the lived experience of modernity is represented using forms of expression that both emulate and question the conditions of modern life. Phrased differently, modernism can be understood as *aesthetic modernity*. In addition, for the sake of argument we include here the avant-gardes under the heading of modernism. We understand the avant-gardes as specific artistic currents that combine modernism's aesthetic concerns with a critique of the institutions of art in bourgeois society and utopian, often revolutionary, political ideals, as well as with a critique of modernism itself.

We locate the beginnings of European and subsequently Western modernism in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, with important predecessors such as Charles Baudelaire paving the way for later developments such as symbolism. In a historical context, modernism exists in an often troubled relationship with the societal changes brought on by urbanization, industrialization, the rise of mass culture, nationalism, and imperialism, as well as with the paradigmatic changes brought on by advances in, for instance, psychiatry (most noticeably the 'discovery' of the unconscious) and the natural sciences (such as electromagnetism, Einsteinian relativity and quantum physics, among others) and in communication technology (telegraphy, telephony). Although we have chosen to limit this volume to modernism in the fields of literature, art, and cinema, it is important to emphasize that intersections of occultism and modernism can also be located in music, theatre, dance, and other performative arts, as much as in photography, design, fashion, sculpture, and architecture. Considerations of space have prevented us from exploring those disciplines in this volume.

If occultism is considered part of modernity (rather than modernity's rejected 'Other', a narrative we discard), and if modernism evolves out of modernity, then occultism has a role to play in forming the response of modernism to modernity. The manifold interactions of occultism and modernism can best be described in terms of dynamic interaction. Occultism has an impact on modernism even as it is informed by modernism, occultists often being keen to latch on to the latest artistic trends. Occultism offers modernism new modes of expression; so does modernism for occultism. Occultism asks the same questions as modernism: What does it mean to be modern, and how should a modern life be led? What has been gained in the modern age, what has been lost? How to deal with the heritage of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, and how best to position the present in relation to both past and future? How to face the apparent destabilizing of the world and knowledge by new radical developments in science? What makes human existence meaningful, and why? What constitutes creativity? Occultism is also a search for answers to epistemological issues: What is knowledge, and what can be known? What is reality, and how can we understand it? How do we interact with the world? Similar questions of epistemology and ontology are posed in modernism but perhaps not answered as definitively as in occultism.[2]

The study of occult modernism imposes certain requirements on the scholar wishing to engage with the topic, principally the need to address issues of terminology and definition. We are not suggesting that scholars of occult modernism need to cross over from their own disciplines altogether and lose themselves in terminological discussions of what 'esotericism' or 'occultism' signify. That discussion is already ongoing in the field of religious studies (among many other sources, Asprem, 2015; Granholm, 2014; Hanegraaff, 2012; Neugebauer-Wölk, 2010, 2013; von Stuckrad, 2010). Arguably it is not up to the art historian or scholar of literature to come up with a definitive definition of such complex cultural constructs that are foremost located in the domain of religion. Yet it *is* up to the scholar engaged in the analysis of *occult modernism* to make clear what they understand by 'occultism'—or 'esotericism', 'magic' or 'mysticism', if those are chosen—even if this is achieved simply by reference to a definition proposed by another scholar. In addition, issues of methodology and theory should also be addressed in one way or another, as we will discuss below. First, we will delve a bit further into occult modernism.

Untangling the Concept of Occult Modernism

With a wink to surrealist frontman André Breton, we would describe the process of the impact of occultism on modernism as the *occultation of modernism* (Breton, 1969 [1929], 178). That, in turn, leads to *occult modernism*. This concept is founded on the following interrelated theses:

1. Occultism is an integral part of modernity.
2. Modernists who turn to the occult do so as part of their engagement with modernity.
3. Occultism transforms and is transformed by modernism.[3]

An obvious consequence of these statements is the necessity to study occultism, modernism, and modernity as an integrated whole. Scholarship dealing with occult modernism should take the occult as seriously as modernism. More specifically, the interest in the occultation of modernism is a concern for occult modernism in its *historicity*: in its construction and reception at specific moments in time, and among authors, artists, and cinematographers who evinced an interest in the occult (traceable in source data) and/or who incorporated elements drawn from occultism into their works. Furthermore, we strongly advocate for a return to sources to properly outline the occult in modernism. This results from our experience of, on the one hand, browsing through existing scholarship and, on the other, dealing with primary sources. A considerable amount of relevant source material has been neglected, we find. That is for instance due to some modernists having been relegated to the sidelines of canonical accounts of modernism; others will have had their occult interests expunged from the records or glossed over because, quite simply, a fascination with the occult was regarded as embarrassing. In addition, for all that scholars should be encouraged to revisit and revise the history of occult modernism, an overemphasis upon the impact of occultism on modernism or identification of a relationship with the occult where none existed should be avoided. The concept occult modernism is certainly not meant to imply that all modernism was indebted to the occult.

Awareness of the historicity of occult modernism adds a necessary metahistorical aspect to research into the topic. This aspect extends to the realization that 'modernism', 'occultism', and even 'modernity' are intellectual constructs that can be used to describe and understand historical developments but which can also be used to formulate grand narratives of

progress and modernization, secularization, and disenchantment, by means of which complex historical realities are oversimplified or potentially even falsified.

We furthermore invite scholars of occult modernism to address the theoretical and methodological limitations of earlier studies. An interest in what the histories of modernism and occultism have excluded, glossed over, or misinterpreted should be supplemented by attentiveness to which scholarly methodologies can be brought to bear on the topic and where their usefulness ends. The hybridity of the topic requires any analysis to be grounded in both archival and textual work and object study while at the same time avoiding the temptation to fit the source materials into a pre-established interpretative framework. Risking a statement of the obvious, particular objects may require specific methods of analysis which are not always interchangeable. Indeed, no single methodology can be prescribed as a panacea for all the challenges faced, not least because occult modernism—and the objects of study therein—is as much interdisciplinary as it is multidisciplinary. The approach adopted by scholars should be purposefully broad, to mirror the wide variety of interactions between occultism and modernism. Throughout this chapter, we will outline certain promising avenues of research. These should be viewed primarily as suggestions springing from our areas of interest, and we provide them as incentive for others to develop their own and alternative approaches to the study of occult modernism—which is, after all, what we wish to promote first and foremost.

If the relationship of modernism to occultism was dynamic and multifaceted at the time, marked as it was by fascination, ambivalence, or even outright hostility, it was even more complex in its reception and canonization, that is to say the canonization of modernism as such and the study of how occultism impacted modernist aesthetics. As Henrik Johnsson will explore more in-depth in Chap. 2, earlier research into the topic of literary occult modernism as a result exhibits certain challenging, even problematic, tendencies. A few preliminary observations can be made here.

Firstly (if not already made clear by our emphasis upon the occultation of modernity and the resulting occult modernism), we are by now long past the question of *whether* modernism interacted with occultism. An answer in the affirmative has been readily provided by a variety of studies, and this issue should be considered to have been settled. Moreover, we are well past the traditional narratives of conflict (modernism battling to divest itself of the miasma of occultism or esotericism) or primitivism (the

regressive fascinations of those with an artistic temperament for magic) and should rather engage in a narrative of complexity. Occult modernism is multifaceted: it is pluriform, multimedial, and multilingual; it draws on a variety of cultural, religious, scientific, and aesthetic traditions and discourses; and, finally, it cannot be reduced to a matter of either/or (such as either aesthetics *or* belief).

A more interesting question than whether is *why* modernist authors and artists turned to the occult—a question that invites thoughtful disentanglement of potentially complex material, the driving forces behind an interest in the occult being as varied as the resulting art itself. A self-evident second line of questioning concerns *how*, or a variety of how's as it were, raising a multitude of methodological and theoretical issues both with regard to how an author or artist went about incorporating the occult into their work, as to how the contemporary scholar may go about researching and framing it. We have already stated our preference for source and data-driven research. Below we will offer further discussion regarding the methodological and theoretical issues we are confronted with, as well as a suggestion for a model framework which can be applied to subsequent analyses. One approach that appears to us to have come close to reaching the limits of its usefulness by now is the following: the providing of biographical data, in combination with a surface-level reading of iconography and source materials. Such analyses tend to be inductive, descriptive, and to leap to conclusions. Thus, for instance, the theosophical literature read by Piet Mondrian is listed as definitive proof of his being a Theosophist and, moreover, his art being so too. The card-laying practices in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) are interpreted in the light of the Tarot and Eliot's possible familiarity with the same (disclaimer: the editors are hardly without fault in this regard, Bauduin, 2012). The examples of this approach are many. The format, however, follows a familiar pattern: occult motif/character A, in text or painting B, plus the artist/author having had access to source/milieu C, equals the work's occultism. Or, one might switch the qualifiers: artist/author's participation in occult society D, plus letters/autobiography E commenting on occult group/source F, equals the work's occultism.

Methodologically this functions along the lines of established and conventional literary and art historical analysis. Biographical information is given pride of place in the act of interpretation; the analytical tools (or rather, descriptive devices) employed are used to expound intellectual-historical contexts, cataloguing references to the occult in the work of art

or text, tracing lines of influence, and establishing a canon of modernists whose occult leanings are not in dispute—often with the unintended effect of singling out a few names to the exclusion of all others. We will give an example drawn from modern art: groundbreaking exhibitions and catalogues such as *The Spiritual in Art* (Tuchman et al., 1986) and *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (Loers, 1995) adopted the said approach. The many valuable insights they have provided aside, these shows aimed to settle accounts with formalism and claimed to present a more complete story, while in fact offering only a mild revision. The canon remains unchanged and is, if anything, reaffirmed. Today, any list of the pioneers of abstract art would still consist of the usual suspects: František Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian, although now their occult interests might be lightly pencilled in. The dominance of this approach to the occult in modern art is still inescapable—a long overdue retrospective of the important Swedish occult artist Hilma af Klint was subtitled *A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Müller-Westerman and Widoff, 2013).[4] Georgiana Houghton is along similar lines suddenly perceived as the 'world's first abstract artist' (Spencer, 2016). Abstraction and the Mondrians of modernism are still the gold standard by which artists are measured. With some shoehorning of bits and bobs of the occult into the modernist canon, the established narratives are still reinforced and merely made slightly more (or less) palatable by the added spice of occultism.

The How and Why of Occultism

If posed at all, the question of why an author, artist, cinematographer (and others) would appropriate or become involved with the occult is not an easy one. Apart from the complexity of interpreting and analysing sources in a satisfying manner, there is the not inconsiderable danger of the answer to this question already being informed by the perceptions (or even beliefs) of the scholar posing it. Equating esotericism and occultism to irrationalism or superstition, a position that can be encountered throughout modern scholarship, will inevitably lead to a flawed appraisal of works of occult modernism. Sixten Ringbom's seminal study of Kandinsky, *The Sounding Cosmos* (1970), was innovative and groundbreaking, but the author's aim was still to underline the presence of irrational (and in his view dangerous) forces in modern art. In the process of doing so, Ringbom distanced himself and his scientific methodology from the 'spirituality' of Kandinsky. This is not a position to be found only in scholarship of the 1970s or

1980s. Even contemporary studies position occultism as, in the end, irrelevant, as, for instance, in the recent—and otherwise very interesting—exhibition *Artists and Prophets: A Secret History of Modern Art 1872–1972* (already a rather telling title):

> Throughout [this catalogue/exhibition] the view is advanced that, if these [modern] artists and prophets dabbled with the occult at all, it was usually superficially. Their real concern was to effect a change in the lifestyle and outlook of contemporary man so as to help people solve personal, social, and economic problems. (Kort, 2015, 429)

Without a doubt such a conclusion may be valid in some cases. Yet the emphasis upon 'dabbling' in something, 'superficially' and only to meet *real* concerns, not only misjudges a historical reality and shifts the focus of attention away from the work under scrutiny but also employs rather suggestive language. The continuing scholarly trend to acknowledge only to subsequently dismiss modernist culture's fascination for and engagement of the occult as hardly substantial strengthens our resolve to revisit the topic.

A second factor informing scholarly understanding of the topic is how the relationship between religion, science, and the arts is viewed. Does esotericism/occultism/magic have a role to play as intermediary between the three discourses, or is one thought of as a remnant or precursor of the other? Is art a new religion and occultism a misbegotten child of the transition, best forgotten? After all, apparently '[n]o one in his right mind goes to an art museum to worship anything but art, or to learn about anything else' (Reinhardt, 2003, 822); that would seem to be doubly true for the occult. It would seem that art supersedes all religion and metaphysical interests, including occultism. Related to this second point is many scholars' adherence to grand narratives of secularization, disenchantment, and the triumph of science and reason as an inevitable consequence of the success of the Enlightenment project and the progress of modernity (in the West, one should add). In this case it is felt that occultism, if anything, should have been left behind long ago, as the apparently premodern character of occultism cannot be reconciled with modernism. Yet, secularism is dogma, not reality; and such positions should be left behind already (Viswanathan, 2008).

Those are the variables that broadly define the range of answers to the question of why modernist artists and writers would become invested in the occult, which further tend to fall within a limited spectrum. There is

the explanation of heterodoxy: the occult is depicted as attractive to modernists because it is a throwback, a survival of the irrational, atavistic, regressive, and primitive in the modern age. This line of reasoning can be linked to an explanation of the therapeutic value of occultism: the occult offers a re-enchantment, a new spiritualism, a mystical worldview, to counter the harsh light of modernity. A third explanation is that of innovation: occultism provides access to special knowledge, secret techniques and transcendental experiences, unique pathways to creativity, and artistic production. In this case occultism is seen as primarily a means to an end: modernists are drawn to the occult because it entices them with promises of metaphysical insight or techniques that would otherwise be unobtainable. Indeed, rather than for answers to existential questions alone, this utilitarian perspective is frequently the reason behind modernist experimentation with occult tropes, methods, concepts, or frameworks. We should note that these three explanatory domains are not without their merits, merits that moreover can be enhanced by combining them. But we would also add a fourth: from a strategic perspective, occultism can be regarded in terms of a particular market—think of an eccentric but affluent patron—or of avenues of dissemination. A rewarding variation on the theme of occultism's heterodoxy being the main attraction to modernists would be to inject questions of ontology and identity and of epistemic systems and competing discourses into the debate.

Later French surrealism can be used as an example. Surrealism became increasingly invested in occult ideas because of the view that occultism offered an alternative paradigm with which to understand the world, instead of the (from the surrealists' perspective) failed paradigm of progress and reason. 'Magical' thinking, equated to 'primitive' thought in the tradition of French anthropology (and frequently referred to within academia as 'analogical' thinking), was perceived as a worldview that would bring about a transformation of life and a reshaping of the world. Hence, in this case it was the surrealists themselves who considered occultism heterodox and irrational and identified it as primitive and premodern, all factors making it suitable to their political and artistic agendas (Bauduin, 2014, 175–182). Recently an argument along similar lines has been made that occultism, here as 'magic', offered a non-normative, heterodox conceptual framework for modernists to think about their art and its efficacy, enabling them to revise their understanding of concepts such as realism and *mimesis*:

> [T]he aesthetic experiments of the first half of the twentieth century that we call modernism drew on the discourses of the occult dominant during the period […] because in them it saw the possibilities for a reconceptualization of the mimetic. (Wilson, 2013, 1)

But the constant reaffirmation of the marginality and otherness of occultism on the part of scholars may also be indicative of a general unease with the subject or even an active need to marginalize the 'forces of the occult' in line with Theodor Adorno's critique of occultism as regressive in his *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (1994 [1951]), than an accurate judgement of occultism's position with regard to dominant discourses and its possible own dominance. As recent studies of occultism from the perspective of intellectual history have shown, occultism enjoyed a more prominent position in modernity than has previously been recognized (Owen, 2004; Pytlik, 2005; Treitel, 2014; see also Laqueur, 2006). Indeed, research developments such as these compellingly underscore the need to investigate even more closely the role of occultism in the development of modernism.

Turning to the issue of how such an investigation would differ from earlier attempts, we will note that formalist interpretations of works of occult modernism tend to gravitate towards the odd position of regarding the author or artist as both alive *and* dead. Elements of the text or art work that can be traced back to occultism are used to map the personal (occult) beliefs of the artist; or, in a similar vein, if we already 'know' that the artist dabbled in the occult, a search for evidence will soon prove us right. Authorial intent and artistic expression are connected in ways that seem to defy at least time, sometimes logic, and certainly artistic licence and the artist's freedom to choose. Again, this underlines that as far as we are concerned, a new conceptual framework for the study of occult modernism is required.

A Typology of Occult Modernism

Efforts to address head-on the methodological issues inherent in researching occult modernism are rare. The most intellectually rewarding attempt so far is that of esotericism scholar Marco Pasi, who has proposed a fourfold typology of the ways in which 'the relationship of the occult with [contemporary] art can present itself' (Pasi, 2010, 107). Pasi's four types can be summarized as *representation*, *production*, *initiation*, and *mediation*.

In the first instance, occult symbols are reproduced in a work of art. In the second, the art work becomes an esoteric object on the level of a talisman or magical amulet. If the art work serves as a point of departure for a spiritual experience, it gains an initiatory function. Finally, a work of art can be the result of a supranatural communication or experience, which is to say that it is mediated (Pasi, 2010, 107–108).

Pasi's typology is a pragmatic and frequently useful method of conceptualizing the relationship between occultism and art, as Kristoffer Noheden will demonstrate in Chap. 9, while Pasi's more recent twofold typology (Pasi, 2015) is employed by Per Faxneld in Chap. 5. Nonetheless, it harbours some problematic tendencies, primarily because of the blurring of boundaries between processes, actors, and agents involved in the production and reception of art. Pasi's fourth type, for instance, concerns a process of creation in which a spiritual or occult element is thought of as playing a part; mediation here overlaps with production. For all the apparently unorthodox manner of creation, however, the final product itself may still be quite ordinary; indeed, mediated works ostensibly created by the spirits of past masters can be decidedly mediocre. In contrast, works of art falling into Pasi's second category (talismans) may be created in ordinary ways, be composed of commonplace materials, and even be employed for quotidian purposes but are intended to *function* as magical objects. That entails a process of reception which depends on the creator of such an object being perceived by others as possessing extraordinary powers or at least as having access to some form of elite knowledge that allows the creator to invest the said object with magical properties. But what, we would ask, if a work of art is intended to serve a magical purpose but viewed by the audience as merely a work of art? The line of communication between the artist and public may easily fail—in both directions. Returning to the example of Kandinsky, most museum visitors today would presumably perceive his abstract paintings as just that, and not as representations of a spiritual or supra-physical reality, nor would Kandinsky's hopes that his art would elevate the audience's spiritual awareness necessarily register.

Knowledge or experience may be gained through Pasi's third type, which seems a combination of the art work's function and purpose. A process of instrumentalization may be at work here, with a final aim (initiation) that supersedes the work itself. Finally, hardly any occult knowledge (or experience) would necessarily be required to create an art work falling within Pasi's first type. For example, anyone can copy

the sigils of planetary spirits or magical squares in the *Key of Solomon*, not least after S.L. MacGregor Mathers published a compilation in 1889. Another example is Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Là-bas* (1891), which at first glance seems filled with occult tropes but which, at second glance, might be better qualified as gothic, the author deriving much of his material from (sensational) press stories and other information readily available in mainstream culture. Merely underlining certain tropes, themes, symbols, or narrative structures as occult, while valuable in itself, does not always tell us that much.

Such blurring of boundaries between creation, inspiration, intention, function, reception, and so on may make this particular typology less easy to wield in the study of works of art and literature. This exemplifies the challenges faced by interdisciplinary scholarship in general. The driving force behind Pasi's types is occultism, not the art work. In line with our earlier argument that the scholar of art or literature should tread lightly in the field of religious studies, the flipside is that the academic training and experience of scholars of religion cannot be easily transposed to analysis of the arts. While for a religious scholar the occult beliefs involved in the creation of a work of art, or the occultism present in the artist's circle, for instance, are differences of *type* (everything circling back to the overall category of 'occultism'), we argue that it is instead a difference in *kind*.

We consider it necessary, when discussing the arts in relation to occultism, to distinguish between the various constituent components involved in the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of art works, artists, milieus, and styles or genres. We therefore propose the following typology of occult modernism, intended as a model framework to assist in bringing more clarity to the topic. Five overall components interact and can be distinguished within occult modernism:

1. Processes. First and foremost the creation of art, but also its dissemination and reception.
2. Actors. Primarily the artist-creator, but also the patron, buyer, or otherwise intended audience (if any); publishing houses, collectors, museums; an artist's milieu.
3. The work itself. A distinction should be made between the different aspects of the work according to its artistic medium and material (text, film, the plastic arts), the different aspects of the work (style, genre, structure, etc.), and its presentation and distribution.

4. The function of the work. If one considers the author-artist not dead, this may function as intended and be expressed by the author. Other functions are, for instance, as received, both by audiences familiar with occultism and by those that are not, and as used, within an occult context as much as in non-occult contexts.
5. Aesthetics. While it is debatable whether one could speak of an 'occult aesthetic' in the singular, in some cases a specific aesthetic system can be identified, and a few examples will be provided below.

The above framework is by no means definitive; we are certain that it can be expanded and improved upon, and we invite others to do so. Furthermore, we do not wish to suggest that all components or the dynamics of their interaction must be taken into account. Neither do we mean to imply, though, that these components act entirely independently in all cases or that they must be considered in isolation. Obviously the choice of focus will depend on one's subject and research interests. What we do wish to suggest is that any scholar approaching the topic of occult modernism could, and perhaps should, take a moment to think about and possibly make explicit in their study where, as a point of departure, they locate the occultism in the modernism studied—in the work itself or in its effect on or perception by the audience? In the work's iconography or its aesthetic? In the process of inspiration or of creation? In (the biography of) the artist or their milieu? This question must be answered early on, since it will necessarily impact the overall analysis across all of these loci.

A brief point about the thorny question of belief. Some modernists self-identify as occultists and subscribe to the dogmas of a particular occult current. Yet the modernist interaction with occult currents ranges across the entire religionist spectrum from faith to agnosticism or atheism, with all possible positions, including prominently typically (post-)modernist devices such as irony and paradox, in between. One insightful term in this regard is provided by Walter Benjamin, who, in his reflection upon surrealism, used the term 'profane illumination' (Benjamin, 1978), capturing perfectly that in modernism secular enchantment is entirely possible.

At the same time, we emphasize that the study of the occult in art is also a means to arrive at *other* issues; questions about, for instance, creativity, experimentation and technique, materiality, embodiment, artistic appropriations of the past, and visions of the future. Occult means of creation and inspiration raise important issues about authorship, the seat of creativity, and modern constructions of the artist as genius and prophet.

Now that (telegraphic) communication had become wireless, it was high time for a 'wireless imagination', too, argued the futurists (Marinetti, 1995 [1913]). Several decades earlier, of course, the invention of telegraphy left a deep mark on occultism when spirits began to communicate by knocks and raps. With the invention of telephony, phone calls from the dead arrived too (as explored by Ronell, 1989). Occult materials/materialities are another issue altogether, and when used in concert with occult techniques or allusions to such—as in postmodern and contemporary art using materials identified as 'alchemical', referring to alchemical contexts, and re-enacting an alchemical process—provide a space for asking questions about the effect of art on the artist and public, artistic engagement with history and craft, or even the importance of transformation or transmutation as an affect demanded by society (see Dupré et al., 2014).

Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the complex and multilayered nature of occult modernism, we deem it impossible to provide a single methodological and theoretical framework, one all-encompassing recipe for approaching both the occultation of modernism and the occult modernist as such. We will instead provide some suggestions, to serve as points of departure for further development.

In our typology we have outlined five components: processes, actors, objects, functions, and aesthetics. These may be analysed independently and in a constellation of two or more. *Field and network*. One can imagine, for instance, case studies following the production of a work within the context of the artist's milieu, its reception among patrons, peers, and antagonists, its dissemination in periodicals and reproductions, and its gradual insertion into historical textbooks. Although the dynamics between the factors involved would be understood differently according to one's academic background, few studies have shown an interest in framing the interpretation of such interactions in terms of actor-network analysis. Nor has field theory been put to use in analysing occult modernism, even though notions of field would prove helpful when studying particular milieus, occultist, modernist, or otherwise. Those are but a few instances of possible avenues of inquiry that could be expanded. Throughout this text, we have provided other examples; here, we will engage in a few further thought experiments to illustrate the wealth of underexplored critical perspectives on the topic.

Creation and artistic identity. Discussions of occult processes of creating art have frequently focused on the mediation of the work, generally with the aim of safeguarding authorship—a piece of automatic writing generated during a séance is not entered into the literary canon under the spirit's name; the Courtauld exhibits the art of 'Georgiana Houghton' and not of 'the spirit of Correggio', for all that on the back of the canvas Houghton attributed the painting to the Italian Renaissance painter. The distinguishing of categories such as *art brut*, outsider art, and spirit art in the discipline of art history is another such safeguard that serves to keep the status quo intact. Queer theory could here be employed to destabilize established categories and force us to rethink previously held notions of authorial integrity. The identity of mediums who write or draw in the setting of a séance is queered in significant ways: the alleged author of the work is another being, often belonging to the opposite gender (or even genderless), frequently dead, sometimes a historical figure, possibly with another ethnic background (which in turn would invite post-colonial analysis), and, in a best-case scenario for the medium, famous. Besides questions regarding the construction and performance of different identities, such cases could serve as source material for studies of the performative aspects of artistic production, as well as of the subversion of 'acceptable' ways of creating art and literature in a manner strongly reminiscent of avant-gardist practice. Artistic mediums frequently worked under conditions that were entirely irregular—writing or painting blindfolded, without preparation, from top to bottom, from right to left—and were generally not trained at the academy or well-read in the literary canon. Female mediums, in particular, could find in mediumism a way to kick-start a new life and career. And while the gender angle has been explored in several important studies (Braude, 1989; Owen, 1989), the applicability of gender and queer theory to mediumistic women who built a literary or artistic career out of nothing has hardly been exhausted.

Discursive and narrative strategies. Researchers studying occult literary texts have offered valuable theoretical and methodological insights applicable to works of occult modernism. Promising recent examples of such scholarship include Miriam Wallraven's work on the occult literature of Theosophy frontwoman Annie Besant and other occultists (Wallraven, 2008). On a parallel track, an inspiring example of what discourse analysis can yield in this regard is Benedikt Hjartarson's analysis of avant-garde manifestos (Hjartarson, 2013). In Chap. 6 of this volume, Hjartarson will explore Hans Richter's Dadaist film *Vormittagsspuk* (1928), an example of

the spiritist aesthetic that permeated certain strata of modernist culture. And where visual art works are concerned, Jonathan Shirland's (Shirland, 2013) inspiring analysis of the discursive phrasing and terminology related to Spiritualism and its concerns employed by Victorian artist James Whistler, as well as by his critics and admirers, and in particular as combined with Whistler's ghostly iconography and style, explores a fruitful research trajectory that calls out for more such study. And what would happen, we wonder, if the discursive and narrative strategies used by occultists were compared to those found in modernist works inspired by the occult? Does the occultist writer of fiction, for instance, make use of a narrative strategy whereby the text is structured so as to impart a 'double message', one intended for the general public and the other for the occultist readership? Can this and other strategies be appropriated by modernist authors, and if so, how and why? More generally, when is it relevant to study occult literature as *literature*, and when is it relevant to do the opposite, that is to say, read works of fiction as *occult* literature? Additionally, how does one separate the two?

The scholar of occult modernist fiction will inevitably be faced with the question of how to distinguish between novels written by occultists and occult novels written by modernists. The issue at hand is perhaps one of categorization, and can be illustrated by a few simple questions about novels which make use of motifs and concepts drawn from occultism, that is to say, occult novels. Are such novels to be interpreted as vehicles for the dissemination of the author's occult beliefs? The answer would most likely be affirmative in the case of Aleister Crowley's novel *Moonchild* (1917). August Strindberg's novel *Inferno* (1897), in contrast, is primarily thought of as a work of fiction. With Crowley, the novel part of occult novel disappears; with Strindberg, occultism fades into the background, and the occult motifs present in the text are seen to merely accentuate the novel's (non-occult) themes. Marja Lahelma will address this issue in part in Chap. 4. In any case, since we arrive at Crowley's novel pre-armed with the knowledge that Crowley positioned himself, and is generally regarded as, an occultist, we will read his novel as occultism. Statements that the author of *Inferno*, on the other hand, was an occultist who used his (early modernist) novel to communicate his occult worldview are hard to find. Instead, one commonly encounters interpretations along the lines of how Strindberg was an author who made use of occultism for aesthetic effect. To give another example, Gérard de Nerval's novel *Aurélia* (1855) is used to illustrate Nerval's personal and possibly esoterically influenced beliefs, whereas the

occult tropes in Umberto Eco's *Il pendolo di Foucault* (*Foucault's Pendulum*, 1988) are read as postmodernist play with the trappings of occultism. A solution will need to be found to the problem of distinguishing between similar but different types of text while at the same time avoiding the thorny issue of reanimating the supposedly 'dead' author.

Aesthetics. The aesthetic analysis of occult modernist art works can profitably be directed towards isolating certain clusters of motifs and images that, when taken together, allow us to identify aesthetic systems associated with specific occult movements. As an example, an aesthetic of the invisible can be discerned in works of spiritualist art and literature, as well as in the non-spiritualist works this aesthetic has inspired. Developing from, among other things, spirit photography and fuelled by 'ghostly' lens-based techniques, an aesthetic of the invisible can be traced in photography and film, theatre, and dance, gradually becoming integrated into popular visual culture (Keshavjee, 2009, 2013; Warner, 2006). Indeed, a veritably *haunted* aesthetics seems to have sprung up, driven by developments in media and technology (Natale, 2016; Sconce, 2000). These and other examples of aesthetic systems derived from or inspired by the realm of occultism could be analysed in conjunction with each other, as well as in relation to popular culture and *occulture* (see below), perhaps even with the aim of locating an as yet hypothetical aesthetic particular to occultism. That, in turn, could be used to trace the impact of the aesthetics of occultism upon modernism.

Aesthetic analysis ties into the question of genre: when and why exactly should a certain motif or image be thought of as belonging to the category of occultism? For instance, the motif of the double or *doppelgänger* features prominently in both occult novels and in the literature of the fantastic. Attention should be paid to the exchange of tropes between different types of text and/or image (cinematic and otherwise) and the reconfiguration of these tropes when entered into a new context. Not all literary doubles are informed by occultist notions of astral selves or the extension of sensibility beyond the corporeal self; sometimes a *doppelgänger* is just a *doppelgänger*. The importance attached to the provenance of motifs and images suggests that historical contextualization is essential to the aesthetic analysis of occult modernist works. This in turn leads us to conclude that an aesthetic analysis could profitably be combined with what has been termed the 'materialist turn' in modernism studies and more generally in art history and cultural history, that is to say, an emphasis on the original conditions, such as sites of publication of texts and

images. One can think of, for instance, occult periodicals publishing modernist fiction and sometimes vice versa. As well, conceptual reflection upon and theoretical criticism of when and why certain motifs are thought of as belonging to the category of occultism and how such categorization processes work and have worked historiographically would be welcome additions to the scholarly investigation of occult modernism.

Occultism and mainstream culture. The concept of *occulture*, used by Christopher Partridge to describe the process of dissemination of occult discourse and topoi into mainstream culture, is germane to the study of the interaction between occultism, modernism, and popular culture (Partridge, 2004–2005). As Nina Kokkinen (Kokkinen, 2013) has convincingly argued, *occulture* is well suited to the analysis of occult modernism. To some extent the explanation of how modernist authors and artists came to familiarize themselves with occultism will be found in the nineteenth-century popular culture, which was quick to embrace occultist imagery, not least that which would help sell copies of magazines and books (Warner, 2006). Equally important was the ridicule directed towards the claims of occult organizations, which (inadvertently) popularized those very same claims. While modernism can perhaps be categorized as being 'highbrow', the rather 'lowbrow' spiritualist séances, as an example, could be used for the purposes of entertainment, as a pastime offering a certain thrill of the forbidden. When popular culture becomes suffused with occult imagery and ideas, a smorgasbord will have been provided for modernist authors and artists to make use of (Nelson, 2001).

The effects of the dissemination of occultism into mainstream culture will vary from one instance to another. On occasion elements of occultism will be integrated into modernist art works while retaining their original function; this would tend to be the case with modernists who believe in the dogma of a specific occultist movement. In other cases, occultism is appropriated and rendered commonplace, profane, or emptied of magic. The visual culture of Spiritualism, for instance, may become a repertoire of spooky motifs in horror films (Andriopoulos, 2008; Gunning, 2004). A third case would be the modernist appropriation and subsequent 'disenchantment' of occultism, or *profane illumination*, a category that has received only limited scholarly attention. Finally, and on the other side of the spectrum, depictions in popular culture of occultism and occultists can be taken into account, especially when such depictions can be shown to have informed modernist perceptions of the occult in turn.

Before we turn to the studies of occult modernism this volume offers, permit us a few final words on conceptualizing, grounding, categorizing, and otherwise framing one's research into the confluence of occultism with the aesthetic experiments and expressions that are considered modernism. Ideally, an approach would be rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980), decentred, and/or non-linear and, furthermore, depart from or at least challenge occidental, Eurocentric, and Western perspectives. For all that we already ask a lot of future scholarship on occult modernism, it appears essential to us that, to move forward and enter a new phase of research, all avenues and trajectories should be explored, and a stringent turn towards a new methodology and theoretical framing is necessary.

Investigations into Occult Modernism

This book sets out to explore occult modernism—or occultism as a response to the modern condition, borrowing Per Faxneld's phrasing in Chap. 5—from different perspectives. Structurally, it is organized in three sections: artistic practices, aesthetics, and occulture, with nine chapters that take us from the late-nineteenth-century and *fin-de-siècle* art and literature through the avant-garde to contemporary practices.

The attitude of scholarship towards occultism and towards the occult in and in relation to modernity and modernism has been problematic, to say the least. In Chap. 2, Henrik Johnsson will delve deeper into this subject, focusing on how the discipline of literary studies has approached the topic of occult modernism. Taking as his point of departure the limited approach of earlier literary scholarship and resulting failure to fully appreciate the extent of the historical entanglements between occultism and modernism, Johnsson divides the scholarship under discussion into three periods or 'generations'. These are characterized by an increasing awareness of the theoretical and methodological challenges facing the scholar of occult modernism, many of which—including the tendency to focus on a single author or artist, modernist movement, or language—have yet to be resolved today. Suggesting that scholars learn from the mistakes and overviews of the past, Johnsson therefore argues for a new 'generation' of scholarship into occult modernism, which would be comparative, interdisciplinary, and multilingual.

In Chap. 3 Gísli Magnússon investigates the works of four well-known authors: Guy de Maupassant, Gustav Meyrink, August Strindberg, and Rainer Maria Rilke. Central to his argument is the concept of *visionary mimesis*: the artist-author, who identifies as a visionary, aims not to imitate the material world but rather to represent spiritual reality. The need to move beyond naturalism characterizes the work of many artists and writers around 1900 and later; yet, artists like Kandinsky, whose work was later claimed for abstraction, did not intend to depart from the principle of mimesis altogether but rather challenged traditional conceptions of it and of reality. Proceeding from the worldview of sensuous-supersensuous monism—in which that part of reality that is supersensuous is still partly perceptible, a view found among many occultists, artists, and intellectuals alike—they instead set out to achieve a new visual expression of mimesis incorporating the material and immaterial, the mundane and spiritual. Magnússon uncovers similar developments in literature in his case studies, highlighting the different ways the worldviews behind visionary mimesis and the creative potential of sensuous-supersensuous monism are expressed in the works studied. As they range from the transition phase from naturalism to occult modernism (Maupassant, Strindberg), to late symbolism (Rilke), to occult expressionism (Meyrink) and thus represent different phases of modernism, this chapter demonstrates how widespread occult ideas were in the literature of the time.

Marja Lahelma, in Chap. 4, continues the theme of the modern pursuit of expressing the inexpressible and revealing the invisible, facilitated by the perception of the artist-author as a hypersensitive genius of exceptional sensitivity or even possessing higher sensibilities. Focusing on Strindberg, Lahelma concentrates her analysis upon a part of Strindberg's oeuvre that has seen little scholarly study: his artistic works, in particular his photographs and paintings. In his artistic pursuits, Strindberg aimed to reunite science and religion, a typically occultist approach and indicative of the early modernist contexts in which artistic, scientific, and occultist ideas collided, often very productively. Essential to this process was the psychological theorization of the unconscious that took place in the late nineteenth century and which provided models of the human mind as multiple and fragmented. It becomes clear that Strindberg suggested in his works an interaction between the unconscious mind and extrasensory reality, even as he also proposed one between subjectivity and nature, the subjective and objective dimensions of art, the insistent materiality of an art work, and its spiritual dimension. As Lahelma argues, instead of singling

out Strindberg as an isolated genius or forerunner of abstraction, he can fruitfully be positioned as a central representative of late-nineteenth-century occult modernism.

The fragmentation of self informs the modern(ist) quest for redefinition of, or perhaps struggle to redefine, the authorial self, a concern central to modernism and one which saw many modernist authors and artists turn to occultism and dissociated states. In Chap. 5 Per Faxneld discusses the crisis of authorship that manifested so tangibly in early modernism, focusing on British writers and artists who claimed to have been inspired by fairies or even had their works produced by them. As Faxneld argues, occultist discourses concerning fairies, antiquarian notions concerning fairy lore, and modern artistic preoccupations concerning authorship and the seat of genius could collide, as his case study of William Butler Yeats shows. In a milieu where fairies were captured in photographs and cited as inspiration for paintings and literature, they could also come to be positioned as alienated authors, in a way, as they apparently dictated texts to William Blake and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Thus the fairy could play an important role in the modernist preoccupation with intentionally fragmenting the authorial self and the increasing perception of the creative subject as passive and unstable, or even splintered, by ascribing artistic innovation to external entities.

These three chapters constitute the section *Artistic Practices*, which is followed by the second section, on *Aesthetics*. In her chapter on French author and esoteric aesthetician Joséphin Péladan, Sasha Chaitow presents a case study of this original semi-symbolist writer, who aimed at synthesizing esoteric knowledge and took it upon himself to effect the collective initiation of society at large. European artists, authors, and thinkers in the late nineteenth century found themselves in the midst of manifold sociocultural changes and on the cusp or 'threshold' of modernism. Indeed, as Chaitow argues, Péladan can be seen as an early modernist, an author whose oeuvre represents the act of stepping over that threshold. Chaitow also confronts the challenges of interdisciplinary scholarship and the complexity of material that combines the esoteric and occult, the modern and modernist. She introduces her concept of 'literary esotericism', a specific subcategory of literature where a literary work functions *as* an esoteric symbol and vehicle of esoteric praxis, and further provides insight into the interdisciplinary methodological framework created in her own work, as a roadmap for other scholars.

In Chap. 7, we encounter the key avant-gardist film *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts before Breakfast*, 1928) by Hans Richter. Conventionally discussed in relation to issues of classification, Benedikt Hjartarson here draws attention to its understudied content that is so explicitly present in the title *Vormittagsspuk*. More than just playing with paranormal phenomena, in Hjartarson's reading the film engages in a dialogue with the visual culture of Spiritualism and other occult currents. Highly relevant here is Christopher Partridge's concept of *occulture*: the wide circulation of ideas and products rooted in occultism across discourses. The ghosts and paranormal events in Richter's film are analysed as traces of an epistemic moment and the iconography as partly shaped by spirit photography, and while Richter presents the beings from beyond with irony, that does not indicate mere superficiality or subordination of the film's links to Spiritualism. *Vormittagsspuk*, Hjartarson shows, leads the viewer into a realm of mystery and chance, with the filmmaker exploring deeper layers of perception, new consciousness, and phantasmatic oscillations between visible and invisible, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality—a theme we have encountered already in the chapters above and clearly a central concern of occult modernism. Hjartarson's chapter makes clear that analysing the role of occultism should be part and parcel of discussions of aesthetic modernity; rather than treating the aesthetic as an autonomous social field, it is much more rewarding to see it as a discursive realm intrinsically linked to other discourses, including those of occultism.

The final chapter in this section takes us into the 1950s. In Greece, as Victoria Ferentinou's case study shows, modernism flourished well into the post-war period. In Chap. 8, Ferentinou introduces *Terre de Diamant* (1958), a hybrid and heterogeneous art work of visual poetry or *image-text*, from the hands of Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis. This chapter is the first study to date that both addresses and analyses this work integrally as a composition of texts and images produced to be read and seen together, and identifies and explores its occult language (both visual and textual). Placing the work in its proper historical context, Ferentinou teases out the occultism and heterodox spiritualities it enters into dialogue with, the techniques of creative automatism and passive consciousness as much as the occult, alchemical, magical, gnostic, Greek pagan, and even Tibetan Buddhist sources that inform *Terre de Diamant*'s creative artist pair. Productively employing the theoretical figure of *image-text*, Ferentinou problematizes the search for a single author and 'real' meaning that characterizes so much scholarship on modernism and occult

modernism in particular. Offering an interpretation of *Terre de Diamant* as an open-ended work infused with manifestations of interior visions that invite the viewer to complement or recreate their own narrative using magical thought, this chapter also indicates the usefulness of the *image-text* construct in studies of occult modernism and the many instances of aesthetic hybridity found therein.

Kristoffer Noheden's chapter takes us well beyond the conventional periodisation of modernism. In Chap. 9, which opens the final section on *Occulture*, Noheden considers Czech artist Jan Švankmajer and the six *Drawer Fetishes* he created in 2014 and 2015. Švankmajer, a contemporary surrealist, engages, extends, and reshapes core concerns of surrealism that have underpinned the movement since its inception. Both this and the preceding chapter underline the longevity and even continued relevance of surrealism and in particular its interest in occultism and post-war formulation of the urgent need for a new myth and magical worldview, with the works of artists such as Wilson and Valaoritis on the one hand and Švankmajer on the other, as only two instances of the confluence of the discourses of avant-gardism, occultism, *mythopoeia*, and, in the particular case of Švankmajer's *Drawer Fetishes*, primitivism and fetishism. Here too, therefore, ingrained historiographical assumptions about modernism (and surrealism) are problematized. Placing the drawer fetishes within the context of both Švankmajer's general tendency towards alchemical transmutation of everyday objects, and a discussion of other surrealists such as Pierre Mabille, Leonora Carrington, and Jean Benoît, Noheden argues for a reading of them as magical objects with the double effect of changing the world and transforming life—avowed surrealist aims. Furthermore, they result from the artist's personal ritual of primitivist inspiration, relating to ritualistic making of *minkisi minkondi* (vengeance) objects by the Bakongo people, to Western, partly Freudian-inspired notions of the fetish, and to George Bataille's concerns with sacrifice and ritual. Indicating a wealth of surrealist forms of magic and art magic still to be excavated by scholars, Noheden also underscores the continued relevance of surrealism's turn towards occultism and magic as alternative paths to rationalism and reason and as vehicles of radical transformation, even as discourses of (post-)colonialism and modernist primitivism are brought into the analysis.

Finally, in Chap. 10 Giuliano D'Amico brings the discussion into the present in his study of the Swedish poet Håkan Sandell, a contemporary poet. Sandell's poetry belongs to the current of *retrogardism*, the starting point of which is a critique of modernism, and in whose poetry—as D'Amico shows convincingly—several tendencies of occult modernism are tangibly present, thereby returning us both to 'high modernism' and to the central concern of this anthology. Moreover, with this final study of poetry, we come full circle to literary studies. Mining the usefulness of the theoretical construct of *occulture*, D'Amico analyses several of Sandell's poems, showing how they can be understood as examples of occulture. Indeed, retrogardism shares with occulture, as much as with Western esotericism in general, an 'ancient wisdom narrative'. D'Amico excavates the shamanic, alchemical, gnostic, and magical elements in Sandell's work, highlighting how these elements operate on a methodological level before being fully realized on a thematic level. Thus, for instance, gnostic elements are employed to reflect upon the dualism between the material and spiritual world and possibly effect a synthesis between the two, something already explored by Magnússon in Chap. 3, and one of the red threads running though works of occult modernism, as well as through this anthology. D'Amico introduces the subject of shamanism, a subset of paganism, and returns to the subject of magic, raised in the previous chapter, not least in his discussion of poetry performance as a form of magical practice. Sandell's bardic conception of the poet and the importance of music, rhyme, and rhythm in (the performance of) poetry, with 'the spiritual' becoming the very centre of poetic expression, reifies the construction of the poet-artist-genius as a special intermediary between different realms or spheres of reality that we have also come across several times.

In closing, this book offers one of the poems of Sandell analysed by D'Amico: 'Jag följer inte Dante ner…' ('I do not follow Dante down…'), which is published here in English for the first time.

Notes

1. The editors thank Kristoffer Noheden for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.
2. Our choice of historical focus should not be seen to signify that we deem contemporary material less relevant to the topic. Just as modernism can be argued to have evolved into postmodernism, occultism can be understood to have developed into New Age and other new religious movements. For

an overview of such recent developments, see Asprem and Granholm (2013). The wider and watered-down dissemination of occultism into post-modern Western culture has been termed 'occulture' by Christopher Partridge (2004–2005).

3. However, we will not explore occultism as such, since we are primarily interested in modernist culture and its relationship to occultism. While we are here therefore not concerned with the *modernization* of the occult, or even the modernism-ization, as it were, of the occult, we look forward to studies tackling that topic.
4. It should be noted that the qualification of af Klint as an abstract pioneer was attributed to her by one of the first scholars to study her work, Åke Fant, in 1989, having been implicitly put forward by Fant in an earlier study (Fant, 1986, 1989).

CHAPTER 2

A History of Research into Occult Modernist Literature

Henrik Johnsson

> To consider a publisher in Sweden for my *Inferno* is likely not worth it, but [I] must write it in French to be read; perhaps only in manuscript. That would be the ideal for [an] occult manner of writing. (August Strindberg, letter dated 12 September 1896)[1]

Where fiction inspired by occultism is concerned, not all readers react the same. Some, like August Strindberg, had a habit of reading the occult novels of authors such as Honoré de Balzac not as fiction but as factual accounts of the otherworldly experiences undergone by the author. When writing his own occult novel, *Inferno*, Strindberg chose to write in French and submit it for publication to a Parisian publishing house specializing in occult literature. The fact that Strindberg's interest in occultism informed both his reading and writing practices, as well as his efforts at establishing himself as a household name in 1890s Paris, has only belatedly been recognized. Furthermore, the extent to which Strindberg's occultism influenced his literary modernism has still not been fully explored.[2] This begs the question: if there remain significant

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research gaps in such a well-known case as Strindberg, what can we expect to find when dealing with the occult modernism of lesser-known authors? Furthermore, has scholarship on occult modernism tended to prioritize certain authors and movements, or for that matter languages and historical periods, over others? And where earlier scholarship on occult modernism is concerned, which scientific challenges were faced by the first few generations of scholars and which yet remain?

The following historiography of research into occult modernism will endeavor to answer these questions. I have chosen to limit myself to occult modernist fiction and to focus on studies written in English and French. This choice of focus is due to the prominence of studies of symbolism and surrealism and the academic breakthrough of the research topic in English-language modernism studies of the 1990s.[3] The justification for writing such a historiography is relatively straightforward: to the best of my knowledge, no similar overview currently exists. Research into occult modernism has a by now extensive history, spanning many decades, languages and academic traditions. An increased awareness of this history may help other scholars identify areas that remain understudied and contribute to further advancing the theoretical and methodological state of the art of the field.[4]

Earlier scholarship can be roughly divided into three periods or 'generations'. The first generation consisted of scholars who recognized the relevance of occultism for the study of modernism and whose efforts were directed toward individual authors or movements. This generation developed in tandem with the emergence of esotericism studies as an academic subject, although scholars of modernism were slow to realize the importance of the study of esotericism to their own work. The academic breakthrough of research into occult modernism during the 1990s was brought on by a small cadre of researchers, described here as a second generation, whose publications introduced the topic to a wide audience. The emergence of this generation coincided with the establishment of the Modernist Studies Association and the rise of the 'new modernist studies', a development characterized by the adoption of a global, transcultural and multilingual perspective that in turn came to inform the scholarship of second-generation researchers.[5] Occult modernism, albeit not always referred to as such, now emerged as a distinct subset of modernism studies.

A third generation can be seen to develop during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This generation is clearly indebted to the preceding

but is also more heterogeneous, exploring many different lines of inquiry. The research of third-generation scholars is characterized by the contextualization of source materials, resulting in an increased awareness of the role of historical processes such as secularization in the development of occult modernism. More use is made of the research findings of scholars working in the field of esotericism studies. Anticipating my conclusion, I will suggest that an integration of the theoretical and methodological advances made by scholars of esotericism with the study of occult modernism may result in a new generation of scholarship on the latter. Such an as yet hypothetical fourth generation will, one hopes, elevate the study of occult modernism to even higher levels of academic excellence.

First Generation: ca. 1940–1990

The emergence of the research topic in French studies of the 1940s can perhaps be accounted for by reference to the less pervasive influence of formalist literary criticism in France at the time. Early scholarship tended to focus on symbolism and surrealism, with an important precedent being set by works on Romanticism. It should be noted that the first scholars to explore occult modernism were unable to benefit from (Western) esotericism studies, an academic subject pioneered by Renaissance scholar Frances A. Yates during the 1960s. Yates's publications on early modern esotericism (Yates, 1964, 1966, 1972, 1979) helped establish esotericism as a serious research topic. Although her research has since been subjected to extensive criticism, Yates's studies, as Henrik Bogdan has noted, 'have nonetheless been instrumental in changing the attitude of historians of science and philosophy toward esotericism' (Bogdan, 2007, 8). The later consolidation of esotericism studies as a distinct academic subject may explain why the first generation of scholarship on occult modernism focused on one particular author or movement (and language) and why the relationship between occultism and modernism was only infrequently theorized.

The landmark publications of Denis Saurat (1929–1948) and Auguste Viatte (1928, 1942) on occultism and French Romanticism pioneered the academic study of occultism in literature. The studies by Saurat and Viatte form a bridge to the study of occultism in (early) modernism in that several of the authors discussed, most noticeably Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval, would later exert a profound influence on modernist writers. Symbolism acts as the 'missing link' between Romanticism and

modernism in these studies. The two issues of *Les Cahiers d'Hermès* published in 1947 under the direction of André Rolland de Renéville and which included articles on Baudelaire, Nerval and Arthur Rimbaud further explored the relationship between Romanticism, symbolism and modernism.

Nerval, who can at once be described as a romantic and as a proto-modernist author, serves as a case in point. Jean Richer's scholarly work was instrumental in uncovering the indebtedness of Nerval to occultism, thereby demonstrating the importance of occultism to the development of early modernism. Richer's publications unfortunately also illustrate a common pitfall among first-generation scholarship on occult modernism: a tendency to biographical interpretation, whereby the occult interests of the author are analyzed from a psychologizing perspective. Richer's characterization of Nerval's seminal novel *Aurélia* (1855) as 'not only the end, the final stage of Nerval's oeuvre, but a veritable sum of his experiences during the whole period of 1841 to 1853' (Richer, 1963, 462) is the rule rather than the exception.[6] Despite his emphasis on biography, Richer does see *Aurélia* as belonging to the tradition of the '*initiatory tale* or allegorical travel story' (Richer, 1963, 508), but he does not examine the place of Nerval's novel within this tradition.[7] In a similar vein, Albert Béguin sought to explain the occult interests of modernist authors through recourse to religious and societal factors, imposing his understanding of occultism as a form of 'irreligious humanism' (Béguin, 1949, 24) on the works studied instead of allowing the texts to speak for themselves. This is, perhaps, a side effect of the relative lack of emphasis placed on formalist criticism by French (or Swiss, in Béguin's case) literary scholars at this time.

Baudelaire's occult interests, on the other hand, are often used as a starting point in discussions of the relationship between occultism and symbolism. Guy Michaud (1947) argued that symbolist poetics were influenced by the concept of correspondences, present in early modern esotericism and frequently associated with the thought of Swedish esotericist Emanuel Swedenborg.[8] John Senior's monograph (1959) was the first extensive treatment of the relationship between occultism and symbolism. Senior set out to 'demonstrate that the chief symbolist poets were to some extent occultists', that the philosophy of symbolism is 'occult philosophy', and that the aim of symbolist poetry is 'the communication and evocation

of occult experience' (Senior, 1959, 46). Senior's polemical tone and his use of occultism as a means to criticize contemporary society and popular culture, obviously off-putting to contemporary reviewers, may point to why Senior's study did not have much of an impact.[9] Alain Mercier's two volume study of the topic (1969–1974) held a higher academic standard.[10] Mercier emphasized the fact that the periodical culture of nineteenth-century France included magazines in which art, literature and occultism seemed to happily co-exist.[11] Mercier's argument that symbolism integrated occult discourse into a symbolist poetics is in line with the tendency of scholars to view modernist appropriations of occultism as fundamentally instrumental in nature, that is, as a means to an end. Mercier pays limited attention to those symbolists and others on the peripheries of symbolism (for instance, Joséphin Péladan) to whom occultism was much more than a matter of aesthetics.[12]

Book-length studies of Baudelaire's readings in occultism have also appeared, more often than not written from a religionist perspective. Paul Arnold (1972) maintained that Baudelaire was influenced by the writings of Swedenborg and the Hermetic tract *Poimandres*. Arnold's analysis consisted of a search for evidence in Baudelaire's oeuvre that a certain trope or theme had its origins in esotericism, with limited attention being paid to Baudelaire's aesthetics. Anne-Marie Amiot (1982) adopted a similar approach but focused on the impact on Baudelaire of eighteenth-century Illuminism, in particular the thought of the mystic and philosopher Louis Claude de Saint-Martin. Christopher McIntosh (1972) commented on Baudelaire's friendship with occult writers.

As John Senior's study of symbolism indicates, English scholarship on occult modernism at first tended to focus on French literature. Anna Balakian (1947) was among the first scholars to note the surrealist appropriation of occultism.[13] While Gwendolyn M. Bays's analysis of the trope of the author as seer (1964) devotes chapters to German romantic writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann and Novalis, Arthur Rimbaud emerges as the central figure in her analysis.[14] Bays's reading of Rimbaud's poetics as inspired by his readings in occult literature is not without interest, and her study is still referenced today.[15] Turning to English modernism, William Y. Tindall (1954) argued that James Joyce and other writers of his generation, in an act of rebellion against modernity, turned to the 'theory of knowledge' and 'literary method' of occultism (Tindall, 1954, 29). Tindall unfortunately did not investigate what the latter implied, neither in this article nor in his subsequent monograph (1955).[16]

English scholarship on occult modernism during the 1970s was spurred on by the publication of George Mills Harper's monograph on W.B. Yeats (1974) and the anthology edited by Harper (1975). These volumes were instrumental in drawing attention to Yeats's occult interests, his membership of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the various occult practices he engaged in, most importantly spiritualist automatic writing (in collaboration with his wife George Yeats).[17] Harper's work on Yeats helped foster an academic interest in Yeats's involvement with occult movements and the influence of occultism on his poetics, even as Harper's continued efforts also resulted in the publication of source materials related to Yeats's *The Vision* (Harper, ed., 1992–2001). Presumably because Yeats's occult interests are both explicit and well known, his oeuvre is perhaps the best explored individual instance of occult modernism.[18]

Other authors have been afforded comparatively less attention. Martha Banta (1972), for instance, argued that Spiritualism and psychical research offer an overlooked cultural context to Henry James's fiction. Leonora Woodman (1983) interpreted Wallace Stevens's poetry as being informed by a 'vision of spiritual regeneration' derived from the 'Hermetic tradition' (Woodman, 1983, 4). Finally, Madeline Moore (1984) related Virginia Woolf's use of mythology in her fiction to her political ideals and her mysticism (but not occultism as such).

Second Generation: ca. 1990–2000

The 1990s saw the publication of several important monographs that combined a more comprehensive approach to the study of occult modernism with a polemic directed at earlier scholarship of modernism that had neglected or even concealed the link between occultism and modernism. This second generation of scholars helped position the research topic as both worthy of consideration and in need of further exploration by academics working in different disciplines. Their admirable efforts notwithstanding, however, second-generation scholars exhibit a conspicuous disinterest in integrating the (by now upcoming) discipline of esotericism studies into their work.[19]

Quite possibly the most influential scholar of this generation is Leon Surette, who in an early study (1979) made note of Ezra Pound's fascination with the occult, investigating Pound's reading of occultists such as Joséphin Péladan and G.R.S. Mead. Surette's interest in this topic

culminated in a major study of modernism and the occult (1993). Here, Surette criticized the tendency of modernism scholarship to ignore the research topic, describing such reluctance as instances of academics considering it ‘poor form to dwell upon such an aberration’ as occultism (Surette, 1993, 9). Surette devotes special attention to authors who are at the same time occultists and modernists, such as Yeats, who is described by Surette as an ‘occult visionary’ who incorporated ‘an illumination directly experienced’ into his work (Surette, 1993, 35). In an attempt at explaining the attraction of occultism to modernists, Surette delineates a worldview common to both groups, characterized by an interest in alternative historiographies that have been suppressed by established authorities. Surette’s argument, although certainly intriguing, has rarely been expanded upon by later scholarship.

A preoccupation with the poetry of Ezra Pound unites the contributions of Surette and Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, who investigated the impact of occultism on *The Cantos* in a significant monograph (1992). Interestingly, Tryphonopoulos details the skepticism he faced from Pound scholarship when launching his study of Pound and the occult; his comment that ‘persuading Poundians that Pound was seriously interested in the occult is a formidable task’ (Tryphonopoulos, 1992, xiv) is reminiscent of similar comments in Surette’s publications and reflects a blind spot in scholarship that both these scholars addressed.[20] This is especially noteworthy given the fact that the research topic of occult modernism by now had a history half a century long.

Timothy Materer includes Pound in his major study (1995), but also widens the selection of authors studied. Apart from well-known cases such as Yeats and Pound, Materer takes into consideration poets whose names are less familiar in this context, such as Robert Duncan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and James Merrill. Materer is furthermore aware of the prevalence of occult modernism in other media, citing examples such as the sculptures of Constantin Brâncuși as well as the photography of Alvin Langdon Coburn and Anton Giulio Bargaglia, with Bargaglia in turn influencing the futurist art of Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini. Materer accounts for the modernist fascination with occultism as a case of the thrill of the forbidden: the ‘[s]ecrecy, eclecticism, and rebelliousness’ (Materer, 1995, xiii) of occultism appealed to authors and artists who sought to challenge the aesthetic norms of the day. Much like Surette, Materer is interested in authors who are at once modernists and occultists,

distinguishing between, on the one hand, poets such as Wallace Stevens, by whose use of alchemical imagery '[n]o beliefs are implied', and, on the other, Yeats, Pound or H.D., who could not have written poetry 'with their degree of conviction' purely on the basis of 'the intellectual beliefs of a Stevens' (Materer, 1995, 6). Materer does not, however, explain how his proposed distinction between occultism as trope and belief manifests in the literary text itself.

The research of Helen Sword has focused on issues of aesthetics, focusing on writing practices influenced by occultism. In her study of the modernist use of prophecy and visionary insight (1995), Sword argued that an experience of disenchantment with the modern world resulted in a turn to a prophetic mode whereby the modernist writer adopted the literary persona of a poet-prophet. In a later study (2002) Sword explored the impact of spiritualist mediumship on modernism, uncovering reciprocal lines of influence between occultism and modernism: the automatic writing of Spiritualism exhibits stylistic characteristics that are also commonly found in modernist texts. Such parallels are taken by Sword as evidence for the essential 'modernity' of occultism, with Spiritualism serving as a prime example. Spiritualism thrives in the modernist period 'not in spite of the modernist Zeitgeist but because of it', with mediumship offering a striking parallel to modernist views of the role of the author and the process of artistic creation (Sword, 2002, x). In Sword's reading, occultism is a reservoir of topoi and discourses that can be used by authors to express typically modernist aesthetic concerns.

Finally, mention should be made of research dealing not with the relationship between occultism and modernism but that between esotericism and (early) modernism. Lynn R. Wilkinson (1996) traces the impact of Swedenborgianism on French nineteenth-century literature, focusing on theories of language derived from Swedenborgian thought. In her view, writers such as Baudelaire conceived of language as a system 'capable of producing certain effects' that could be used to merge 'aestheticism and violence' and integrated this understanding of language into both their political ideology and aesthetics (Wilkinson, 1996, 253). Wilkinson's study highlights the hybrid nature of occult modernism by demonstrating how art, religion, politics and language can come to form an all-encompassing discourse in which worldview and aesthetics blend together.

Third Generation: ca. 2000 to the Present

Taking 2000 as a cut-off date for what could reasonably be considered the contemporary study of occult modernism, a number of significant recent developments can be identified. Perhaps the single most important is the shift in focus to the historical contexts of occult modernism. Substantial contributions have been published which explore the intellectual, religious and artistic backdrop against which occult modernism develops. The most frequently cited studies in this regard are those of Owen (2004) and Treitel (2004). Owen investigates the cultural milieu of late nineteenth-century Britain, focusing on the overlap between occultism and discourses on the nature of human consciousness. Owen's argument is that the emphasis of occultists on subjectivity and the exploration of the self evolved in tandem with new models of how the human mind is structured. Arguing against an understanding of occultism as being premodern and irrational, Owen thus makes the case for occultism instead being part of the historical process of modernity. In her study, Treitel also interprets occultism as an essentially modern phenomenon, arguing for the existence of a 'modernist sensibility' (Treitel, 2004, 110) shared by modernism and occultism. The studies of Owen and Treitel share a commitment to reinterpreting the place of occultism and modernism in modernity, with the previously unrecognized link between psychological theory, psychical research, and modernism in the arts being afforded special attention.

Other studies have had a more limited scope, focusing on specific aspects of the relationship between occultism, modernism and modernity. The link between psychical research and modernism has been investigated further by Luckhurst (2002) and Wolffram (2009), for instance. Mark S. Morrisson (2007) focused on the connections between occultism, modernism and science. Victoria Nelson (2003) analyzed the fascination with the occult on the part of modern mainstream culture as a result of the secularization of Western societies. Christopher Partridge (2004–2005) launched the concept of *occulture* to describe the dissemination of occultism into the cultural mainstream, and while this study's focus was not directed toward modernism per se, occulture has since proven useful as a scientific tool.[21] Other studies have made use of modernist texts as a point of departure for discussing broader topics. Pericles Lewis (2010) situates the modernist turn to occultism within a religious context, arguing against the traditional 'secularization thesis' according to which modernism

embraced modernity's supposed rejection of religion. In a similar vein, Leigh Wilson (2013) contends that occultism offered modernist authors and artists a means whereby outdated notions of realism could be challenged, revised and replaced. Mention should also be made of studies of individual authors that have expanded our knowledge of occult modernism as a whole.[22]

Where historical contextualization is concerned, research into the original sites of publication of occult modernist literature has been given an impetus by contributions in the field of periodical studies. This area, however, remains a research lacuna. *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009–2013), an otherwise sound scholarly work, is noticeably lacking any discussion of periodicals that published both occult and modernist texts. To give just two examples of publications that are not included, I would point to the French occult magazine *L'Initiation* (1888–1912), which featured contributions by August Strindberg, or the German artistic and political periodical *Die Zukunft* (1892–1922), which published texts by both Rainer Maria Rilke and the psychical researcher and spiritualist Carl du Prel. Indeed, a preliminary mapping of the overlap between modernist and occult periodicals has been conducted by Mark S. Morrisson, who argues that 'a more fully developed understanding of occultism's role in modern culture' is a prerequisite for the 'much-needed examination of modernism's relationship to occultism' (Morrisson, 2008, 2). More work remains to be done on this topic.

Research into occultism and the avant-gardes has benefited from the increased visibility of avant-garde studies in general, especially following the establishment of academic societies such as for instance the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies. While considerable research gaps still exist in regard to the relationship between avant-garde movements and occultism, significant contributions have been made. Lidia Głuchowska (2009) has investigated the topos of the 'new man' in occultist and avant-garde discourse, a concept revolving around the notion of humanity evolving and achieving a higher state of spiritual awareness. This concept is informed by discourses centered on the hidden potential of the human psyche, the relationship between the mind of man and the phenomenal world, and the reality of other dimensions of existence. The futurist manifestos of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, for instance, exemplify this overlap. The occult discourse in Marinetti's manifestos has been analyzed by Benedikt Hjartarson (2007), who argues that Marinetti conceived of Futurism as 'a mystical religion of externalized will' that sees the subject

gaining the ability to influence the exterior world through the application of willpower (Hjartarson, 2007, 187).[23] Hjartarson's analysis demonstrates how the very concept of the avant-garde can be refined by the addition of occultism as an interpretative context. If the avant-gardes are associated with stylistic experimentation and with criticism of the institutions of art, one can add to this list also the influence of occultism, which contributes to the avant-garde understanding of art as both a means of expression and a form of heterodox spirituality.

The most obvious example of an avant-garde movement deeply invested in occultism is, of course, surrealism. Tessel M. Bauduin's study of the interaction of surrealism and occultism (2014) exemplifies an interesting research development: the integration of esotericism studies and modernism studies (or in this case, avant-garde studies). Using the methodology of esotericism studies, Bauduin follows André Breton's growing interest in occultism and his gradual incorporation of occult discourse into the surrealist project. At the same time, Bauduin describes the worldview of surrealism as essentially materialistic, with surrealists arguing that the source of creativity is located within the confines of the self rather than in external (metaphysical) sources. Surrealism thus becomes an instance of modernism appropriating occultism and finding inspiration in occult discourse and practice while removing the concepts appropriated from their occult context. Bauduin's analysis of surrealism as a uniquely secular mysticism suggests yet another line of investigation to be explored by subsequent scholarship.

Concluding Remarks

I will conclude by remarking on some of the pitfalls of contemporary scholarship on occult modernism and offering a few suggestions on how research into this topic can be further improved. I will illustrate these pitfalls using John Bramble's study (2015) of the Orientalizing discourses to be found in occult modernism. Bramble gives an instrumental reading of occultism: occultism acts 'as a springboard for personal creative endeavour', to be discarded once 'its purpose […] [is] served' (Bramble, 2015, 15). Such a reductive view of occultism entirely bypasses instances of modernist authors and artists for whom occultism was far more than a stylistic device. Bramble does a disservice to the authors he discusses by attempting to save them from their own occult interests. Phrasing such as 'the occult's monomaniacs and exhibitionists' indicates that Bramble would

have preferred his chosen authors not to have engaged with the occult at all (Bramble, 2015, 140). In regard to scientific methodology, Bramble's scholarship would have been much improved had he made use of the discipline of esotericism studies. By focusing exclusively on the historical context of Western colonialism and imperialism, Bramble's selection and analysis of source materials becomes skewed, with the textual evidence being made to fit Bramble's hypothesis. While Bramble's study does not advance the state of the art of current scholarship, it does provide an instructive example of how *not* to write about occult modernism.[24]

My first and most important suggestion on how to undertake research into occult modernism is therefore deceptively simple: scholars, especially those working in disciplines other than religious studies or esotericism studies, need to take occultism seriously. That is to say, the occult interests or beliefs of the authors studied should not be downplayed or glossed over. If an author made use of occultism in his or her work, then this is all the justification one needs to investigate the topic further. A reaction of distaste or silence when confronted with a work of occult modernism is best avoided.

Turning to issues of scientific methodology, the most noticeable challenge still faced by scholarship on occult modernism is the choice of focus. Monographs dedicated to a single author or movement remain the norm, and while our understanding of occult modernism continues to expand, a comparative analysis of the works of different authors and literary currents can give us new insight into the manifold interactions between occultism and modernism. Closer attention to non-literary source materials and the original sites of publication of texts would improve our understanding of the complexity of occult modernism. Similarly, while it would be too much to ask of scholars to master all the major languages of literary modernism, simply adding another language to one's repertoire would be beneficial, given the multilingual nature of the research topic.[25]

Another barrier concerns the issue of genre. Scholars working with poetry may not be comfortable researching drama or prose, and vice versa. Occult modernist literature tends to blend genres, blurring the line between occult tractate, scientific exposition and artistic expression.[26] A greater awareness of the hybrid nature of occult modernism is desirable, especially considering how the issue of genre may very well have affected the marginalization and exclusion of occult modernism in artistic canons. Indeed, canonization continues to impact research into the topic. The academic interests of scholars of occult modernism tend to mirror those of

modernism and avant-garde studies; the established canon is more often reinforced than challenged. Authors who have been relegated to the side-lines need to be 'recovered', as it were, not for the sake of criticizing the canon as an end in itself but rather to paint a more inclusive picture of the entanglements of occultism and modernism. The integration of methodologies developed by scholars of esotericism with those traditionally used in literary studies can be useful in this regard, if for no other reason than to aid scholars in identifying the presence of occult discourse and topoi in the works studied.

Finally, and on a practical note, scholars with an interest in exploring the relationship between occultism and modernism should be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the research being conducted by academics working in other disciplines and focusing on different languages and media. Doing so would obviate the need—still present in contemporary scholarship—to reinvent the wheel when studying occult modernism. This brief historiography of research into occult modernist literature can perhaps be of some use. Similar overviews can certainly be written for the disciplines of art history, photography and cinema studies, not to mention theater, dance and music studies. It is my hope that such studies will appear soon.

Notes

1. 'Att tänka på Förläggare i Sverge [sic] för min *Inferno* är väl ej lönt, utan måste väl skrifva den på Franska för att bli läst; kanske blott i manuskript. Det vore ju idealet för ockultistiskt skrifsätt.' Letter to the prominent Swedish Theosophist Torsten Hedlund (Strindberg, 1948–2001, vol. 11, 323). All translations in this chapter are my own; original will be provided in the notes.
2. For a discussion of how Strindberg scholarship has dealt with his occultism, I humbly refer to my own study (Johnsson, 2015).
3. Size constraints prohibit the inclusion of German-language scholarship here. The most relevant studies are Fick (1993), Hilke (2002), Magnússon (2009), Pytlik (2005), Rausch (2000), Spörl (1997), Stockhammer (2000) and Wagner-Egelhaaf (1989). Important anthologies are Baßler, Moritz and Hildegard Châtellier, eds. (1998); and Gruber, Bettina, ed. (1997).
4. As I make no claim to completeness, subsequent studies will without a doubt include material I have missed. A few promising areas can be suggested: Russian symbolism, multilingual authors such as Stanisław Przybyszewski and Oscar Vladislas de Lubicz Milosz, the Italian *ermetismo*

movement and the work of Spanish and Portuguese authors such as Rúben Darío and Fernando Pessoa. While these authors and movements have of course been studied in their own right, their relationship to occultism is still understudied.

5. As noted in one of the few historical overviews of the research topic, Ross (2010).
6. 'Non pas l'aboutissement, l'étape dernière de l'œuvre de Nerval, mais une véritable somme de son expérience pour toute la période qui va de 1841 à 1853'.
7. '*Conte initiatique* ou du récit de voyage allégorique', italics original. Of note is also a later, more wide-ranging study (Richer, 1980). On Nerval, see also Kaplan (1967).
8. For more on Swedenborg, see Hanegraaff et al., eds. (2005, 1096–1105).
9. See, for instance, the highly critical review by Torchiana (1960).
10. The title of Mercier's study naturally brings to mind Viatte's *Les Sources occultes du romantisme*, which Mercier's work complements.
11. As an example, the issue of *Revue du monde nouveau* in which Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Le Demon de l'analogie' was first published (1874, vol. 1, 14–16) also featured an essay by the magazine's editor, Charles Cros, on 'L'Alchimie moderne' (pp. 58–62). For a survey of symbolist periodicals, see Genova (2002).
12. For more on Péladan and the Salons de la Rose + Croix he helped organize, see Pincus-Witten (1967).
13. In regard to surrealism, the second volume of the Cahiers du Centre de Recherche sur le Surréalisme (Paris III), *Mélusine II: Occulte-occultation* (1981), edited by Henri Béhar, constitutes a landmark in the study of the relationship between surrealism and occultism. The center is now called Association pour la Recherche et l'Étude du surréalisme (APRES).
14. Several of Bays's articles are relevant in this context (Bays, 1954, 1967).
15. On the trope of the author-seer in modernism, see also Cattaui (1965) and Wacker (2013).
16. In his monograph Tindall (1955, 54–55) made note of the overlap between authors such as Arthur Rimbaud and occultists such as Éliphas Lévi.
17. On the latter topic, see Harper (2006).
18. More recent studies of Yeats's occultism include Gorski (1996), Maddox (1999) and Monteith (2008).
19. See Faivre (1996 [1986]).
20. Mention should also be made of the anthology edited by Surette and Tryphonopoulos (1996). Almost all of the contributions deal with English-language modernist poetry.
21. See also Kokkinen (2013).

22. A few examples may suffice. On Joyce, see Enrico Terrinoni (2007). On Robert Musil, see Genese Grill (2012). On H.D., see Matte Robinson (2016).
23. See also Hjartarson (2013).
24. That being said, the topic of the Orientalizing discourses to be found in works of occult modernism is worth investigating, especially in conjunction with the 'anti-Orientalizing' tendencies of some writers who may distance themselves from movements such as Theosophy because of their perceived 'non-Western' origins. A case in point is Strindberg, who prefers contemporary French occultism to Theosophy, arguing that the latter is too 'Oriental', unscientific and much too invested in the women's liberation movement. See (Johnsson, 2015).
25. To give just one example, any scholar wishing to write a monograph on the art and occult thought of Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli would need to master Arabic, French, Italian and Swedish.
26. Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*, August Strindberg's *Inferno* (1897) and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), for instance, can be characterized as occult novels, autobiographical narratives, medical case records, confessional texts and modernist fiction—all at once. Indeed, the defying of genre norms and/or hybridization of genres, furthermore across disciplinary boundaries such as between literature and painting, is not only characteristic of modernism but is frequently found in occultism as well.

PART I

Artistic Practices

CHAPTER 3

Visionary Mimesis and Occult Modernism in Literature and Art Around 1900

Gísli Magnússon

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote with great insight about the development of modern art in his letters concerning Paul Cézanne to his wife, Clara Rilke, in 1907. In one of these so-called Cézanne letters, Rilke stylizes Honoré de Balzac as a prophet of modern art, brilliantly foreseeing tendencies of abstraction in (the as yet embryonic) modern art. According to Rilke, Balzac, in the short story *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*, 1831), invented the modern artist. In a letter dated October 8, Rilke retells an episode where Cézanne identifies with the artist of Balzac's story, Frenhofer:

> [In] the midst of eating he stood up, when this person told about Frenhofer, the painter whom Balzac, with incredible foresight of coming developments, invented in his short story of the *Chef d'œuvre inconnu* [...], and whom he has go down to destruction over an impossible task, through the discovery that there are actually no contours but rather many vibrating transitions, learning this, the old man stands up from the table [...] and, voiceless with excitement, keeps pointing his finger distinctly toward himself and

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> showing himself, himself, himself, painful as that may have been. It was not Zola who understood what the point was; Balzac had sensed long ahead that, in painting, something so tremendous can suddenly present itself, which no one can handle. (Rilke, 1969, 306)

Implicitly, two kinds of art are contrasted with each other, two conceptions of art that are anchored in different world views. The art of contours is mimetic and based on Newtonian physics according to which well-defined physical boundaries exist. In Rilke's interpretation, Balzac's artist Frenhofer creates art without contours, thus anticipating developments within physics that had not yet manifested. According to late nineteenth-century physics, in particular Heinrich Hertz' theory of electromagnetic waves, there are no well-defined contours; rather the universe is composed of 'vibrating transitions'. What was a daring idea in the first half of the nineteenth century was no longer problematic when Wassily Kandinsky wrote his famous treatise, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*, 1912). In a footnote Kandinsky writes:

> Frequently, use is made here of the terms 'material' and 'immaterial' and the interim phases which are terms 'more or less'. Is everything material? Is everything spiritual? Can the distinction, which we make between matter and spirit, be nothing but graduations of one or the other? Thought, which science terms the product of 'spirit' is matter, a fine but not a coarse substance. Is whatever cannot be touched with the hand spiritual? It is not possible to discuss the subject further in this little book; it suffices if the boundaries drawn are not too definite. (Kandinsky, 1946, 20)

Not drawing too definite boundaries between the visible and invisible was indeed considered essential by Kandinsky and other modern artists. The underlying *Weltanschauung* was sensuous-supersensuous monism or duo-unity.[1] The discovery of supersensuous phenomena in physics and technology (that is to say, infrared waves) was interpreted as indicia of the validity of this sensuous-supersensuous conception of the world. The philosopher and parapsychologist Carl du Prel—held in high regard by Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Sigmund Freud—concluded that the senses did not grasp the whole of reality: 'There are rays of the sun which we do not see, vibrations of air which we do not hear, etc. And in physics it became necessary to set up the atomic theory, so that now even materialism, making use

of non-sensual concepts, has broken into the region of metaphysics, whose existence it denied, since it declared the identity of the perceivable with the real' (du Prel, 1889, 8).

This model of reality led to an increased artistic interest in the supersensuous part of the spectrum of reality. If religion can be defined as a relation to transcendence through faith and written revelation, occultism focuses more on immanence than transcendence, resulting in an extension of the immanent sphere.[2] Theosophy interpreted the psychic content as 'fine matter' and aura; Reichenbach talked about the 'odic force'. There was virtually an 'explosion of immanence' (Gruber, 2000, 190). In the perspective of the occultists, the extended immanence was no abstract, speculative beyond. The extended immanence was thought to be accessible to the human senses. The world conception of sensuous-supersensuous monism was interpreted as world totality where the supersensuous part of reality was considered potentially perceptible.

This world view had consequences for the way modern and avant-garde artists and authors interpreted mimesis. Wassily Kandinsky rejected the traditional notion of mimesis in favor of so-called abstract techniques. It is, however, misleading to call Kandinsky's early abstract paintings nonimitative or antagonistic to mimesis.[3] Rather, his ideal is more adequately referred to as *visionary mimesis*. The artist does not attempt to imitate the material world (as in naturalism); instead, he strives to represent spiritual reality.[4] From the standpoint of realist or naturalist mimesis, this tendency may appear to be a development toward abstraction; from the point of view of the modern artist, it was an attempt to visually express a more encompassing reality. The modern artist ascribed himself or herself visionary capacities, and therefore he or she did not want to achieve pure 'abstraction', but a new visual expression of mimesis suited to the new reality without contours.[5] Artists like Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Umberto Boccioni considered themselves visionaries who, due to clairvoyant abilities, were able to conquer new areas of reality.[6] An example of a transitional work in this regard is Kandinsky's *Frau in Moskau* (*Lady in Moscow*, 1912), where so-called fine-matter thought forms—as they are called in theosophical literature—are depicted around the recognizable figure of a woman. The painting perfectly illustrates that the seemingly abstract elements represent a different (clairvoyant) mode of perception. The painter, in other words, visualizes spaces of perception that are invisible to the common man. Even paintings such as *Improvisation*.

Deluge (1913) are not really abstract but are rather Kandinsky's attempt at depicting the spiritual world or what he termed 'the inner nature' (Kandinsky, 1946, 98). To give another example, the works of Hilma af Klint can only be understood as expressions of visionary mimesis.[7] As noted by Iris Müller-Westermann, 'Hilma af Klint's works [...] are not concerned with the pure abstraction of color and form for its own sake; they are instead attempts to give shape to invisible contexts and make them visible' (Müller-Westermann, 2013, 45). Thus, early twentieth-century art did not imply the departure from the mimesis principle altogether but challenged the traditional conception of reality and mimesis.

The Limits of Postmodern Interpretations of Literary Visionary Mimesis

This raises the question of similar developments within the field of literature. In terms of currents, the mimesis principle undergoes a transition from naturalism to symbolism and the avant-garde. Naturalistic mimesis generally means an accurate representation of the visible world and social realities. Ontologically, naturalism relied on the natural sciences. The world view underlying the works of many symbolist and avant-garde authors, however, widely corresponded with esotericism and occultism. Accordingly, a profound knowledge of the esoteric and occult cultural code is required if one is to untangle the intricate relation between aesthetical means such as metaphors and rhetoric, on the one hand, and esoteric and occult unit-ideas, on the other hand.[8] Philological research into esoteric and occult motifs and unit-ideas forms the basis of an adequate understanding of symbolist and avant-garde authors such as August Strindberg and Rilke, among many others.

Just as important, however, are investigations into the function of literary and poetical language. More often than not, these two methods or perspectives are not combined. One example is the postmodern school of literary studies. Although postmodernism's focus on the fringes of culture has led to interesting results in the field of discourse analysis, it has been less successful in determining the occultist perception of language. Rather, postmodernist interpreters project their own understanding of language as the primary foundation of reality, the so-called linguistic turn, onto the works of symbolist authors, thereby failing to grasp the mimesis principle of occult symbolist and avant-garde literature. As an example, one could

mention Paul de Man's claim that all metaphors are allegories of reading, that is to say, literary meta-reflections (see de Man, 1979). Here we find the literary equivalent of the thesis of pure 'abstraction' in avant-garde art: the misunderstanding of symbolist-modernist poetry as merely an exploration of the possibilities of language itself, as experiments with signifiers without signifieds. This might to a certain degree be true of dada, but it is not an adequate interpretation of the poetry of Rilke. Within art, the visionary quality was achieved by replacing naturalistic mimesis with visionary or clairvoyant attempts at depicting new spaces of perception. In symbolist literature, the means of visionary mimesis were automatic writing, synesthesia, suggestive language, and symbols.[9] The following analysis will, however, look at the different ways the world view behind visionary mimesis is expressed in the works of Guy de Maupassant, Gustav Meyrink, Strindberg, and Rilke. These four authors represent different phases of literary modernism. Maupassant and Strindberg mark the transition from naturalism to occult modernism, Rilke represents late symbolist modernism, and Meyrink represents occult expressionism.[10] Since they represent different phases of modernism, they indicate how widespread occult ideas in literature were. The common denominator is sensuous-supersensuous monism, a focus on the limited scope of human sensory organs, and the visionary (clairvoyant) search for uncharted areas of the invisible.

Maupassant and Meyrink: Realizing the Limits of Perception and the Exploration of 'New Senses'

On the level of motif, Maupassant was one of the first authors to explore the potential of the 'invisible'. His short story *Le Horla* (1887) combines the discourses of early psychology (hypnosis) and occultism. In order to introduce an invisible being of more advanced evolutionary capacity than man, Maupassant needs to stage man's senses as highly limited: 'Ever since man has thought, ever since he has known how to speak and write his thoughts, he has felt touched by a mystery impenetrable to his coarse and imperfect senses, and he has tried, by the effort of his intelligence, to compensate for the powerlessness of his organs' (de Maupassant, 2005, 12). 'Mystery' is a metaphor for the invisible part of the totality, and the adjectives (coarse, imperfect, powerless) point to the inability of the human sense organs to reach far enough into these invisible realms. The narrator describes the human sense perception as a limited spectrum that only encompasses a small part of the totality:

> How profound this mystery of the Invisible is! We cannot fathom it with our wretched senses, with our eyes that don't know how to perceive either the too-small or the too-big, the too-close or the too-far, the inhabitants of a star or the inhabitants of a drop of water … with our ears that deceive us, for they transmit to us the vibrations of the air as ringing tones […] with our sense of smell, weaker than a dog's … with our sense of taste, which can scarcely tell the age of a wine. *If only we had other organs that could work other miracles for us, how many things we could then discover around us!* (de Maupassant, 2005, 7. Emphasis mine)[11]

Just as the parapsychologist Carl du Prel, the theosophists H.P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and C.W. Leadbeater, and the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, Maupassant makes the human sense perception dependent on our biological organization. Uexküll calls our field of perception *Umwelt*, and just as the animals perceive the world differently from humans, the human senses represent a specific stage of evolution.[12] Since Maupassant is writing a horror story, the being representing a higher level of consciousness (a more encompassing *Umwelt*), the *horla*, is not benevolent. The first-person narrator is at the mercy of the more advanced being that is invisible to him, whereas the *horla* sees both the narrator's *Umwelt* and his own. The *Umwelt* of the *horla*, in other words, transcends and includes the human sphere of perception. In order to make the invisible influence of one consciousness on the other more plausible, Maupassant interposes an account of hypnotic experiments.[13] The central theme of the short story, however, is the narrative potential of the malevolent supersensuous being with a superior *Umwelt*; in this sense it is a further development of the ghost story embedded in contemporary theories of sensuous-supersensuous monism and the evolution of the sense organs.

In his novel *Der Golem* (1915), the Austrian author Gustav Meyrink drew the logical conclusion of the *Umwelt* theory. Meyrink's first-person narrator begins to doubt the ability of his senses to reach far enough in the totality of reality: 'For a brief moment his mind was illuminated, as if by the sudden glare of a flashlight, with a flickering spurt of distrust of the apparent solidity of the world around and of his own five senses' (Meyrink, 1992, 43). The first step of the developmental process consists in seeing through the limited nature of the habitual three-dimensional space of the senses. The next step consists in developing new senses able to conquer new areas of the previously supersensuous reality: 'He felt new senses ripening within him to reveal the invisible realm that permeates our earthly

world. Any second the last veil that kept it from his eyes might fall' (Meyrink, 1992, 212). In the world conception of the novel, there is no gap between immanence and transcendence; instead, the invisible world permeates the visible, the earthly. The project of developing clairvoyance and 'new senses' points to the visionary potential of this world view. Kandinsky, Boccioni, and Hilma af Klint drew the same conclusion and similarly sought to break through to a larger section of the totality.

Naturalist Clairvoyance as the Basis of August Strindberg's Visionary Mimesis

The poetological path of August Strindberg differed from the one chosen by the symbolists. Strindberg is, however, paradigmatic of the link between abstract art and occult modernism in literature. On the basis of naturalism, he created his own kind of visionary mimesis. Relying on esoteric ideas, he created so-called symbolic pictures and prophesized that they reflected the future occultism in art. Since these pictures were, seemingly, abstract, he was right to assume that occultism would soon play an important role in the development of artistic modernity.[14] In 1897 Strindberg published his autofictional novel *Inferno*, in which he moves from the naturalism of his earlier works toward the spiritual orientation of his later works such as *To Damascus*, *A Dream Play*, and *The Ghost Sonata*. In *Inferno*, naturalism is described as a phase that is now over: 'People are longing for a religion, a reconciliation with the Powers (their exact words), a re-establishment of harmony with the unseen world. The naturalistic phase was potent and fruitful, but it has served its turn. There is nothing adverse to be said about the movement, nothing to regret, since the Powers ordained that we should pass through it' (Strindberg, 1979, 253–254). This is in other words the aforementioned transition from the world view of naturalism to a spiritual world view. The role of the modernist author is now to 're-establish harmony with the unseen world' in a new way. Just as Kandinsky questioned the sharp distinction between matter and spirit, so did Strindberg: 'Meanwhile, whereas all were agreed in recognizing the unity of matter and called themselves monists without really being so, I went further, drew the ultimate conclusions of this doctrine, and eliminated the boundaries between matter and what was called the spirit' (Strindberg, 1979, 127). The basic idea is that monism and anti-dualism did not lead to the complete denial of the spiritual; only the idea of a gap between the material and spiritual dimensions was rejected.

On the level of motif, there is an abundance of occult unit-ideas in the novel: telepathy, alchemy, spirits, clairvoyance, the astral body. Strindberg is well read in occultist literature and mentions Emanuel Swedenborg, Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Camille Flammarion, Papus, and Sâr Péladan. He even goes so far as to add an 'occult bibliography for readers not well versed in occult science' to the Swedish edition of the novel.[15]

On a poetological level, Strindberg creates a hybrid between naturalism and occultism, and in that regard he differs from symbolist poets such as Yeats and Rilke. Strindberg does not use poetic-suggestive language, rich in imagery and metaphors, but rather creates a 'realistic world' with an invisible, metaphysical backdrop. With self-ironical distance the narrator says: 'Childish enough, and sufficiently unhappy to be able to extract the poetry from the most everyday and the most natural events, I accepted this as a good omen' (Strindberg, 1997, 247). Accordingly, Strindberg's literary method consists in making precise observations on (more or less trivial) elements of external reality and only subsequently interpreting these elements as signs.[16] There are no atmospheric, mysterious, vague symbolic sceneries or visions of any kind (Hansen, 2003, 214). In the words of *Inferno*'s narrator: 'Spirits have become positivists, in harmony with the times, and are therefore no longer content to manifest themselves only in visions' (Strindberg, 1979, 145–146). Strindberg calls the new artistic path 'natural clairvoyance':

> A new art discovered. Natures's own! A natural clairvoyance. Why scoff at naturalism now that it has shown itself capable of inaugurating a new kind of art, full of youth and hope? The Gods have returned to us. Writers and artists have sounded the call to arms, 'Back to Pan! And its reverberations have been so multifarious that Nature has awakened from her slumber of centuries. Nothing happens in the world that has not the approval of the Powers. Naturalism has come into existence. Therefore let there be naturalism, let there be a rebirth of the harmony of matter and spirit. (Strindberg, 1979, 148)

Strindberg expresses mimesis as 'natural clairvoyance'—the ability to observe reality accurately and only then proceed to metaphysical interpretations.[17]

Symbolist Visionary Mimesis in the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke is a prime example of a poet relying on visionary mimesis in late symbolist literature.[18] As a young man, Rilke sent an article to the theosophical journal *Sphinx*, with the telling subtitle *Monthly journal for the historical and experimental foundation of a supersensuous world view on a monistic basis.*[19] Although Rilke was never a theosophist—he avoided metaphysical societies and group affiliations of any kind—he nevertheless held on to the world view of sensuous-supersensuous monism his entire life. In this sense Rilke has a great deal in common with Kandinsky. Rilke and Kandinsky shared a view of the universe as a unity consisting of sensuous and supersensuous waves and vibrations, and both believed that the task of the modern visionary artist was to dissolve the dualism of the visible and invisible, matter and spirit. The artist was perceived as a seer or clairvoyant whose senses stretched farther into the previously unknown realms than those of the average person.

Some scholars have misunderstood Rilke's duo-unity because he polemicizes against the Christian notion of the beyond (see, for instance, Engel, 2004, 510). They interpret his accentuation of 'this world' as a sign of exclusive commitment to immanence in the manner of Friedrich Nietzsche. In reality Rilke simply criticizes the Christian split between (visible) nature and the (invisible) beyond. For Rilke, the border between this world and the beyond is fluid. Contrary to the Christian conception of the beyond, Rilke embraced the possibility of mutual contact and interaction between the physical and nonphysical realms. He thought that the artistic or spiritualistic medium was able to reach into the nonphysical realm with the 'antennae of the heart'.[20] He also believed that nonphysical entities were able to manifest and communicate with the living. When Rilke wished to express his holism, he used concepts such as *Das Ganze* (the totality), *Das Vollzählige* (the complete), *Der Doppelbereich* (the twofold realm), or *Die Kugel des Seins* (the sphere of being). All of these concepts point to the same occultist world conception: sensuous-supersensuous monism. Perhaps the sphere of being gives the best visual illustration of this epistemology. One half of reality is visible (sensuous), the other invisible (supersensuous), but the border between the two is not fixed.

In his two late *magna opera*, the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (both 1922), Rilke created two mythological figures that symbolized the ideal approach to the world conception of duo-unity: the angel of the elegies and Orpheus of the sonnet cycle of the same name.

In a passage from the first *Duino Elegy* describing the afterlife and the difficult process of adaptation of humans to the conditions of the dead, the angel is emphasized as an ideal being that does not, as humans do, distinguish between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead: 'Angels (they say) don't know whether it is the living/they are moving among, or the dead. The eternal torrent/whirls all ages along in it, through both realms/forever, and their voices are drowned out in its thunderous roar' (Rilke, 1989, 155). This ability to transgress the border between the visible and invisible realms makes the angel an ideal figure within the hierarchy of consciousness in the *Elegies*. In a letter to his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz, Rilke distances himself from the Christian notion of the beyond.[21] The mission of man, according to the *Elegies*, is to salvage the 'frail, ephemeral things' of nature and our environment and 'to bring the things we here behold and touch within the greater, the very greatest circumference. Not into a Beyond whose shadow obscures the Earth, but into a Whole, into *the* Whole' (Rilke, 1988, 394). The whole, here, means the visible *and* invisible—and similarly to Kandinsky's artistic strategies, Rilke accentuates the invisible (supersensuous) part of the spectrum: 'The angel of the Elegies is that Being who stands for the recognition of the Invisible of a higher degree of reality. That is why he is "terrible" for us, because we, its lovers and transmuters, still cling to the Visible'. In the same letter, Rilke uses the beehive as a metaphor of the process of transformation: 'We are the bees of the Invisible. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible' (Rilke, 1988, 394). The artists (and all creative people) are these 'bees of the invisible', a metaphor Rilke became acquainted with when he read Maurice Maeterlinck as a young man in the 1890s.[22] Rilke combines the notion of a transformation of the visible to the invisible with monistic theories on material and immaterial matter. The key words are 'vibrations' and 'frequencies', concepts from physics that seemed to confirm the occultist theory of an ontological unity of the visible and invisible:

> The *Elegies* show us engaged in this work, the word of the perpetual transformation of beloved and tangible things into the invisible vibration and excitability of our nature, which introduces new 'frequencies' into the pulsing fields of the universe. (Since the various materials in the Universe are only varying coefficients of vibration, we build in this way not only intensities of a spiritual kind, but, who knows? new bodies, metals, nebulae and stars.) (Rilke, 1988, 394)

In this model of reality, art, emotions, physics (frequencies, vibrations), and cosmos are synthesized to a whole where all parts are connected—an occultist reminiscence of the hermetic notion of correspondences (see Faivre, 2012, 19).

The *Sonnets to Orpheus* are written as a 'grave memorial' for Wera Ouckama Knoop, a creative and talented girl who died from a rare disease only 19 years old. In a letter to Wera's mother Gertrud Ouckama Knoop from January 1922, Rilke used the metaphor 'antennae of the heart' to describe Wera's mediumistic ability to reach beyond the earthly realms into the 'more-than earthly' (Rilke, 1988, 349). Rilke talks about

> the two extremes of her understanding: that pain is a mistake, a blind misapprehension of the body, driving its stony wedge, between earth and heaven, which are one; and, on the other hand, the oneness of her wide-open heart with the living and everlasting world, this harmony with life, this joyous, throbbing communion to her very last breath with the delights of earth—ah, only with the earth? Nay (and this she could not know in the first anguish of division and farewell)—with the Whole, which is much more than the Earth. (Rilke, 1988, 349)

The figure of Orpheus symbolizes this transgression of the border between the earthly (visible) and more than earthly (invisible). The culture criticism expressed in the *Sonnets to Orpheus* is aimed at the chasm between immanence and transcendence: 'Though he himself is afraid to disappear,/he *has* to vanish: don't you understand?/The moment his word steps out beyond our life here,/he moves where you will never find his trace./The lyre's strings do not constrict his hands./And it is in overstepping that he obeys'[23] (Rilke, 1989, 233).

Orpheus is the god of spiritual art who is threatened by the forces of materialism and technology. 'His word', the spiritual poetry, has a soteriological role. It exceeds the visible *Hiersein*, being in the world, and—simi-

larly to the angel of the *Elegies*—Orpheus transgresses the border between the visible and invisible realms. He resides in *Der Doppelbereich* (the two-fold realm) as it is called in the ninth sonnet (Part I). The same thought is expressed in the sixth sonnet (Part I): 'Is he someone who dwells in this single world [*Ein Hiesiger*]? No: both realms are the source of his earthly power./Only he who has known the roots of the willow/can bend the willow-branches into a lyre'[24] (Rilke, 2009, 93). The Rilkean neologism *Hiesiger* means someone belonging only to immanence, but Orpheus's more encompassing nature arises from his affiliation to both realms, the visible and invisible.[25]

If the line between the visible and invisible is not fixed, the task of the artist becomes the conquering of new areas of the (formerly) invisible world. In the small prose text *Ur-Geräusch* (1919), Rilke conducts a strange thought experiment (Rilke, 1987, vol. VI, 1085–1093). In it he imagines a gramophone that, instead of a record, transmedially plays the coronal suture (*Kronen-Naht*) of the skull, producing a 'primal sound' (*Ur-Geräusch*). This primal sound is a metaphor for the achievement of the clairvoyant artist who, by means of a synesthetic intensification involving all five senses, discovers new sectors in the (previously) supersensuous reality. Thus, the human being is not in a Kantian sense bound to the transcendental prison of the visible world; rather, the 'spotlights' of his senses illuminate small areas of the totality, and through synesthesia or clairvoyance, he is able to discover new areas in the night of the unknown. In this way, synesthesia *is* a form of clairvoyance, because it allows the artist to widen the field of perception.

One of the means of visionary mimesis is automatic writing, of which there are several examples in Rilke's works; it should be mentioned that Rilke participated in séances.[26] Rilke deals most explicitly with automatic writing in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910). Most famous is a passage in biblical tone prophesying the 'mediumistic' writing of the future Malte:

> For some time yet, I shall still be able to write all of these things down or say them. But a day will come when my hand will be far away from me, and, when I command it to write, the words it writes will be ones I do not intend. The time of that other interpretation will come, and not one word will be left upon another, and all the meanings will dissolve like clouds and fall like rain. Though I am full of fear, I am yet like a man in the presence of greatness, and I recall that I often used to have this sensation within me before I began to write. But this time it is I who shall be written. (Rilke, 2009, 34)

This passage is often interpreted on the basis of the tradition of mysticism.[27] Although this tradition is not irrelevant, it is much more plausible to place the passage within the context of contemporary Spiritualism and automatic writing. In the context of modern occultism, there are (at least) four possible modes of communication: (a) It can be spirits communicating with the living; (b) it can be the 'transcendental self'; (c) it can be 'unknown forces' (agnosticism); (d) it can be angels or other higher astral beings.[28] The 'hand' is an allegory of the artistic writing process. The fact that the 'hand' is 'far away' from Malte indicates his (future) lack of conscious control over what is written. He is to become a passive instrument of unknown forces. His hand is going to write words that he does 'not intend'.[29] The 'time of that other interpretation' annunciates a modern spiritual and mediumistic art, and the meanings that 'dissolve' are the old structure of meaning (but not—as per postmodernist scholarship—*all* meaning). The new meaning gained from mediumism does indeed 'dissolve like clouds', but it prophetically falls 'like rain', a symbol of fertility. The bad artist (the young, immature Malte) writes; the mediumistic artist (the ideal artist Malte projected into the future) will 'be written'.[30] In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, mediumistic art is still a utopian future possibility, but since Rilke himself described his late masterpieces, the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, as the result of 'dictation', one could argue that he ended up fulfilling the artistic task of his fictional figure Malte.

Concluding Remarks

The importance of occultism and esotericism for the specific visionary version of modernism is relatively well-established in the scholarship on art.[31] The picture is, however, less clear in the scholarship on modern literature. By focusing on the principle of mimesis as a common denominator between art and literature, the creative artistic possibilities inherent in the world view of sensuous-supersensuous monism become more pronounced. Both artists and authors wanted to conquer previously uncharted areas of the invisible by means of visionary mimesis but in different ways. Maupassant exploited the horrifying narrative potential of a more advanced supersensuous being; Meyrink focused on the shift of perception from object reality to visionary reality; Strindberg created his own strategy of 'naturalistic clairvoyance' by focusing first on the visible reality before interpreting its objects as signs of the invisible totality. Rilke in turn demonstrates the full range of the literary potential of sensuous-supersensuous

monism: He creates two mythopoetic figures, the angel of the *Duino Elegies* and Orpheus of the sonnet cycle, that symbolize the ideal visionary capacity to transgress the border between the visible and invisible. The remarkable poetological reflection, *Ur-Geräusch*, accentuates synesthesia as a means of visionary mimesis. And finally, Rilke in his only novel outlines automatic writing as a (utopian) future prospect of the young and still immature author, Malte Laurids Brigge.

There were, of course, many other authors and poets that shared the visionary mimesis principle. The representative examples chosen here demonstrate that both authors and artists were exploring the pioneering potential of a new world conception, that of sensuous-supersensuous monism. Hence, the principle of mimesis is not a given; it is dependent on the world view of the artist or author.

Notes

1. Leon Surette sees this anti-dualism as a feature of occultism: 'The occult is almost invariably monist, assuming a single realm modulating from material or "hylic" thickness through mental or psychic attenuation to spiritual or noumenal reality. Because of this monism, the modern occult thought it had found an ally in materialist science's discovery of radiation and the nonparticulate nature of quantum physics' (Surette, 1994, 13). The theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky is an example of the sensuous-supersensuous monism: 'The radical unity of the ultimate essence of each constituent part of compounds in Nature—from Star to mineral Atom, from the highest Dhyani-Chohan to the smallest infusoria, in the fullest acceptation of the term, and whether applied to the spiritual, intellectual, or physical worlds—this is the one fundamental law in Occult Science' (Blavatsky, 1988b, 120).
2. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff writes in the article on 'occultism' in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, contemporary scholarship tends to view 'occultism' as a nineteenth-century development within the broader current of esotericism (Hanegraaff, 2006, 888). Occultism can be defined as an attempt to create a synthesis between esotericism and natural science. In that sense Blavatsky's Theosophy represents nineteenth-century occultism in an exemplary fashion in that she combines the Darwinian theory of evolution with the idea of spiritual development. Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff defines occultism as 'an attempt to adapt esotericism to a disenchanted world' (Hanegraaff, 1996, 423).
3. In the introduction to *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky writes about the imitation of both inner and outer nature. The outer mimesis is linked to materialism, and the inner mimesis is linked to spiritual reality: 'The

observer of today, however, is seldom attuned to those subtler vibrations. In the realm of art, he seeks a mere imitation of nature by serving a practical purpose (a life-like portrait of depiction in the ordinary sense); an imitation following certain conventions (Impressionist painting); and, finally, those expressions of an inner feeling called "Stimmung" by the Germans and best translated as sentiment) concealing its true essence in nature-forms' (Kandinsky, 1946, 11). Without using the term 'visionary mimesis', Jason M. Wirth nevertheless distinguishes between Kandinsky's non-figural use of the concept of mimesis and mimesis as a mere copying of an original: 'Writing at the dusk of figurative art, when Kandinsky claimed all art to be mimetic, that it imitates nature, this could certainly not have meant copying as exactly as possible an original and certainly not a concern with the slippage between original and copy. Kandinsky's painting[s] were on the verge of a new language of color that no longer relied on the figural. The *Geist* that Kandinsky reproduced, he reproduced productively' (Wirth, 2000, 265).

4. The Greek word *mimesis* means 'imitation'. The mimesis principle of Plato and Aristotle, however, did not imply a mere imitation of the physically perceptible world. The Danish philosopher Dorthe Jørgensen summarizes the doctrine of mimesis as follows: '[A]rt is by definition mimetic, i.e. it expresses itself in imitation; art either mimes (presents) or conveys (represents) reality as a result of which artistic beauty is—in essence—a mirror of cosmic harmony' (Jørgensen, 2001, 46) [Translation by G.M.]. Jørgensen adds: 'Modern abstract art does not imitate the concrete forms of nature and is therefore called anti-mimetic, but it does operate in a mimetic way to something, but it imitates nature as such [and not just visible forms]. In other words, abstract modern art seeks to reconstruct the inner law of nature aesthetically—thereby reconstructing and actualizing that which lies beyond imminent perception' (Jørgensen, 2001, 268) [Translation by G.M.].
5. Milestones in the scholarly investigation of these aspects of modernity are Ringbom (1970), the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Tuchman et al., 1986), and the exhibition *Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900–1915* (Loers, 1995).
6. The futurist painter Umberto Boccioni expressed this idea most clearly: 'What must be painted is not the visible, but that which was previously regarded as invisible, namely what the clairvoyant sees' (Müller-Westermann, 2013, 45).
7. In an attempt to find a more adequate term for 'abstract art', Raphael Rosenberg introduces the concept 'amimetical'. According to Rosenberg, the nonfigurative paintings of Hilma af Klint are 'amimetical' rather than abstract. Rosenberg defines Aristotelean mimesis as 'imitation of nature' as

if 'nature' were an unproblematic concept (= the sensible world). The meaning of nature is dependent on world view, and if the artists have a spiritual world view, this has consequences for their conception of nature and visibility. Therefore, Rosenberg misunderstands the intention of Klint, Kandinsky, and other visionary artists. The concept 'amimetical' indicates that the artists do not wish to imitate any reality. But the aforementioned artists strive to represent a spiritual reality in a visionary way, and therefore their art is not amimetical but an expression of visionary mimesis (Rosenberg, 2015, 87–100).

8. Arthur Lovejoy, the 'inventor' of the discipline history of ideas, used the term unit-ideas for ideas in a larger compound, such as a philosopher or school (Lovejoy, 2001, 3).
9. Automatic writing is a phenomenon known both within mysticism and Spiritualism. The modern wave of Spiritualism began in 1848, when the two daughters of the Fox family in Hydesville, Margaretta (14 years old) and Catherine (12 years old), began communicating with spirits through rappings. Soon Spiritualism became a mass phenomenon. Among those communicating with spirits was Victor Hugo, who used the technique of 'table turning'. Automatic writing appeared in the psychological discourse of the late nineteenth century. Pierre Janet, for instance, interpreted automatic writing as a form of somnambulism. In the early twentieth century, the discourses of psychology and spiritualism were not divided sharply, and mediumistic phenomena could be interpreted within both frameworks (Magnússon, 2009, 100). Within surrealism, automatic writing was an important means of artistic production.
10. Walter H. Sokel defined the characteristics of Meyrink's allegorical style as expressionism (Sokel, 2005, 80).
11. The translation quoted is based on Maupassant's revised version of the text published in 1887.
12. The concept literally means 'world around' and refers to the organism's subjective universe (cf. Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmermann, 2009). The American philosopher Ken Wilber calls the field of awareness *worldspace*: 'shared common interiors' (Wilber, 2000, 126).
13. This episode is inspired by Hippolyte Bernheim and Ambroise-Auguste Liébault's hypnotic experiments in Nancy.
14. Cf. Dalrymple Henderson (1988, 1995).
15. When writing in French, Strindberg had the French occultist milieu in mind. The French audience knew the occultist sources mentioned in *Inferno*, but his Swedish audience did not, hence the bibliographical guide.
16. Strindberg considered himself a 'naturalist occultist' in the lineage of the Swedish eighteenth-century botanist, physician, and zoologist Carl von Linné, and he criticizes the theosophers for occupying themselves with

metaphysics without having first 'passed through physics' (Johnsson, 2015, 332).

17. One could argue that Strindberg's naturalistic clairvoyance is not an expression of visionary mimesis, since his study of nature is anchored in science—in the widest sense of the word. Nevertheless, he *does* also adhere to ideas that originate in Renaissance esotericism and which hibernated in nineteenth-century occultism such as micro-macro-cosmic correspondences. Since Strindberg thought he was able to interpret earthly phenomena as signs from a higher sphere, he moves beyond the merely scientific paradigm broadly speaking.
18. The connection between symbolism and occult currents is not a scholarly novelty. One of the pioneers in the scholarly investigation of romanticism was Auguste Viatte (Viatte, 1942, 1965). John Senior authored the first monograph specifically on symbolism and occultism (Senior, 1959). Georges Cattaui investigated the spirituality of the French symbolist current (Cattaui, 1965). Alain Mercier was the first scholar to investigate the relevance of occultism for not just the French but the European context as a whole (Mercier, 1969–1974). The first volume of Mercier's work dealt with French symbolism, but the second volume was devoted to European symbolism as a whole and contains a chapter on the German symbolist movement. Mercier describes the circle around Stefan George and its connection with the Cosmics from Munich (*Münchener Kosmiker*), Hugo van Hofmannsthal and Rilke. After describing Rilke's reception of occultism and French symbolism, Mercier draws the following conclusion: 'Jusqu'en ses ouevres et témoignages ultimes, le poète autrichien fut fidèle à sa quête "visionaire" de l'invisible par les choses et les signes apparents, quête qui fait de lui un héritier spirituel, beaucoup plus que simplement formel, du mouvement symboliste' (Mercier, 1969–1974, vol. II, 61). Friedhelm Wilhelm Fischer has shown how 'certain spiritual ideas from the occult tradition were transferred from [symbolist] literature to [modernist] painting' (Fischer, 1977, 344) [Translation by G.M.].
19. *Sphinx. Monatsschrift für die geschichtliche und experimentale Begründung der übersinnlichen Weltanschauung auf monistischer Grundlage* (published 1886–1896). Corinna Treitel translates 'übersinnlich' as 'transcendent'. 'Supersensuous', however, comes closer to the original word (Treitel, 2004, 52).
20. Rilke distinguished between the spiritualistic and artistic medium, and he held the latter in higher regard (Magnússon, 2009, 323–333).
21. 'Not, however, in the Christian sense (from which I always passionately dissociate myself)' (Rilke, 1988, 393).
22. Cf. the chapter 'Rilke und Maeterlincks Bewusstseinsevolution. Die Bienen des Unsichtbaren' (Magnússon, 2009, 196–209).

23. German original: 'O wie er schwinden muß, daß ihrs begrifft!/Und wenn ihm selbst auch bangte, daß er schwände./Indem sein Wort das Hiersein übertrifft,//ist er schon dort, wohin ihrs nicht begleitet./Der Leier Gitter zwängt ihm nicht die Hände./Und er gehorcht, indem er überschreitet' (Rilke, 1987, vol. I, 734).
24. German original: 'Ist er ein Hiesiger? Nein, aus beiden/Reichen erwuchs seine weite Natur' (Rilke, 1987, vol. I, 734).
25. The metaphor 'roots of the willow' seems motivically related to the 'dark, unconscious' God of *Das Stunden-Buch* (*The Book of Hours*, 1899–1903). Darkness and the unconscious were designations used to illustrate man's limited scope of perception opposed to God's immense, invisible vastness (Magnússon, 2014, 21).
26. In the works of the Irish Nobel laureate William Butler Yeats, we find the same characteristics of symbolism and visionary mimesis as in Rilke's, and the same suggestive and intuitive language. Yeats possibly relied even more on automatic writing than Rilke did. Yeats's work *A Vision* (1925, 1937) was created on the basis of his wife, George's mediumism (cf. Mills, 2006). See further Per Faxneld's discussion of Yeats in Chap. 5 of this volume.
27. Cf. Braungart (2002); Baßler (1993); Baßler (1998a); Baßler (1998b); Baßler (2002); Pytlik (2005). See especially Pytlik (2002, 167–194) on Rilke, and Pytlik (2002, 187–194) on Rilke and automatic writing.
28. One could also mention Blavatsky's masters from whom she claimed to receive telepathic messages. In the twentieth century, many mediums claimed to receive messages from ascended masters. This communication is often called 'channeling' (Hanegraaff, 1996, 23).
29. Madame Guyon uses almost the exact phrase: 'In writing I saw that I was writing of things which I had never seen: and during the time of this manifestation, I was given light to perceive that I had in me treasures of knowledge and understanding which I did not know that I possessed' (quoted from Underhill, 1960, 66). Rilke could have come across this passage in his reading of Carl du Prel (Braungart, 2002, 91).
30. The ecstatic letters Rilke wrote after having completed the *Duino Elegies* bear witness of his self-interpretation as a medium. In a letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, dated February 11, 1922, Rilke writes: 'All in a few days, it was an unspeakable storm, a tornado of the spirit (as in Duino), the very fibres and tissues creacked in me—there was never a thought of eating, God knows what nourished me' (Rilke, 1988, 352). In a letter of the same date to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke writes: 'All a few days. It was a hurricane, just as in Duino: all that was fibre in me, tissue, scaffolding, cracked and bent. There was no thought of eating' (Rilke, 1988, 353).
31. Cf. note 5.

CHAPTER 4

August Strindberg's Art in Modernist and Occult Context

Marja Lahelma

August Strindberg is best known as a playwright and author, but he was also an accomplished painter and photographer. While his interest in occultism is well known and has been the subject of a fair amount of scholarship, the impact that his occult ideas had on his artistic practices has been discussed less frequently.[1] Strindberg's occult inclination found its most famous expression in the novel *Inferno* (1897). It was the first major work of fiction that he published after a hiatus in the 1890s, which has typically been perceived in terms of a psychological and religious crisis. Strindberg's creativity did not come to a standstill during his so-called Inferno period, but his energies were directed into new fields. He took up painting and photography with increased vigor, and his artistic endeavors were in many ways connected to his scientific and occult pursuits. In *Inferno* the whole world appears as a network of personally meaningful symbols, an idea that Strindberg adopted from the writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

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Whether it was a demonic force or a benevolent guiding spirit, there always seemed to be some higher power that was keeping an eye on the protagonist, sending him messages and guiding his way. Of course, we have to be careful not to take the novel too literally as a description of the author's life.[2] It does, however, give us a sense of the cultural atmosphere that Strindberg inhabited during the period, and it reflects the interests and occupations that he shared with his intended audience. Strindberg wrote the novel in French and sent it to the Parisian publisher Lucien Chamuel (pseudonym for Lucien Mauchel), who specialized in occult literature. This seems to indicate that it was intended for a specific audience of Parisian occultists or at least a literary audience accustomed to reading occult novels (Gavel Adams, 1993, 125–126).

Inferno exemplifies the highly popular *fin-de-siècle* notion that exceptional sensitivity and even mental illness could be beneficial to artistic creativity. It is, therefore, possible to perceive the 'crisis' described in it as a kind of artistic initiation. Strindberg's version of artistic hypersensitivity builds on the theories of the German philosopher and occultist Carl du Prel, who combined the notion of extreme sensitivity with a vision of the evolution of human consciousness. Strindberg reflected on this idea in the essay 'Sensations détraquées' ('Deranged Sensations', *Le Figaro*, 1894–1895), in which he appears to figure himself as one of those hypersensitive geniuses who serve as an evolutionary link to the man of the future. The first-person narrator experiences a simultaneous confusion and sharpening of all the senses, and he asks himself if it was possible that his nerves were becoming more refined and his senses more subtle—was he becoming 'modern'? (SV 34, 228).[3] The expression 'deranged sensations' appears to indicate a state verging on madness, but in the artistic circles of Paris, this notion was given a specific significance referring to the extreme sensitivity of the artist (Brandell, 1950, 174–175; Gafijczuk, 2014, 84–85). Arthur Rimbaud, in his 'lettre de voyant' (1871), had famously called for a total disorganization of all the senses as a means of reaching the unknown and becoming a visionary (see also Ahearn, 1983, 135–161; Bays, 1964, 166–206). Strindberg's formulation of this model provided a much-needed antidote for decadent pessimism. The nervousness and hypersensitivity of modern man no longer appeared as a sign of degeneration—it was an indication that his senses were becoming more refined. The protagonist of *Inferno* also embodies this notion: he is a sick and nervous man in the process of developing higher sensibilities.

Henrik Johnsson has argued that the Inferno period should be understood as a scientific crisis as well as a religious one (Johnsson, 2015, 13). When perceived in this way, it will appear not so much as a crisis but rather as a point of culmination in a long process of scientific and religious enquiry (Johnsson, 2015, 15). Strindberg was distancing himself from Darwinism and positivist science and becoming more interested in penetrating the surface of the visible world in order to grasp what goes on beyond it. As recent scholarship has emphasized, late nineteenth-century occultism was not contradictory to science (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008; Hanegraaf, 2013; Owen, 2004; Treitel, 2004). Its aim was to restore the link between science and religion that had been lost with the scientific mindset that had its origin in the Enlightenment project and had intensified with the emergence of positivist science in the nineteenth century. Hence, Strindberg's endeavor to reunite science and religion can be considered a typically occultist approach. It was also one favored by many other artists of his generation, who wished to explore things that existed beyond the visible world.

There has been a tendency to view Strindberg's artistic production as completely original and isolated from the rest of the art world—if anything, he has been considered an unwitting precursor of twentieth-century abstraction. A typical example is Jean Cassou's assertion that to understand Strindberg's art we should not situate ourselves within the history of modern art but within his own personal universe, 'l'univers qui a nom Strindberg' (Cassou, 1972, 14). Yet, Strindberg's lifelong interest in visual art is well documented, and we know that he was intimately involved in the artistic circles of Stockholm, Paris, and Berlin, socializing with some of the leading artists of the period, such as Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch. Carlson (1996) has provided one of the most insightful approaches to Strindberg's artistic production, although his focus is on Strindberg's 'reawakening' as a dramatist after the Inferno period. According to Carlson, Strindberg had always felt that as a visual artist he had greater freedom to use his imagination. He maintains that the experimental artistic practices that Strindberg engaged with during the Inferno period made him aware of the creative power of the imagination, which allowed him to discover a new approach in his work as a dramatist. Carlson's analysis is highly relevant, but it is also important to note that Strindberg's artistic practices should not be considered merely an instrument that enabled him to pursue new paths in his writing. What I wish to demonstrate in this chapter is that his artistic production is valuable in its own right and that

in order to understand it we must examine his art within the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century contexts in which artistic, scientific, and occult ideas often collided. In both his painterly and photographic practices, Strindberg was motivated by the very modern pursuit of expressing the inexpressible and revealing the invisible. This was a mission shared by modern artists, occultists, and scientists alike.

I will begin with an analysis of Strindberg's artistic activities, particularly painting, followed by a discussion of his photographic experiments. In earlier Strindberg scholarship, the photographs are usually not treated as part of his artistic production. Söderström (1972), for instance, focuses on Strindberg as a painter and does not take into account his photography. Hemmingson's (1989) pioneering work, on the other hand, is a highly valuable source of information on Strindberg as photographer, but does not establish connections with his painting. In current art historical discussion, photography has come to be considered an increasingly central art form, and consequently, the value of Strindberg's experimental techniques and the theoretical notions that guided them has become more evident. Carlson (1996) was among the first to include photography in his discussion of Strindberg's artistic production. The exhibitions in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Paris in 2001–2002 (Hedström, ed., 2001) and London in 2005 (Granath, ed., 2005) followed this path and consolidated Strindberg's role as a painter and photographer as well as a writer. As I will argue, Strindberg's photographic practices manifest direct parallels with his paintings; in both cases he was informed by scientific and occultist ideas and motivated by the desire to explore the poetic dimension of nature's creative potential. I will conclude with a discussion of Strindberg's artistic production in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century artistic developments, reflecting on the modernist quality of his work and its relation to occultist ideologies.

The Creative Process and the Unconscious Mind

In 1894 Strindberg published an essay titled 'Du hasard dans la production artistique' ('The Role of Chance in Artistic Production') in the Parisian journal *Revue des revues*. Strindberg explains the creation of a work of art as an organic process controlled by creative imagination rather than consciousness. He writes about the kind of imaginative perception that Leonardo da Vinci already promoted as an artistic tool, in which forms of nature activate the visual imagination. In a famous passage in his

Trattato della Pittura (published posthumously in 1651), Leonardo encouraged artists to stimulate their imagination by looking at stains on the wall, stones of mixed colors, ashes, mud, clouds, and the like. Strindberg refers to a fairy tale about a young boy who encounters a nymph in the woods. Of course, it is only his imagination playing tricks on him; what he sees is nothing but a tree stump. Strindberg claims to have had many similar experiences in which the unconscious mind started to feed into his sensory perceptions. According to Strindberg, this provides an analogy with modern painting:

> At first one sees nothing but a chaos of colors; then it begins to assume a likeness, it resembles, but no, it resembles nothing. Suddenly a point is fixed like the nucleus of a cell, it increases, the colors are grouping around it, accumulating; rays are developing that grow branches and twigs like ice crystals do on a window […] and the image appears to the viewer, who has assisted in the act of creating the painting.
>
> And what is even better: the painting remains always new, it changes according to light, never wears out, constantly rejuvenated with the gift of life.[4] (SV 34, 168–169)

Strindberg is writing about a general phenomenon in the art of the period, but he is also referring to his own practice as a painter. He offers a detailed description of the creation of the painting *Underlandet* (*Wonderland*, 1894) (Fig. 4.1).

It may or may not be a truthful account of his actual painting process, but it does reveal a great deal about the way he understands the workings of the creative mind. He begins with a vague idea of a design of 'a shadowy wood where you can see the sea at sunset', and gets to work distributing the colors with his palette knife.

> The canvas is covered, I step back and look! Oh no! … I can no longer see the sea; the illuminated opening reveals an infinite perspective of pink and bluish light, in which vaporous beings, without body or qualification float like fairies with cloud trails. The wood has become a dark underground cave, barred by scrub; and in the foreground, let's see what it is—rocks covered with unknown lichens—and to the right the knife has smoothed down the colors too much, so that they resemble reflections in water—well, then it is a pond! Perfect! […] A touch here and there with the finger, which blends the rebellious colors, melts together and chases away crude tones, refines, evaporates, and the painting is finished![5] (SV 34, 169)

Fig. 4.1 August Strindberg, *Underlandet* (*Wonderland*), 1894. Oil on paper, 72.5 x 52 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

We can see how the artist sets his imagination in action by a process of alternation between the roles of creator and receiver and between conscious and unconscious acts. What is most significant here is the central role that he gives to the unconscious mind in the creative process. The psychological theorization of the unconscious that took place throughout the nineteenth century provided new models of the human mind as multiple and fragmented rather than singular and unified. As Alex Owen has pointed out, this was an idea that found parallels in occultist views of subjectivity; both the occultist and the psychological approach can be seen as attempts to find a solution to the inherent paradoxes of the modern self in the way that they sought to negotiate the seemingly oppositional relationship between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational. Moreover, both emphasized interiority and viewed psychic activity as an interaction between conscious and hidden parts of the mind (Owen, 2014, 114–147).

One of the most central questions regarding the unconscious mind was whether it should be considered 'closed' or 'open' (Ellenberger, 1970, 145–147). That is, whether it contained memories and impressions that had passed through the conscious mind or whether it could open a route into something larger than the individual. The conception of the unconscious as open was prevalent among occultists, who believed that by turning inward and letting go of conscious control it was possible to establish contact with some kind of objective level of being (see also Owen, 2004, 148). Strindberg is clearly suggesting that the unconscious mind is in contact with some kind of extrasensory reality and that by allowing it to guide the artistic process one could imitate nature's creativity. He employs a metaphor of the nucleus of a cell and describes the creation of the work of art as an organic process in which the viewer assists. These metaphors suggest an association between artistic creativity and the creative processes of nature with echoes of the dual concept of nature that can be found in the writings of Romantic philosophers as well as late nineteenth-century occultists. According to this notion, *natura naturata* is the outward appearance of nature, whereas *natura naturans* refers to nature's own creativity; instead of copying nature as it appears, the artist should imitate the creative spirit of nature in order to become united with the divine creativity of God (Engell, 1981, 347–350). The formula for the art of the future according to Strindberg is to imitate nature closely and above all to imitate nature's way of creating. The work of art that is thus created

remains always new, rejuvenated with the gift of life (SV 34, 169). It is forever in a state of becoming, like a living being, and neither its meaning nor its ontological status is fixed.

Similar conceptualizations of the creative process as a merging of the subject and object can be found in late nineteenth-century symbolist art theories. These were often informed by occult notions such as the doctrine of correspondences and the existence of various invisible energies, as well as by modern psychological formulations concerning the dynamic structure of the human mind with both conscious and unconscious dimensions. One of the most influential theorists of symbolist art, Albert Aurier, described the creation of the artwork as a union between the soul of the artist and the soul of nature. The artwork thus born has a soul that, like the human soul, serves as a link between spirit and matter:

> The complete work of art is therefore a new being, one can say it is absolutely alive, since it has a soul to animate it that is the synthesis of two souls; the soul of the artist and the soul of nature, almost like a paternal and maternal soul. This new being which is almost divine because it is immutable and immortal, must be considered likely to inspire whoever communicates with it under certain conditions, emotions, ideas, special feelings, in proportion to the purity and profundity of his soul.[6] (Aurier, 1893, 303)

Even though Aurier uses a different vocabulary—he seems to be emulating the German Romantic philosophers in his elaborate argumentation—the basic elements of his theory are analogous to Strindberg's. Aurier describes the work of art as a living being and its creation as a process of communication between the artist (the active, subjective element) and nature (the passive, objective element). While he states that the work of art is 'immutable and immortal', it also has the potential to inspire different emotions and ideas depending on the viewer's personal ability to receive them. Aurier also refers to Swedenborg, whom he calls a 'hallucinating genius', and he uses the term *extase* to denote the capacity to perceive the correspondences between the material and the spiritual world (Aurier, 1893, 210–214). This ability to recognize higher meaning in the most mundane and ordinary things is a central theme in *Inferno*, and Strindberg also reflects on the idea in 'Sénsations détraquées' (see also Johnsson, 2015, 205–206). However, while Aurier's ecstasy appears to be a pleasant state of reverie, the sensory derangement described by Strindberg seems more agonizing. Nevertheless, both portray an exceptional mental state,

considered beneficial or even necessary for the artist, in which the conscious mind temporarily loses control, which in turn affects one's sensation of both the self and the surrounding world.

Strindberg's essay builds on the conception that a work of art does not exist as a 'thing in itself' (SV 34, 169). The existence of an artwork depends entirely on imagination: it comes into being as a result of an imaginative practice, and its reception is also a process of imaginative perception. As Carlson (1996, 178–179) has observed, the essay reveals that Strindberg no longer considered imagination to be a dangerous hallucinatory force but had assumed a novel attitude in which it appeared as a vital part of the creative process. The concept of imagination had been a subject of debate throughout the nineteenth century. The scientifically orientated naturalism that emerged mid-century had rendered the whole idea highly suspicious, and it was understood to be nothing but a mechanical function of the mind. The 'occult revival', however, contributed to a newly established positive attitude toward the Romantic notion of creative imagination. For Charles Baudelaire, who provided the late nineteenth-century generation with an aesthetic interpretation of Swedenborg's theory of correspondences, imagination was 'the queen of faculties'—a mysterious gift, resembling the creative power of God that transformed the artist's vision into a work of art (Baudelaire, 1859/1868, 263–276; see also Hiddleston, 1999, 39–41).

Many twentieth-century critics tended to interpret the late nineteenth-century use of the doctrine of correspondences in purely aesthetic and formalist terms, but it was in fact deeply rooted in the occult discourses of the period (see also Henderson, 1987, 6–7). In its most basic interpretation, the doctrine holds that there are three hierarchically arranged worlds—the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial—and correspondences are the links between these worlds. Every object in the natural world reflects its spiritual image, which in turn is a representation of a divine archetype. Baudelaire defined imagination as the ability to perceive the mystical correspondences between the visible and the invisible worlds. For Baudelaire, as for Strindberg, the imagination was not purely subjective; it was based on an innate universal language that could be communicated directly. Imagination was a dynamic faculty that activated all the others (Baudelaire, 1859/1868, 263–269; see also Hiddleston, 1999, 39–41; Wilkinson, 1996, 217–247). Charles Taylor has argued that the Romantic conceptualization of the creative imagination was, in effect, the element that transformed the mimetic conception of art into an expressive and

creative one (Taylor, 1989, 379). When this notion developed further in the late nineteenth century through an increased emphasis on the unconscious, the result was a modern understanding of art as dynamic and extremely powerful, as it had the potential to change one's perception of reality.

The Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski, who belonged to Strindberg's social circles in Berlin in the 1890s, was among the late nineteenth-century theorists who contributed toward new formulations of the creative imagination. In an article on Edvard Munch's 1894 Berlin exhibition, he connected the imaginative capacity directly with a transcendentally interpreted notion of the unconscious. Przybyszewski, who was also keenly interested in experimental studies of psychic phenomena, described Munch's paintings as 'products of a brain in the most unstable state of consciousness imaginable, in which the conscious and the unconscious flow into each other'[7] (Przybyszewski, 1894, 27–28). Przybyszewski uses the term 'individuality' to refer to the transcendental and immortal part of one's being. According to him, it is the same facility that was more commonly known as the unconscious (Przybyszewski, 1894, 12). Individuality gives sense impressions their intensity and quality, binding them all together so that most heterogeneous phenomena are perceived as equivalent because the individual responds to them all with the same emotion: 'there is color to line, perfume for tone: Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent'[8] (Przybyszewski, 1894, 13). The quote in French is from Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondances' (1857). This poem was popular among symbolists, and it was also quoted by Aurier for whom it embodied the power of *extase* (Aurier, 1893, 214). Lynn R. Wilkinson has suggested that a poem entitled 'Les Correspondances' written by the French occultist and magician Eliphas Lévi (pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant) in the 1840s could be a possible source for Baudelaire's poem (Wilkinson, 1996, 24–26). Lévi was an important popularizer of occult ideas among the nineteenth-century artists and writers, and one of the key elements of his thought in this respect was the notable emphasis that he placed on the power of imagination (Wilkinson, 1996, 217–220).

In his description of individuality, Przybyszewski seems to also be borrowing from Carl du Prel's philosophy of mysticism. He defines this capacity in terms that are very similar to what du Prel called the 'transcendental subject' (du Prel, 1885, 391–420). According to du Prel, this is the part of the human mind that prevails in unconscious states. Unlike Eduard von

Hartmann and other early theorists of the unconscious, du Prel held that the transcendental subject remained an individual. He maintained that as the psychological and sensory abilities of humans continued to develop during the course of evolution, the part of one's being that now lives in the unconscious state will gradually emerge into consciousness. The development and education of the senses was the key to this transition toward a higher state of being. When our senses become more highly tuned, the world will appear to us in new ways. In dreams and abnormal mental states such as trance or delirium, when the threshold of sensation is lowered, we can momentarily become aware of our future state of being. He emphasized that these were not morbid states even if they may appear so from the standpoint of ordinary sense consciousness (du Prel, 1885, 378–420; Sommer, 2009, 61–62; Weber, 2007, 597–598). The name Carl du Prel is not well known today, but he was an influential figure, particularly in the German-speaking part of Europe. In *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1899) Sigmund Freud calls him 'that brilliant mystic', and among other well-known readers were Rainer Maria Rilke, Wassily Kandinsky, Thomas Mann, and Arnold Schönberg (Sommer, 2009, 59; Weber, 2007, 595).

The model of artistic creativity presented by Przybyszewski has apparent similarities with Strindberg's aesthetic thought, which is not surprising considering their shared social circles in the 1890s. The philosophies of du Prel and Swedenborg, the poetry of Baudelaire, and the latest psychological theories were a common interest among the bohemian group of artists, writers, and musicians that Strindberg associated with in Berlin. Similar to Strindberg's formulations in 'Du hasard dans la production artistique', Przybyszewski also describes the creative process as controlled by unconscious psychic impulses rather than by consciousness. The unconscious is defined by Przybyszewski as the transcendental part of our being; it constitutes our true self, and it is also what guides our sense impressions, giving them their intensity and quality. In 'Du hasard dans la production artistique' Strindberg only speaks indirectly of the unconscious realm, and the sense in which this concept is to be understood is not entirely clear. But Strindberg's other writings, most importantly 'Sensations détraquées', reveal that he was also interested in an evolutionary model in which the development of the senses and the nervous system played a central role. Moreover, the idea that by letting go of conscious control one could become one with the creative power of nature indicates that the uncon-

scious is not perceived merely as a dimension of the individual psyche. Rather, the unconscious part of our mind connects us to a fundamental level of being. Hence, art that is created in this way has a universal significance that is revealed only when the viewer interacts with it.

The kind of artistic method that Strindberg describes in his essay, in which the unconscious is allowed to guide the artistic process, is more commonly associated with surrealism. In the beginning of the twentieth century, surrealists endeavored to liberate the creative imagination by means of psychic automatism and trance states (see also Bauduin, 2015b; Rabinovitch, 2002, 60). Before it was turned into a systematic artistic approach, this kind of method was employed in mediumistic art. Strindberg was interested in the idea of telepathic communication, and he was aware of the psychological experimentation carried out to prove the existence of this phenomenon. These experiments, which typically produced drawings as visual evidence of thoughts being transmitted through mental suggestion, were reported in the journal *Sphinx*, edited by du Prel (Morehead and Otto, 2015, 156–157). The agenda of this publication was to establish a rational basis for emerging spiritual and mystical perspectives.

The French dramatist and author Jules Bois, who had connections with both the artistic and occultist circles of his time, was among the first writers to fully recognize the connection between artistic and mediumistic activities. In 1897 he published an article entitled 'L'Esthétique des esprits et celle des symbolistes' ('The Aesthetic of Spirits and that of the Symbolists') in *La Revue des revues*. Later he returned to the subject in *Le Miracle moderne* (Bois, 1907, 161–162), in which he writes that the symbolist artists were similar to the mediums who produced images in that they also turned away from the visible world into an unconscious realm in order to find material for their art. For Bois, mediumistic art comes about like natural processes and unites the subjective and the objective:

> The unconscious, in fact, is the great Pan. Nature and its infallible geneses ferment in its womb. It unfolds the mystery hidden in the heart of the universe. It unites the subjective phenomenon to the objective, explains to us the dark abyss of things by the secret buried in the roots of the individual being. These invisible artists, buried in ourselves, manifest themselves in certain predisposed temperaments. They reveal to us our inner being, far richer, more fertile, and far more original than our superficial personality.[9] (Bois, 1907, 157–158)

According to Bois, the incontestable leader of the symbolists was Odilon Redon. Dario Gamboni has compared Strindberg's method to that of Redon, whom he sees as a prime representative of the kind of indeterminate and process-oriented tendency that he examines in *Potential Images* (2002). According to Gamboni, for both artists 'the appearance of the finished work and its effect corresponds to its genesis, which itself illuminates the process of perception and cognition' (Gamboni, 2002, 177). He connects this artistic phenomenon with contemporary philosophical and psychological theories that emphasized the active nature of perception, on the one hand, and the power of unconscious mental processes, on the other (Gamboni, 2002, 183–200). Similar to Strindberg's formulation of the creative process, Gamboni's conceptualization of the 'potential image' accentuates the imagining activity of the perceiver; the image is created in an interactive process between artist, work, and beholder. These kinds of images have a visual ambiguity that gives them an open-ended quality and blurs the distinction between figuration, ornament, and abstraction. The artistic scheme based on visual indeterminacy presented by Gamboni contributes to an alternative 'story of modern art' that is more accommodating for an artist like Strindberg than the dominant evolutionary plot that culminates in abstraction. Within this context Strindberg's artistic, scientific, and occult interests and practices constitute an ideological whole that can be analyzed on its own terms.

Photographic Experiments 1: Celestographs and Crystallograms

Following his other artistic and scientific endeavors, during the course of the 1890s, Strindberg's photographic activities became increasingly experimental, culminating in the pursuit of revealing the invisible sources of life through chemical investigation that included the use of photographic techniques. It is no surprise that someone like Strindberg, who moved freely between the worlds of art and science, would be fascinated with this modern technique. Like other modern technical devices such as the telescope and the microscope, the camera could reveal things the naked eye was unable to perceive. Indeed, one might argue that there is a special relationship between photography and occultism; both are concerned with invisible forces that exist on the threshold of scientific understanding. In addition, the chemical processes performed in the darkroom create a sense of mystery and evoke associations with alchemy and magic (Tucker,

2005, 51–52). Attempts to photograph spirits, fluids or vibrations, thought forms, or other invisible phenomena were carried out by occultists and scientists alike, and they often produced highly aesthetic images that artists with occult and symbolist inclinations, such as Strindberg, Munch, or Kandinsky, found both visually and intellectually stimulating (Eggum, 1989, 61; Enns, 2013; Morehead and Otto, 2015). On one level, Strindberg was motivated by the hopes of establishing scientific proof for occult phenomena, but he was equally fascinated by the artistic potential of the modern technique. I have explained above how Strindberg's desire to explore the interplay of passive and active elements of the creative process was reflected in his paintings. Photography, due to its passive character of mechanical reproduction, would appear to remain on the surface level of things. Yet, for Strindberg, it was precisely the passive element in creativity that was able to imitate nature's way of creating—that is, the *natura naturans* aspect—and hence could penetrate beneath the surface.

In the series of scientific articles that Strindberg published in 1896–1897 in the occult journal *L'Initiation*, he often reflects on the construction of the human eye (for instance, 'Un regard vers le Ciel et les 23 degrés' ['A Look at the Skies and the 23 Degrees'], 'Le Ciel et l'Œil' ['The Sky and the Eye'], 'L'Horizon et l'Œil' ['The Horizon and the Eye']; SV 36, 67–131). He had a theory that the concave form of the retina caused us to perceive everything as having a round shape, like the earth, the ocean, and the horizon. Hence, in his photographic images, he attempted to overcome the restriction of not only the photographic medium but also our physical vision that he believed created a falsified perception of reality. He distrusted all kinds of lenses and preferred to use simple self-made devices or, in the case of the 'celestographs' and 'crystallograms', opted for direct exposure without any kind of mechanical apparatus or even a lens. Similar experimental methods were employed in both scientific and occultist photography, which endeavored to record invisible phenomena (Chéroux, 2005, 114–125; Enns, 2013). Strindberg noticed that when brine solutions were left to evaporate on sheets of glass, the residue would create crystal formations that resembled various plant forms, such as ferns, grass, or tree branches. It seemed to him that these crystal formations were imitating living matter. The photogram was then created by laying the glass on photographic paper and making an exposure. The so-called celestographs were made by exposing a photographic plate directly to the night sky (see also Campany, 2005, 115–118; Hemmingson, 1989, 89–105) (Fig. 4.2).

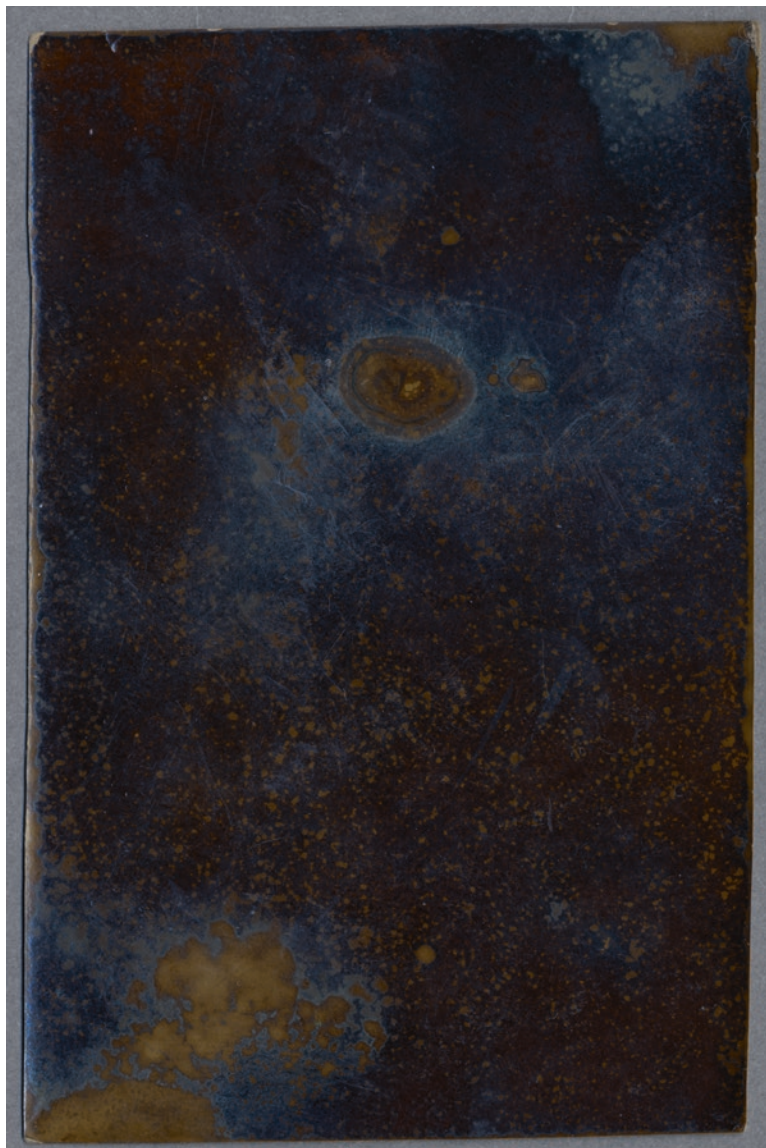

Fig. 4.2 August Strindberg, *Celestograf XIII*, 1890s. Photograph, dimensions unknown, Kungliga biblioteket, Stockholm

The image that appeared as a result was not a photograph of the night sky in any conventional sense. Its visual resemblance to the sky dotted with the light of heavenly bodies was, in effect, incidental and probably formed by microscopic particles in the air and impurities in the chemical process. But the image was more than that; to borrow Gamboni's words, it was 'a kind of *vera icon* of the heavens', a miraculous apparition that captures not only a likeness but also the essence (Gamboni, 2002, 177). These experiments appeared to prove Strindberg's occult vision of the universe in which the microcosm and the macrocosm corresponded with each other.

During the most intense stage of the Inferno period, Strindberg was unable or perhaps unwilling to produce any major literary works, but he did not stop writing altogether. In 1894 his thesis on monistic chemistry, *Antibarbarus*, was published in German, appearing two years later in Swedish. In addition, he produced numerous short essays on subjects ranging from alchemy and chemistry to art criticism. Many of his essays from this period, including the scientific ones, were published in occult periodicals such as *L'Initiation* and *L'Hyperchimie*. The artistic and scientific aspects in these texts are as deeply interconnected as in his photographic and painterly activities and often directly related to them. For example, in the essay 'Stenarnes suckan' ('The Sighing of the Stones', 1896), he ponders the process of crystallization in a way that reflects the motivation behind the photographic experiments he was carrying out at the time. He believed that the potential for life was present everywhere in nature, even in seemingly inanimate matter such as stones and minerals. He wondered if it was possible for the elements to carry 'memories' of their previous forms of existence:

> [H]as this water in the form of steam, which may have passed through the lifecycle of plants several times, taken on and retained impressions of the plants' forms, or has the water itself, since it left the lower stage of crystal form, its own higher aiming ability to shape the formation of crystal aggregates more freely, and is it water that has given form to plants or vice versa?[10] (SV 35, 172–173)

In these ideas he was influenced in particular by the monistic principle popularized by the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, according to whom all organic and inorganic matter is composed of a single substance that is capable of growth and transformation. Strindberg was certainly not the only artist who was interested in Haeckelian monism.

Haeckel's evolutionary theorizations, his speculations on science and religion, and the visually stimulating material in his *Kunstformen der Natur* (*Art-Forms of Nature*, 1899–1904) provided inspiration for a number of late nineteenth-century artists. Emile Gallé's, Odilon Redon's, and Hilma af Klint's work, for instance, has been connected with Haeckelian ideas (Bindman, 2009, 154–158; Larson, 2005, 50–84; Lomas, 2013; Keshavjee, 2015). An artist close to Strindberg who was inspired by Haeckel was Munch. He found a possible answer to the question of immortality in the monistic theory of transformation, and it also provided support for his belief that the work of art was a living being. Munch employed the metaphor of crystallization to formulate this notion: 'An artwork is a crystal—crystals have a soul and a will, and an artwork must also have these'[11] (Munch Museet, MM N 63; see also Cordulack, 2002, 94). For Haeckel the process of crystallization represented an example of matter seemingly coming into being anew; like the opposite process of matter apparently vanishing, as in burning, it was a question of transformation (Haeckel, 1893, 14). Crystallography played a central role in his effort to establish proof for the unity of organic and inorganic matter. He argued that the primordial organisms that existed on the border between organic and inorganic matter were analogous to crystals, which stood at a similar position on the side of inorganic matter (Di Gregorio, 2005, 137–139). He continued to develop this theory throughout his career, and in his last scientific work, *Kristallseelen* (*Crystal Souls*, 1917), he set out to prove that crystals have souls (Di Gregorio, 2005, 537–542). Crystallization creates interesting visual effects, but it is clear that the metaphorical side of this phenomenon also fascinated Strindberg. He wanted to capture the impression of natural processes that reflect analogies between living nature and similar processes in seemingly inanimate matter. Crystallization perceived as a process of matter seemingly coming into being provides an elegant metaphor for art understood not as imitation of something that already exists but as a completely new creation.

Munch's desire to breathe life into his paintings went so far as to make room for the physical transformation of the object. His notorious 'kill-or-cure' treatments that left his paintings weather-beaten and occasionally moldy or covered in bird excrement are well known (see also Buchhart, 2003, 27; Stenersen, 1969, 40). These methods, which not only allowed the forces of nature to transform the color and structure of the painting but also opened it to the natural effects of time and aging, have obvious affinities with Strindberg's ideas about imitating nature's creativity. Like

Strindberg, Munch invited chance to interfere with the creative process. This 'modern aspect' of his working methods has even been compared to Andy Warhol's factory concept (Hoerschelmann, 2003, 14–15).

Evert Sprinchorn has pointed out an apparent discrepancy in Strindberg's thought between his own spiritual and religious attitude and Haeckel's approach, which he interprets as essentially materialistic (Sprinchorn, 1982, 55). Harry G. Carlson assumes that Strindberg liked to cite scientific sources as proof of his own position in the avant-garde of modern science, and he was perhaps too eager in this project to worry about any contradictions (Carlson, 1996, 213). Henrik Johnsson emphasizes that even if one should not always take Strindberg's scientific speculations literally—at times, particularly in his letters, he was amusing himself and the reader—he did in fact take his scientific activities very seriously (Johnsson, 2015, 197). Strindberg had high hopes for *Antibarbarus*, which he thought would revolutionize modern chemistry and earn him honor and publicity as a man of science (Johnsson, 2015, 196–208). He sent a copy of the manuscript to Haeckel, who wrote in reply that he did not consider himself an expert in chemistry but that, as far as he understood it, there was nothing completely absurd or crazy in Strindberg's ideas (letter 2787, vol. 10, 69, n. 4).[12] It should be kept in mind, moreover, that for Haeckel matter and spirit composed an indivisible unity where one could not exist without the other. He defines the monistic principle as the conviction that there lives 'one spirit in all things' and that the whole cognizable world is constituted and has been developed in accordance with one common fundamental law (Haeckel, 1893, 9). This formulation is not very different from the Romantic view of matter as being informed by creative spirit. Like Romantic theorists before him, and unlike most contemporary physicists at the time, Haeckel provided a vision of nature in its entirety. Science constituted for him the foundation of all knowledge, but he did not believe it should be allowed to have the final word. Although Haeckel was not an occultist, his theories still had the potential to inspire someone with occult inclinations. His mission, like that of the occultists, was to reunite science and religion. Moreover, Haeckel identified an artistic element in nature's way of creating. His elaborate illustrations of radiolarians, medusae, and molluscs in *Kunstformen der Natur* infused the most minute detail of nature with a sense of beauty, organic symmetry, and the fantastic. The fact that beauty was found in these forms of nature appeared for Haeckel as proof that

there was a bond between man and nature; this bond was constituted by the presence of 'the spirit' everywhere in nature, from humans to radiolarians (Breidbach, 2010, 14).

Photographic Experiments 2: Photographing the Soul

Strindberg discovered in photography a fruitful medium for exploring the relationship between art, science, and occultism, and when he pointed the camera toward himself, questions of subjectivity, the soul, and life and death were introduced into this interplay of ideas. When Strindberg first began photographing himself, he was motivated at least in part by the need to take control over his public image. In 1886 he produced a series of photographs of himself and his family at their home in Gersau, Switzerland (Hemmingson, 1989, 27–54; Höök and Lalander, 2001, 103–115). It is clear that the photographs were staged—the technology of the period was not yet advanced enough to allow for the possibility of spontaneous snapshots, and there is a lot of conscious role-playing taking place—but they nonetheless reflect a belief in the objective and naturalistic potential of photography. In his later photographic self-portraits, Strindberg assumed an approach that was in stark contrast with the one he had developed in the Gersau series. Rather than offering multiple perspectives and details, Strindberg's later photographic self-portraits strive to reveal the essence of his own being through a process of distillation in which the individualizing layers were removed in order to reveal the core of his subjectivity. His experiments with the celestographs and crystallograms reveal, however, that he still believed in the potential of photography to provide objective evidence. Strindberg was probably aware of Hippolyte Baraduc's attempts to capture the human soul using a simple photographic technique very similar to the methods employed by Strindberg. Baraduc's 1896 book *L'Âme humaine et ses mouvements, ses lumières et l'iconographie de l'invisible fluidique* (*The Human Spirit and Its Movements, Its Lights and the Iconography of the Invisible Fluid*) contained a catalogue of illustrations of his experiments, many of which bear a visual resemblance to Strindberg's celestographs.

Strindberg's interest in thought transfer has already been noted, and he also believed that photographs could have a telepathic power. This was by no means an unusual conviction in the late nineteenth century. In the

mid-1890s he came into contact with the study *L'Extériorisation de la sensibilité* (*The Exteriorization of Sensibility*, 1895) by the French occultist Albert de Rochas. He refers to de Rochas's thoughts in the essay 'L'Irradiation et l'extension de l'âme' ('The Irradiation and Extension of the Soul'), published in *L'Inititation* in 1896. He states that after reading de Rochas, he had become certain of the soul's ability to expand beyond the physical body and that in ordinary sleep it does so regularly (SV 36, 85). According to de Rochas, two people could affect each other at a distance through the power of invisible energies. He claimed that it was possible to store an individual's sensitivity in an external object, such as a glass of water or, significantly, in a photograph. Around this time Strindberg first came up with an idea of establishing a photographic studio specializing in 'psychological portraits'. This would have involved a partly occultist working method and the use of a self-constructed pinhole camera that he believed would enhance the psychological effect of the resulting image (Hemmingson, 1989, 74–75).

The Strindberg memoir written by the author Adolf Paul, who belonged to the Berlin group in the 1890s, contains an account of these plans that, in the end, were never put into operation. Paul explains that Strindberg had made a camera out of an old cigar box. It had no lenses at all, only a cardboard sheet with a hole in it. The longer exposure time necessary for this kind of camera gave Strindberg the opportunity to induce a kind of hypnotic suggestion on his subjects, or 'victims' as he called them according to Paul. He had prepared a story containing all kind of moods, carefully calculated to last exactly 30 seconds. He believed that if he told the story silently in his mind while exposing the plates, his victim would be forced to react with the appropriate emotions (Paul, 1915, 36–37). Gunnar Brandell has pointed out that Strindberg took de Rochas's initial ideas several steps further. For de Rochas it was only the 'sensitivity' and not the entire human being (the soul) that could be exteriorized. Strindberg, on the other hand, appeared to believe that with this psychological method he would be able to 'capture the whole man' in the photographic image—not just the physical appearance of the human being but also, and more importantly, his soul (Brandell, 1950, 104–105). In this he was probably inspired by the experiments in soul photography carried out by Baraduc and others.

In 1905 Strindberg started to work together with the photographer Herman Anderson. With Anderson's help he was finally able to fulfill his dream of life-sized portrait photography. These were achieved either by

rephotographing and enlarging existing photographic images or by using the so-called Wunderkamera, a pinhole camera with no lens (Campany, 2005, 18; Hemmingson, 1989, 107–128). Strindberg's friend Gustaf Eisen, who visited him during his period of collaboration with Anderson, found his whole apartment full of photographs. According to Eisen, Strindberg was assured that in the photographs of him taken with the Wunderkamera, his soul came out better than in those taken by other people (Hemmingson, 1989, 121) (Fig. 4.3).

The portraits produced by Strindberg during this period reflect the same idea of a close contact between the image and the object that Strindberg had already been exploring in the photograms of crystallization. In 1906 he addressed a letter to Harriet Bosse (his third wife, whom he had by that time already divorced) and their daughter Anne-Marie (Lillan), in which he writes about the portraits of Harriet and Lillan:

> Today I received a great work of art: Mother's portrait, the larger-than-life-sized face only, from the photograph taken in Helsinki two years ago (Large hat and coat) but without the hat now. It is Botticelli, broad strokes, lovely tones, and grain like in an old oil painting. But the picture of Lillan lights up the whole room […].[13] (Letter 5381, vol. 15, 280)

Fig. 4.3 August Strindberg, self-portrait taken with the 'Wunderkamera', 1906–1907. Photograph, 30 x 24 cm, Nordiska museet, Stockholm

He mentions Lillan's portrait again in another letter written a few days later, stating that he always nods his head when he walks past it in the hall. He is sure that his little daughter knows this and is thinking about him (letter 5390, vol. 15, 286). These anecdotes reveal the great psychological meaning that the images had for Strindberg and also the way that he considered them as works of art.

Strindberg's reliance on photographic techniques that were informed by occult ideas resulted in a highly artistic conception of the photographic image and, indeed, in images that have an unquestionable artistic value. He employed experimental methods in order to minimize all naturalistic details and to reveal the essence of the subject. This approach reflects the modernist attitude favored by Strindberg's Berlin circle of artists and writers, who reacted against the naturalist principle of attention to detail. Carla Lathe has described this phenomenon using the term 'amor vacui'—love of the void, of emptiness, fragmentation—a concept closely related to Gamboni's potential image (Lathe, 1972, 1–7). This kind of visual practice, as we have seen above, makes use of unconscious processes and leaves room for the creative imagination of both the artist and the perceiver. The tension between the subject and the object, the individual and the universal, that is revealed in Strindberg's photography during and after the 1890s reflects occultist and psychological discourses concerning the structure of the human mind. The essence of one's being is no longer situated in the visible but precisely in what cannot be seen.

Similar to his paintings, Strindberg's photographs explore the borderline between the material and the immaterial. The object status of a photograph is far more questionable than that of a drawing or a painting, which always remains insistently material. A photograph as an object lies somewhere between materiality and immateriality; as an object made of light, it is completely immaterial, yet its indexical quality, its tendency to always point toward an original, connects it to the physical world in a very concrete sense. This issue has become more acute during the era of digital images, but it has always been a fundamental element of photography. In Strindberg's photographic portraits, this element of immateriality is combined with a sense of presence. Indeed, the magic of photography, as Strindberg perceived it, would allow the person in the image to be truly present—no less present than if he were there in person or perhaps even more so. According to Strindberg's monistic beliefs, there was no real distinction between matter and spirit, and hence no

reason why the immaterial essence of a living being could not be captured in a material object. A photographic image, which already exists on the borderline, could therefore serve as a perfect instrument for this kind of experimentation.

The abstract, nonmimetic quality of the celestographs is immediately apparent, but Strindberg's figurative photographs from the 1890s onward also manifest the same tendency that transforms the photographic image into a symbolic and expressive medium with the potential to represent feelings and ideas. Strindberg's experiments with Anderson also included cloud photography. Some of these images are extremely dramatic and visually interesting, and similar to Strindberg's paintings, they are simultaneously both representational and abstract. They bring to mind the series of cloud photographs taken by Alfred Stieglitz in the 1920s, which are often considered to be the first abstract photographs. Stieglitz called these photographs *Equivalents*, because for him their abstract forms were equivalent to his own most profound feelings and experiences (Enns, 2013, 188–191; see also Hemmingson, 1989, 134). Strindberg's photographs reflect a similar attempt to transform the facts of reality into an abstract language capable of expressing something that is entirely new.

Concluding Remarks

As Harry G. Carlson has suggested, it is likely that some of Strindberg's working methods, such as his rudimentary technique and his tendency to use palette knives instead of brushes, were at least to some extent due to his lack of formal training (Carlson, 1996, 165). Hence, in purely stylistic terms Strindberg's work may appear to diverge quite radically from that of most artists of the same period.[14] If we take into consideration the theoretical ideas that guided his practices, however, he will no longer seem so isolated. Fellow artists like Munch and Gauguin probably influenced Strindberg in his conception of visual art and creativity (Carlson, 1996, 269; Eggum, 1989, 57–58). Moreover, his interest in the occult and his quest for the invisible and the inexpressible in art was in line with avant-garde discourses of the *fin-de-siècle*, in particular those associated with symbolism. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of the 'occult revival' and emerging psychological theories in the formation of the aesthetic program of symbolism, and there has also been a tendency to reexamine the relationship between symbolism and modernism

(Facos, 2009; Facos and Mednick, eds., 2015; Lahelma, 2014; Rapetti, 2005). Already in her pioneering 1979 study, Filiz Eda Burhan defined symbolist art as symbolic representation that reveals a correspondence between the artist's subjective emotional state and a larger totality of nature. This interaction can be conceptualized in psychological as well as occultist terms; both emphasized the subjective nature of vision and the ability of the human mind to operate with visual symbols (Burhan, 1979, 67–148). As I have argued in this chapter, a similar interaction between subjectivity and nature informs Strindberg's understanding of the artistic process. It is important to keep in mind that although he emphasizes the role of chance, his working methods were not haphazard, as they have sometimes been described (Hedström, 2001, 55). Even when he allowed chance to take control of the process, it was not understood as a random force. According to his occult belief system, every single detail of our existence had meaning for those who were able to decipher the messages they conveyed.

While there is no denying that Strindberg's artistic endeavors were always highly original, they also find parallels in the art of the period. Strindberg takes part in the questioning of established norms of pictorial representation that has continued throughout the history of modern art. This has resulted in new forms of artistic expression, such as conceptual art, performance, or installations, all of which emphasize the creative process instead of the material object and ascribe an active role to the viewer. Hence, in order to appreciate the art historical significance of Strindberg's artistic production, we must go beyond visual appearance. Instead of considering him an isolated genius and a forerunner of abstraction, it is more fruitful to perceive Strindberg as a central representative of late nineteenth-century occult modernism. As with many other artists associated with the symbolist current, he drew inspiration from a wide spectrum of scientific and occult sources. In both his paintings and his photographs, Strindberg reflects on the subjective and objective dimensions of art and explores the interrelationship between the insistent materiality of the work of art and its spiritual dimensions. In his formulation of the creative process, the rational and conscious self is temporarily lost, but this loosening of control allows the individual to reach contact with a larger, more fundamental level of being. This model of artistic creativity in which the creative imagination is fed by unconscious impulses was typical of late nineteenth-century symbolist theory, and it does still prevail, although it may no longer be articulated in occultist terms.

Notes

1. Stockenström (1972) was the first detailed investigation of the various sources of Strindberg's occult thought. More recently the issue has been thoroughly examined in Johnsson (2015). Söderström's (1972) comprehensive study of Strindberg as a painter takes into account Strindberg's occult interests, but his approach builds on a biographical framework and provides very little in-depth information about the effect that these ideas had on Strindberg's artistic production.
2. The biographical and psychoanalytical approach that Brandell employed in *Strindbergs infernokris* (1950) has been criticized by many later commentators (Gavel Adams, 1993, 125–127; Johnsson, 2015, 259, 323; Lagercrantz, 1979, 315), but the tendency to read *Inferno* as a straightforward autobiography and/or a case study of mental illness has been persistent.
3. Strindberg's writings are cited from the standard edition of his collected works, *Samlade verk* (1981–2013), abbreviated here as SV, followed by volume and page number.
4. 'D'abord on n'aperçoit qu'un chaos de couleurs; puis cela prend un air, ça ressemble, mais non, ça ressemble à rien. Tout d'un coup un point se fixe comme les noyau d'une cellule, cela s'accroît, les couleurs se groupent autour, s'accumulent; il se forme des rayons qui poussent des branches, des rameaux comme font les cristaux de glace aux fenêtres … et l'image se présente pour le spectateur, qui a assiste à l'acte de procréation du tableau./Et ce qui vaut mieux: la peinture est toujours nouvelle; change d'après la lumière, ne lasse jamais, se rajeunit douée du don la vie.'
5. 'La toile est couverte, je m'éloigne et regarde! Bigre! … Je ne découvre point de mer; le trou illuminé montre une perspective à l'infini, de lumière rose et bleuâtre, où des êtres vapoureux, sans corps ni qualification flottent comme des fées à traînes de nuages. Le bois est devenu une caverne obscure, souterraine barrée de broussailles: et le premier plan, voyons ce que c'est—des rochers couverts de lichens introuvables—et là à droite le couteau a trop lissé les couleurs qu'elles resemblent à des reflets dans une surface d'eau—tiens! c'est un étang. Parfait! […] Une touche ça et là avec le doigt, qui réunit les couleurs récalcitrantes, fond et chasse les tons crus, subtiliser, évapore, et le tableau et là!'
6. 'L'œuvre d'art complète est donc un être nouveau, on peut dire absolument vivant, puisqu'il à pour l'animer une âme, qui est même la synthèse de deux âmes, l'âme de l'artiste et l'âme de la nature, j'écrirais presque l'âme paternelle et l'âme maternelle. Cet être nouveau, quasiment divin, car il est immuable et immortel, doit être estimé susceptible d'inspirer à qui communie avec lui dans certaines conditions, des émotions, des idées, des sentiments spéciaux, proportionnés à la pureté et à la profondeur de son âme.'

7. ‘Das sind alles Produkte eines Gehirnes in dem denkbar labilsten Bewußtseinszustande, in dem Bewußtes und Unbewußtes ineinanderfließen’.
8. ‘[D]ort wird Farbe zur Linie, Duft zum Tone: Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons répondent.’
9. ‘L’Inconscient en effet, voilà le grand Pan; la Nature et ses infaillibles genèses fermentent dans son sein. Il déroule le mystère caché au cœur de l’univers. Il unit le phénomène subjectif à l’objectif, nous explique l’abime ténébreux des choses par le secret enfoui aux racines de l’être individuel. Ces artistes invisibles, enfouis en nous-mêmes, se manifestent chez certains tempéraments prédisposés. Ils nous révèlent notre être intérieur, beaucoup plus riche, beaucoup plus fécond, beaucoup plus original que notre personnalité superficielle.’
10. ‘[…] har detta vatten i ångform, som många gånger kanske passerat växternas kretslopp tagit och bibehållit intryck av växternas former, eller har vattnet själv sedan det lämnade kristallformens lägre stadium en egen högre strävande förmåga av friare formbildning i kristallaggregaten, och är det vattnet som givit växterna formen eller tvärtom?’
11. ‘Et kunstværk er en krystal—som krystallen har sjæl og vilje må kunstværket osså ha det.’
12. Strindberg’s letters are cited from the standard edition of his letters, *August Strindbergs brev* (1948–2001), with reference to number of letter, volume, and page number.
13. ‘I dag fick jag hem ett stort konstverk: Mammas porträtt, ansigtet ensamt i öfver-naturlig storlek, efter Helsingfors foton för två år sen, (Stora Hatten och Pelsen) men utan hatt nu. Det är Botticelli, stora drag, härliga toner, och en grain som en gammal oljemålnings. Men Lillans bild lyser opp hela salen […]’.
14. Although links with earlier Romantic painters, most importantly J.M.W. Turner, can be established (see also Söderström, 1972, 220–221).

CHAPTER 5

'Only Poets and Occultists Believe in Them Just Now': Fairies and the Modernist Crisis of Authorship

Per Faxneld

This essay will deal with the so-called crisis of authorship in early modernism. Specifically, it will suggest how we can, in a British context, observe some of these modernist concerns being intertwined with occultist discourses concerning fairies, as well as older notions concerning these entities. My primary case study, William Butler Yeats, struck a bridge between such artistic preoccupations, occultism and fairy lore using means typical of the time. The fairy of British folklore was a trope already entangled with questions of artistic innovation and inspiration—and could therefore potentially serve as a prototype of gifts of creativity from preternatural intelligences in occultist and modernist circles.

I will first provide a brief introduction to the history of the fairy motif, followed by a delineation of theosophical interpretations of fairies, including how Annie Besant could link them to artistic vision, an idea with deep roots in British culture. Then, Marco Pasi's typology of the main ways in which artists employ communication with preterhuman entities is pre-

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sented. As we will see, the fairy seems to have been used by painters and authors in both manners detailed by Pasi. Next follows a discussion of occultism as a response to the modern condition and how this response included attempts to use photography to prove the existence of entities like spirits of the dead and fairies. Such photographs also reflect an interdependence between 'entity photography' and fairy painting, which both informed each other's compositions. This, then, is one example of the recurring entanglement of fairies, occultism and art.

Thereafter, I will look at how artists and authors such as William Blake and Robert Louis Stevenson could claim they had texts dictated to them by fairies and how this tied in with a broader enthusiasm at this time for the fairy figure (which was coloured by various perceived pressures of modernity, e.g. the alleged process of disenchantment). In conjunction with this, I will also consider artists working in the genre of fairy painting (which coalesced in the 1850s) who claimed some sort of direct communication with fairies as part of their creative process. This leads to the modernist preoccupation with intentionally splintering the authorial self and ascribing artistic innovation to external entities. In my discussion, William Butler Yeats will function as a case study, with particular attention being paid to the role the fairy played for him in this context and to how Yeats drew on the triple sources of modernism, occultism and folklore. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made about occultist and modernist constructions of legitimacy and creativity, as well as the circularity between discourses. A key suggestion I want to make in my essay is that folklore, and various conceptions of it, is an understudied dimension of occultism and that its interfaces with modernism need to be taken into account more fully.

Fairies, Theosophy and Artistic Visions

What is a (British) fairy? The exact nature of this figure has shifted greatly between different times and areas in the British Isles (or the Anglo-Celtic Isles, as they are sometimes referred to by those who feel the term British holds problematic imperialist/colonialist connotations). Nevertheless, there are recurring traits. These beings are often thought to form parallel semi-invisible societies, ruled by a queen (and occasionally also a king), and located in otherworldly realms or the wilderness surrounding human settlings, typically in old burial mounds or underground. Fairies possess magic powers and are both dangerous and unpredictable. On occasion

they will steal human children and replace them with one of their own, a changeling. They enjoy playing cruel pranks on humans but can also be useful helpers in the household or for magic purposes. At times, they fall in love with humans and take them as their brides or husbands regardless of whether the chosen ones give their consent. Tricksters, servant spirits, rapists and kidnappers, fairies are ambivalent creatures at best (Briggs, 1967). The diminutive size of fairies was, according to historian and literary scholar Diane Purkiss, an invention of Shakespeare and other Elizabethans (Purkiss, 2000, 181). It should be noted, however, that folklorist Katharine Briggs contested this idea already in the 1960s, claiming that even some of the earliest British texts about fairies held some of them to be tiny creatures (Briggs, 1967, 3). While the taxonomy is often unclear and arbitrary, figures like the Irish *sídhe*, which interested Yeats so much, tend to be counted in the fairy category.

From the end of the eighteenth century, British antiquaries (who would later style themselves folklorists, with the establishment of the The Folklore Society in 1878) began to record folk beliefs and narratives regarding all manner of things. A motif deemed particularly interesting was the fairy. The lore concerning this figure was then circulated widely through scholarly and popular books, journals and periodicals, resulting in something of a cultural obsession lasting more than a hundred years. Fairies were at this time mostly a subject in works aimed at adults rather than children. More or less every Romantic poet produced at least one poem about fairies, and the anti-Enlightenment ethos in this current clearly flavoured general attitudes towards the figure. National identity and nostalgia for a pre-industrial rural past soon also became key themes in these texts (Bown, 2001, 1–5, 17, 85). Literary giants of old had of course written about fairies, too. Examples include Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (last two decades of the fourteenth century), Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1596) and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (ca. 1590–1597) as well as several of his other plays (Beddoe, 1997). Given the cultural impact of these authors, a certain co-dependence between works of this type and folk beliefs, with both ‘trickle downs’ and ‘trickle ups’, is highly likely. Popular culture as such has always been a mixture of material drawn from elite contexts, such as plays and poems, and motifs stemming from local, vernacular environments. Distinguishing which is which is often impossible (Purkiss, 2000, 9; see also Briggs, 1967, 3). Both village ‘cunning folk’ and elite magicians (that is to say, those with a

university education) used spells involving fairies, so there has always been a clear connection to the realm of actual magical practices (Purkiss, 2000, 87–102, 126–131).

In early modern Britain, fairies were certainly taken seriously, not only by magicians. For instance, they appear frequently in the confessions found in court records from Scottish witch trials. Folk belief in fairies could also have horrible consequences much later, as in the 1895 Irish court case where a husband, aided by his neighbours, had tortured his wife to death believing she was a shape-shifting fairy which had taken the place of his beloved spouse (Purkiss, 2000, 299–301). The fairies of folk belief were often identified with the dead, particularly deceased family members and those who had died before their time (e.g. in battle or childbirth). They could also be interpreted as fallen angels, in accordance with the theological explanations that tended to demonize all non-biblical entities (Purkiss, 2000, 87–102, 109; Briggs, 1967, 9–10). The former explanation might have facilitated exchanges between spiritualist discourse and discourse on fairies. In general, though, early spiritualists were dismissive of fairies and viewed them as minor spirits disturbing the relevant communication—that with the departed souls of humans (Silver, 1999, 38).

Theosophists, by contrast, took more of an interest in fairies. Looking at theosophical texts, it becomes clear that practically all the important thinkers in this current had something to say about these entities. In her first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (the chief ideologist of Theosophy) ardently affirmed the existence of the fairy folk (Blavatsky, 1988a, vol. 1, xxix). Her disciples followed suit. For example, Charles Webster Leadbeater, previously a priest in the Church of England, systematically described the role of fairies in theosophical cosmology in his books *The Astral Plane* (1895, 76–81, 107–108) and *The Hidden Side of Things* (1913, Chapter 4). In her 1898 book *The Ancient Wisdom*, Annie Besant, the former socialist and feminist agitator who would in 1907 become the president of the Theosophical Society, wrote of the fairies, 'whom science has coldly relegated to the nursery, but who will be replaced in their own grade of natural order by the wiser scientists of a later day', stating that '[o]nly poets and occultists believe in them just now, poets by the intuition of their genius, occultists by the vision of their trained inner senses' (Besant, [1898] 1899, 87).

It is significant that Besant made a connection between occultist clairvoyance and poetic intuition in a discussion of fairies, holding the artist up as having direct access to the spirit world. This self-image among certain

artists, with attendant notions of a link between preterhuman entities and creativity, thus found direct support with a leading theosophical thinker. Such ideas tie in with the conception of the artist as uniquely visionary that developed with Romanticism, and passed on into early avant-garde movements—with or without the presence of explicitly occultist rhetoric among the different groups of avant-gardists.

Marco Pasi, the well-known Italian scholar of occultism, has made some interesting suggestions regarding the importance of preternatural entities (a category that might include anything from angels or spirits of the dead to fairies) in the context of art, especially experimental avant-garde art. He posits two basic ways in which artists utilize these entities: through either *alienated agency* or *creative dissociation*. The former is when

> [...] the ultimate authorship of a strongly innovative or radical artistic discourse is attributed to entities subjectively independent from the author's self. Because of this perceived independence, alienated agency allows the artist to develop a certain freedom of expression from predominant conventions and norms, precisely because the author does not believe that he bears responsibility for the particular aspects of his creation. It is not he who is challenging existing norms, but the entity he is channelling. (Pasi, 2015, 113–114)

Creative dissociation, on the other hand, entails 'particular psychological conditions', wherein 'an experience of detachment from everyday reality may lead an artist to relativize norms and values that were perceived as cogent and absolute, and therefore to a radical change of perspective'. This can then result in innovative types of art, just like alienated agency does (Pasi, 2015, 114; on dissociation, see also Enns, 2012, 73–74). As we will see, inspiration from fairies has historically taken both forms, from outright dictation to entering a dreamlike state where the artist hears fairy music, and so on. I believe Pasi's discussion holds relevance even when the artistic products are not quite as unorthodox as in his examples, and artists and authors have, I would suggest, turned to the strategies he describes for slightly different reasons as well, for example, when they want to set their work apart as holding a spiritual or mystical significance.

Taking the two strategies in Pasi's taxonomy into consideration helps explain 'why the connection between esotericism and artistic creativity has been so significant and fruitful for many artists', namely, he explains,

'because esotericism can offer, among other things, a controlled and institutionalised space for practising creative dissociation, and a convenient cultural framework for experiencing alienated agency' (Pasi, 2015, 114). An additional cultural logic that helped facilitate such ideas and practises was that of fairy lore, which could also be combined with occultist ideas about these creatures to develop an occultism-folklore hybrid framework that appealed to a modernist like Yeats.

Photographing the Invisible and Taking Dictation from the Fairies

Occultism as such, we must keep in mind, was intrinsically modern, and therefore its close bonds to modern*ism* are in a sense logical. Developing in tandem with positivist scientific discourses, a majority of the nineteenth-century esoteric strands of thought did not simply attempt to hold their ground by appeals to tradition but rather mutated into something new—specifically what Wouter Hanegraaff in his early work chose to designate *occultism*. Hanegraaff proposed that we use the term occultism to denote a special form of esotericism, which has undergone changes in its encounter with the enlightenment and the triumph of natural science. This new, modern variety often attempted to negotiate a compromise between the magical and the scientific (Hanegraaff, 1996, 422). The occultists inevitably had to ask themselves the question if advances in technology that facilitated seeing the previously invisible disrupted or lent support to their worldview. Most of them, unsurprisingly, seemed to choose the latter view. X-rays and microbiology were thus felt to *prove* the existence of the invisible (e.g. fairies), instead of *disproving* us being surrounded by spirits by replacing them with, say, microbes. Attempting to document spirits or fairies—that is to say, 'supernatural' creatures invisible to most people—using technological means would thus be a logical next step (Silver, 1999, 51, 56, 166).

Perhaps the apex of this tendency is the famous 'Cottingley Fairies' case, where Arthur Conan Doyle and a number of theosophists championed the veracity of a series of photographs of fairies taken by two young English girls in 1917. The whole affair had been instigated by the local theosophical lodge—in which the mother of one of the girls was involved—taking an interest in the photographs (Purkiss, 2000, 284–293; Silver, 1999, 189–192). This case illustrates how fairies were integrated into

occultist discourse and could be approached with the enthusiasm for modern technology so typical of occultism. Of course, there was a significant prehistory to the events at Cottingley in the form of nineteenth-century spirit photography, which in fact has features that make the importance of the fairy motif—already at this stage—clear. As art historian John Harvey has demonstrated, many of these photographs were directly patterned on the compositions found in the work of so-called fairy painters like John Anster Fitzgerald, a genre particularly popular in the 1850s—the decade before spirits of the dead and other apparitions became commonplace in photos. In Fitzgerald's hallucinatory canvas *The Artist's Dream* (1857), the artist reclines in his chair while a plethora of translucent fairies appear in the air around him. This exact composition recurs startlingly often in the spirit photographs (Harvey, 2007, 120–122).[1] Yet, subsequent fairy painters were themselves often influenced by Spiritualism and other occultist currents, making the relationship fully reciprocal.

While fairy paintings by quite mundane artists could, then, inspire how photographers composed their allegedly real renderings of spirits, there were also those who claimed actual fairies literally bestowed works of art on them. The polymath William Blake, from the late nineteenth century one of the posthumously most celebrated of the English Romantics, was deeply involved with esotericism (e.g. as a member of a Swedenborg church), and his work is clearly marked by this. Blake claimed to base several of his drawings and paintings on actual visions of preterhuman entities (Harvey, 2007, 108). Interestingly, in an instance of what Pasi would designate alienated agency, Blake stated that his book *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794) had been dictated to him by a fairy and, moreover, told stories of how he had once witnessed a fairy burial (van Luijk, 2013b, 111; Silver, 1999, 25–26; Wood, 2000, 18; Briggs, 1967, 162). In *Europe*, Blake has the fairy tell him: 'I will write a book on leaves of flowers' (Blake, 1991, 76). This might potentially have made later readers familiar with the works of Helena Blavatsky think of her claims in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) about having received an archaic manuscript of esoteric wisdom written on palm leaves.[2] More clearly, though, it ties in with what would become a well-established trope: fairies as a source of artistic creativity.

Interestingly, conceptions of fairies in the educated classes—to which Blake, in spite of little formal schooling, doubtlessly must be said to have belonged—were long since entangled with esotericism. In fact, some of the features of fairies that we today believe to be traditional and typical of folklore are derived from an elite culture saturated with ideas

originating in esoteric currents. For instance, the first time that fairies were depicted with wings (something that would subsequently appear in both folklore and artistic representations) was in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), and Pope borrowed this feature directly from Paracelsus's description of the airy sylphs in his theory of elemental spirits (Bown, 2001, 45–47).[3] Thus, Blake's use of the fairy trope was quite logical for an esotericist, since fairy lore and esotericism were long since entangled. In modernity, this interdependence took new forms, which we will now turn to.

Disenchantment, Fairy Art and the Many Shades of Belief

Educated enthusiasm for fairies in England began in earnest with Romantics like Blake, as part of a broader project based on notions in Romanticism that the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution had been, and were, eradicating important values viewed as more 'traditional'—among these, the spiritual riches of an 'enchanted world' (Silver, 1999, 10). This may or may not be an apt sociological analysis on their part, but the Romantics certainly felt this loss, imagined or not, acutely. Fairies were subsequently often used to symbolically make a stand against modernity, for example, in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849) (Bown, 2001, 82). The motif also tied in with a nationalistic fervour that developed further in Victorian times, which made the fairies icons of British (or Irish, English etc.) national identity (Silver, 1999, 19).[4] During the 1850s, a new 'fairy faith', this time among the educated classes, was stimulated by Spiritualism, and a few decades later, Theosophy served as a similar catalyst for a second wave of such enthusiasm (Silver, 1999, 31).

This self-conscious 'revival' (or appropriation from the 'folk', thought to still retain a more traditional culture) of belief in fairies—which was particularly popular with artists—was seldom clear-cut. Ambiguous and undecided, half playful and half serious, I would suggest it could function as a way of balancing the (perceived) disenchanted ontological state without having to commit fully to an enchanted worldview (that may, of course, never have been quite as enchanted as nostalgic thinking imagined it to have been). In a way, this is similar to the playful attitude Christopher Partridge (2004–2005) has described in relation to the present-day phenomenon he designates 'occulture'. Another approach may have been

instrumental, a type of temporary suspension of disbelief to gain artistic inspiration—somewhat resembling the surrealists' employment of spiritualist techniques in the early 1920s (Bauduin, 2015, 147–148, *et passim*).

All these are positions that could feasibly be found among occultists and artists alike but not necessarily articulated explicitly. Middle- and upper-class beliefs in fairies could equally well be seen as evidence of the supposed disenchantment never really having taken place rather than as a revival. Very few people, in fact, seem to have been able to fully embrace a positivist, scientistic worldview without hesitation. As is well known, there is today an ample amount of scholarship questioning the traditional Durkheimian-Weberian-Marxist secularization thesis (see, for instance, Stark and Finke, 2000, 79; Stark, 1999, 270; Berger, 1999). The so-called disenchantment may very well never have occurred, at least not in the manner traditionally conceptualized. In fact, the process is perhaps better described as one of 'de-churching' rather than secularization, whereby spirituality simply found new outlets outside of established ecclesiastical structures. If this was so, which appears likely, it did little to alleviate fears among the 'spiritually' inclined that something was very wrong with their own era—and that a cure for this could be found, for example, in folklore (or, perhaps rather, the *constructions* of folklore one found appealing). The fairy became a central symbol in this undertaking inspired by the fear of a supposed secularization.

In such a context, a number of prominent public figures were advocates of a more or less literal belief in fairies or at least prone to relativizing the sceptical attitudes towards it that dominated in educated discourse. This had begun already during the late eighteenth century. Sir Walter Scott, who aside from his literary activities was a pioneering 'fairy scholar', was reluctant to entirely dismiss the existence of fairies, since he felt that a belief in God entailed necessarily admitting the actuality of other types of spirits. James Hogg, the Gothic novelist, was more inclined to explicitly admit the reality of fairies, while their mutual friend Allan Cunningham commented in 1828 on his own recent loss of faith in fairies, lamenting it but still half believing and attempting to integrate it with his Christian creed (Silver, 1999, 11–15).

During the Victorian era, a sizeable number of prominent authors professed their faith in fairies, in what Carole G. Silver describes as a 'trickle up' of folk belief (Silver, 1999, 33). This group included authors at opposite ends of the popular-highbrow spectrum like Arthur Conan Doyle and Nobel Prize winner William Butler Yeats. Robert Louis Stevenson followed

in William Blake's footsteps and stated that fairies had dictated parts of the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) to him (Silver, 1999, 33–35). In the cases of Blake and Stevenson, the works in question were in some sense unconventional, and therefore their claims of an external agent being involved fit well with the strategic benefits of alienated agency delineated by Pasi. There was, then, a recurring tendency before and outside of modernism to attribute artistic works to fairies. This rhetoric appeared not only in connection with idiosyncratic texts but was also applied to more orthodox writings, as when the anonymous author of *Fairy Tales from Fairyland* (1900) stated that 'a "fairy" moved my hand, while I heard a soft, low voice whisper each word in my ear' (quoted in Purkiss, 2000, 287).

In the realm of visual fairy art, we can mention John Duncan, a (very) late pre-Raphaelite painter and author (as well as illustrator) of the enigmatic children's book *The Woodman and the Elves* (c. 1905). Becoming a member of the Theosophical Society in 1909, he claimed to hear fairy music while painting (possibly entering a state similar to what Pasi calls creative dissociation), and attempted to strike a bridge between the mystical and the artistic in his work (Young, 2009; Kemplay, 2009, 49–50, 89–90). Charles Altamont Doyle, father of Arthur Conan Doyle and a moderately successful fairy painter in his own right, was interred in an asylum towards the end of his life, and claimed to have sketched his fairies from life (Silver, 1999, 35). In other words, he can be considered another example of an artist drawing directly on fairies in his creative work.

Perhaps one of the most curious of the fairy painters (no mean feat, given the number of eccentrics in this field), and widely acknowledged as one of the greatest in terms of artistic quality, was Richard Dadd. In the 1840s, his canvases with fairy motifs had made him a rising star in the British art world. After returning from travels in the Middle East in 1843, however, he murdered his father and set out on a journey to assassinate the emperor of Austria but was captured after stabbing a fellow passenger on the coach at Fontainebleau. This resulted in him being committed to the Bethlem Royal Hospital, where it became apparent that Dadd considered himself an envoy of the Egyptian god Osiris, sent on a mission to slay dangerous individuals possessed by demons. Dadd continued to produce increasingly bizarre visionary fairy art during his subsequent life-long confinement in mental hospitals. At this time, he seems to have viewed his work as 'inspired' or directly channelled to him by spirits in some sense,

renouncing the idea of his personal creativity (Wood, 1988, 74–85; Tromans, 2011, 89–90, 121). Dadd's much-publicized insanity would have served to connect fairy art in the public mind with visionary madness, the idea of artists communicating with entities invisible to others, and with a loss of authorial agency.

It could be said that fairies were thus in a manner decisively entwined with the so-called crisis of authorship at the turn of the century, where the creative subject became increasingly perceived as splintered, passive and unstable—and in which a remedy was opening oneself up to an external source of creativity (Szalczer, 2010; see also Pasi, 2015, 111). There is an obvious similarity between spiritualist 'automatic drawings', 'Hidden Masters' revealing the major theosophical texts to Blavatsky, occultist painters like Hilma af Klint receiving 'channelled' instructions on how to paint (on af Klint and her contemporary milieu, see Bernitz, 2013; Carleson and Levander, 2016), and the manner in which a number of artists and authors in the same time period had texts dictated—or were guided in their painting—by fairies.

I posit that a key factor in the renewed visibility of fairies in the late nineteenth century was the prominence given to them in occultist discourse, which, in fact, most intellectuals in this era were exposed to, at least to some degree. While *Kunstmärchen* (literary fairy tales), the imagination of children and the vernacular culture of the peasant population, certainly held many positive connotations among certain types of artists and intellectuals, the fairy would still not, in my opinion, have been as significant a figure had it not been for the occultist writings that transposed it into a more sophisticated context. Another significant circumstance was the fact that older ideas about the fairy as muse were similar to what would become significant modernist creative strategies, and thus made it suited for use by artists participating in this current.

Splintering the Authorial Self, from Mallarmé to Yeats

In a manner commensurate with Marco Pasi's later model of creative dissociation and alienated agency, theatre historian Eszter Szalczer has detailed how early modernist authors, in their struggle to redefine the authorial self, frequently turned to occultism and, more specifically, trance states and channelling. In her view, Stéphane Mallarmé (often seen as one

of the primary originators of modernist aesthetics) was the first to programmatically set out to construct (or perhaps, rather, deconstruct) an authorial self based on occult concepts. Mallarmé sought a cosmic trance state, where his conscious self would give way to something completely different that was not part of himself. As his famous 1886 essay 'Crise de Verse ('The Crisis of Verse') explains, in this state the poetic speaker disappears and the words themselves become the active party, in a constantly shifting series of correspondences that negate essentialist attempts to fix author or text. According to Szalczer, this represents a radical break (indeed, a modernist break) with earlier views of the author as a creator in full control of his product (Szalczer, 2010, 28–29; see also Enns, 2012, 71; on Mallarmé and modernism, see Zima, 2007, 145–146).

As the scholar of English literature Anthony Enns has highlighted in a fascinating discussion of Spiritualism and authorship, notions of dissolving the authorial self in the nineteenth century points forward towards Roland Barthes's famous 1968 poststructuralist essay 'La mort de l'auteur' ('The Death of the Author'), as well as similar ideas in the theorizing of Michel Foucault (Enns, 2012, 56–57). This would make poststructuralism indebted to both modernist literature and, at least indirectly, occultism. Barthes himself, in fact, 'explicitly cites Surrealism as an example of a new model of authorship that openly rejects authorial agency' (Enns, 2012, 75; this may or may not be a correct characterization—see the introduction to the present volume). Occultism-inspired modernist experiments in destabilizing authorship thus had significant effects on key theoretical developments in the humanities (and, to a degree, the social sciences).

A rather different modernist author who shared Mallarmé's interest in resigning his creator status was William Butler Yeats, whom we have already encountered briefly. As a case study, we will now turn to his use of fairies. Yeats's interest in occultism is well known. It found expression in active membership in a succession of esoteric organisations: the Hermetic Society, the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Drawing on ideas from this milieu, he displayed a preoccupation, in some ways similar to that of Mallarmé, with the fragmentation of the self. This theme was present already in his texts from the 1890s, like 'Rosa Alchemica' (1897), but it was only after his marriage to George Hyde-Lees in 1917 that he began publishing works that he claimed were channelled from spirits. These entities communicated with Yeats through automatic writing produced by his wife, following an established pattern

of women serving as receiving vessels for disembodied words. A majority of spiritualist mediums had, of course, been women (Szalzer, 2010, 30–31, 37–38; Enns, 2012, 72–73). Other examples include Blavatsky receiving the words of the Hidden Masters, and the story of how the spirit Aiwass first contacted Aleister Crowley through his wife Rose Kelly (subsequently, however, Aiwass 'dictated' directly to Crowley—see Kaczynski, 2002, 99–104).

When texts published in a specifically occult, rather than literary, context make claims about being dictated by preterhuman creatures, this serves as a legitimating device. For literature (or pictorial art) to be produced like this, on the other hand, might be seen as diminishing its value on a market dominated by notions of artistic genius and a cult of the authorial figure. That, however, would require the audience to accept the supposed authorship as fact. In my opinion, it seems more likely most would dismiss it (since it is a safe assumption that a majority of people did not share, for example, Yeats's magical worldview or take him to be a genuine magician). These assertions would then instead have fuelled the image of the author or artist in question as suitably eccentric. Of course, given the popularity (as actual belief system, as entertainment or as something in between—or fluctuating between—these poles) of occult themes at the time, making claims like those Yeats made could also be understood as a crowd-pleasing strategy, as the audience would appreciate it *aesthetically* even if they did not adhere to the worldview underpinning the claims (see also Shirland, 2013).

Szalczer contends that through his acknowledgement of multiple authorship (shared between himself, his wife, spiritual entities, various fictional characters, et cetera), Yeats willingly gave up his position as the sole author, his role as the artistic genius as it were, to embrace a pluralistic understanding of what it meant to be a writer (Szalzer, 2010, 38–39). If so, I believe that it is potentially significant that he made the decision to publish this material shortly after he received the Nobel Prize in literature—there was now no higher honour that could be bestowed upon him in his capacity as an 'author', and the timing was perfect to subvert this traditional concept (he had, however, taken an interest in problematizing the role of the author earlier in terms of the folklore concerning fairy-inspired art, though he did not fully subject his own creativity to such deconstruction at that point).[5] This move could, in fact, be seen as a strategic attempt to remain relevant on the literary market where modernism

was increasingly gaining ground, though there is little reason to doubt Yeats's simultaneous underlying earnest belief in occult teachings and practices.

The Fairy-Abducted Bard: Yeats's Experiments in Authorial Agency

The question of 'belief' (however that is supposed to be gauged) leads us to the fact that, as mentioned above, Yeats was also among those who professed a belief in the existence of fairies. This is hardly surprising, since he was a member of the Theosophical Society for several years and would have been familiar with its occult explanations of the nature of fairies. In 1893 he had edited the first complete edition of William Blake's work, which he adored, and his own writing was clearly marked by this role model. Blake, as discussed, claimed that one of his texts had been dictated to him by a fairy. Another important factor in Yeats's interest in these creatures was his strong identification with Irish nationalism and his resulting sustained engagement with the folklore of Ireland, where fairies played a central part.

Yeats published several works focusing on Irish folklore (*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, 1888; *Irish Fairy Tales*, 1892; *The Celtic Twilight*, 1893) and nourished plans to found a Celtic mystical order (Monteith, 2008, 162). These books appear to have been popular among theosophists, and *The Celtic Twilight* received a favourable review in the theosophical journal *Lucifer*. In this interesting review, the author, one F.W. Kirby, lauds folk traditions because they stem 'from ages of the world when men may have possessed other powers than at present' and 'contain symbolical references to lost knowledge […] and information relative to elementals, shells, and other entities not belonging to the physical earth plane' (Kirby, 1896). 'Elementals' are often synonymous with fairies in theosophical discourse, and the tellers of folk tales, then, are mediums for (or vessels of) a perennial wisdom pertaining to the fairy realm—not creative figures in any way.[6] This can be compared to Yeats's own later experiments in tearing down the stable, individualistic authorial figure. The folk tale is something received from a source lost in the mists of time, not the creation of an individual, just as no earthly author is the origin of the material mediumistically received through Yeats's wife.

In his introduction to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, Yeats holds up the (Irish) Celts as the most visionary ethnic group (Yeats, 1888, x). As detailed at the outset of this chapter, there was a strong theosophical interest in fairies and the folklore of various regions. However, the specific focus on Ireland was by no means singular in a theosophical context. Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, next to Blavatsky probably the most influential leader in early Theosophy, lectured on 'Irish goblins' in Dublin. In an article for *The Boston Pilot* (23 November 1889), Yeats recapitulated Olcott's words and his assertion that such creatures (fairies would presumably be included under this heading) exist. He also highlighted how the audience, in line with what Yeats perceived to be a 'reaction from modern materialism', appeared to concur with Olcott's arguments. In fact, Olcott was such a firm believer, Yeats states, that Scottish folklorist and author Andrew Lang dubbed him 'the Fairies' Friend' (Yeats, 1989, 17–18). In the same year, Yeats also published the article 'Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches' in *Lucifer* and, for his theosophist readership, detailed (somewhat tongue in cheek) various types of 'evidence' of the existence of fairies that can be found in the Irish landscape, for example, so-called fairy forts (Yeats, 1889, 401). In a letter to a friend written around the time, Yeats expressed that he felt the same as Olcott regarding the reality of fairies, and added 'Blake saw them—I live in hopes' (Yeats, 1986, 177). Yeats's ardent belief in fairies was the source of some amusement among his contemporaries, as can be seen in Max Beerbohm's 1904 caricature titled 'Mr. W.B. Yeats Presenting Mr. George Moore to the Queen of the Fairies' (Beddoe, 1997, 30).

In *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, Yeats had stated that 'many poets and all mystic and occult writers, in all ages and countries, have declared that behind the visible are chains on chains of conscious beings' (Yeats, 1888, 2). Literary scholar Ken Monteith has underscored that Yeats's conception of fairies here seems to be influenced by how Blavatsky wrote of elementals (Monteith, 2008, 178), which is undoubtedly the case. As mentioned at the outset of this text, Annie Besant would ten years later also single out poets and occultists as those with access to (or belief in) fairies, and it seems likely, given the similar phrasings, that she had in turn been influenced by Yeats's writings on folklore. There is thus a circularity between the world of literature and occultism where views on fairies are concerned, with Yeats functioning as an important bridge connecting the two realms.

In an episode he recounts in *The Celtic Twilight*, a young Irish girl acts as a medium between Yeats and the fairy queen and her retinue, not unlike how women served as mediums during spiritualistic séances (Yeats, 1893/1902, 91–96).[7] In his book on Yeats's theosophical interests, Monteith emphasizes how Yeats the folklore collector, in turn, resembles Blavatsky when he 'transmits the message he authorizes as important, all the while differing the origin of that message away from himself' (Monteith, 2008, 194). He could be said to present 'himself as the medium through which the larger message is simply channelled' (Monteith, 2008, 164). This further relates to the picture presented by the future Nobel Prize winner of his home country's bards of yore. As Yeats paints him, the Celtic bard was typically a person who had been abducted by the fairies or who had an intimate relationship with a fairy muse. The bard's poetic ability thus stemmed from this source. Persuasively, Monteith argues that Yeats simultaneously held *himself* up as the same type of 'bard whose facility with language arises from unseen forces' (Monteith, 2008, 203–206; quote on p. 206).

The fairy-abducted bard, in other words, came to be merged with the splintered self of the modernist author-artist. Yeats hereby wedded his fascination with traditional Irish perceptions of the bard as someone being 'given' his words by entities from the fairy realm with a modernist preoccupation with the crisis of authorship, and the latter's attendant attempts to come up with alternatives to the stable, traditional author self. The fairy became, in Pasi's terms, a figure providing the much-needed alienated agency that would allow for creative breakthroughs, and venturing into the fairy realm became a means to achieve creative dissociation.

Concluding Remarks

Modernist and occultist preoccupations intersected in the notion of alienated agency, which, established scholarly wisdom has it, served as a legitimating device in occultism and as a way to access new creative territories in modernism. Arguably, the dimension of creativity would have been important in occultism too, even if scholarship has tended to focus almost exclusively on its legitimating function in this context (see, for instance Hammer, 2001, 369–419). In his discussion of occult art, on the other hand, Marco Pasi correctly highlights *both* creativity and legitimacy (or a possibility to deflect criticism away from oneself for art that was drastically avant-garde). This, I would say, reasonably goes for occultism as well.

Unless we assume that all occultists were charlatans—who did not believe in their own claims and acted exclusively with strategic concerns in mind—it is probable that they felt they genuinely did open new *creative* venues for themselves through communication with preterhuman entities. With a risk of stating the obvious, it was not simply a question of gaining legitimacy.

I have moreover suggested that the work by certain artists influenced by Spiritualism and Theosophy, which was supposedly produced with the assistance of preterhuman entities, can be seen as a continuation of a long-standing tradition concerning fairies as muses for artists. This tradition had appeared earlier in connection with the work of, for instance, William Blake and then pertaining to some of the fairy painters active during the second half of the nineteenth century. The mediumistic art produced in this time (by, for example, Hilma af Klint) and into the modernist period, thus stood in continuity with older ideas. An author like Yeats accordingly eagerly emphasized folklore motifs in a manner that pointed forward to his own later (occultist and modernist) experiments in destabilizing authorship.

The fairy was a trope already entangled with questions of artistic inventiveness in Britain, and could thus potentially serve as a prototype of gifts of creativity from preternatural intelligences in occultist and modernist circles. As with the case of the circularity between fairy painting and spirit photography, it might also be the case that the fairy-inspired painters and others were coloured by an awareness of spiritualistic automatic drawing. It is seldom a question of either/or but rather of degrees of influence and co-dependence. There are clearly many interesting threads to follow further and disentangle in future scholarship on the relation between fairies, modernism and occultism.

Notes

1. See also the *Spirit* photograph by S.W. Fallis (1901, available online at: http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g01845) and Ada Emma Deane’s *The Armistice Ceremony* (1923; Barlow Collection, British Library, available online at http://www.nickelinthemachine.com/2012/04/the-cenotaph-alfred-rosenberg-ada-emma-deane-and-the-ghost-hunter-harry-price/), which are very similar to fairy dance imagery.
2. Blavatsky (1988b, 1).

3. Paracelsus himself does not use the word elemental to refer to these spirits, this being a label attached to them by later commentators on his writings.
4. From the 1960s to the 1980s or so, there was fervent activity among scholars wanting to deconstruct European folklore as more or less an invention of Romantics and nationalist antiquarians. Today, this position has lost ground and is heavily criticized. In other words, most scholars presently working with the material in folklore archives agree that there existed a vernacular peasant culture beyond Romantic and nationalist constructs, which is not 'inaccessible' to us due to a supposed nationalist bias in the source materials. In fact, these are often of much higher quality than deconstructionist scholars have suggested (on this, see Skott, 2008; Mitchell, 2000).
5. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 and published *A Vision* (where the mediumistic material was first presented to the public) in 1925. The mediumistic sessions had begun almost immediately after he married George in 1917, and it seems unlikely that it was a coincidence that publication should have been held off until two years after his reception of the Nobel Prize.
6. Not all theosophists viewed elementals and fairies as completely identical; see Besant ([1898] 1899, 87). (Besant prefers the term nature spirits.)
7. In all fairness, it should also be noted that there is an episode in the same book where Yeats tells of an encounter with a male visionary poet who can see the fairies (ibid., 15–22), though he does not quite function as a medium between them and Yeats himself in the way the young woman does.

PART II

Aesthetics

CHAPTER 6

Return from Oblivion: Joséphin Péladan's Literary Esotericism

Sasha Chaitow

The French author and esoteric aesthetician Joséphin Péladan (Sâr Mérodack, 1858–1918) was a key figure in the inception and development of French symbolism. Responding to multiple cultural shifts experienced by *fin-de-siècle* French society, he authored over a hundred novels and monographs in an attempt to bring about the spiritual regeneration of society through mythopoetic art underpinned by esoteric thought. Based on an eclectic esoteric cosmology, expressed through art, literature, and philosophical texts, his vast yet coherent oeuvre was intended to bring this call for regeneration to as wide an audience as possible, thereby to spark a social renaissance.

Péladan's thought exists within the intersection of Illuminism, Romanticism, and the *anti-philosophe* movement, drawing on numerous aspects of esoteric thought. Western post-Enlightenment quests for a new understanding of human origins, allegorical mythography, and philosophical historiography coalesce in his writings. Responding to the manifold sociocultural changes of his time, his work captures a sense of stepping over the threshold of modernism in the arts. While expressing concerns

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common to his generation, Péladan's originality lies in his synthesis and its highly individual—and individualistic—nature.

Péladan's work was, however, censured by his contemporaries and was quickly forgotten. Existing studies of his life and work have tended to focus on his eccentricity or isolated elements of his oeuvre, offering little exploration of the content, context, or influences surrounding his work. As a result, a series of misconceptions has been repeated in the extant literature, leading to a lack of understanding of his esoteric philosophy and his place in his historical context.

Péladan's work represents possibly the largest single body of 'literary esotericism', which I define as a specific subcategory of literature where a literary work functions *as* an esoteric symbol and vehicle of esoteric praxis (I expand on the question of selecting terminology and my use of 'esotericism' over 'occultism' in the discussion). By 'literature' I do not only mean fiction but am using the word in its broadest sense, encompassing non-fictional genres that have often been used as vehicles for philosophy, including dialogues, aphorisms, commentary, memoirs, essays, and parables. To the best of my knowledge, this has never been identified as a genre, since literature with esoteric content is normally subsumed into other genres or ignored as lesser or niche work. Literary studies of works *influenced by* esotericism have rarely incorporated the contextual material available from the field of esotericism studies, nor have matters of historical context, definition, and terminology been given due attention. This has led to whole bodies of cultural artefacts such as the work of Péladan being either misinterpreted or neglected, leaving gaps in our understanding of the breadth of the interplay between esotericism and the wider cultural context. It is my contention, however, that careful interdisciplinary treatment and closer collaboration between disciplines may enable a deeper understanding of such texts and their import.

In this chapter, I will use my research on Péladan's life and work as a case study to illustrate these points. When I selected his work as an object of study for my doctoral thesis, I was obliged to justify the validity of that choice and then to navigate the challenges and methodological questions raised by the limitations of the disciplinary boundaries within which Péladan's oeuvre appeared to fall, including those of history, art history, literary studies, and esotericism studies. In order to address precisely these issues and produce an argument justifying both my choice of topic and my approach to it, I found myself designing an interdisciplinary

methodology and using it to demonstrate the limitations of monodisciplinary approaches to such material. Péladan's literature is of course not the only body of work that finds itself at such an interdisciplinary nexus, and other scholars dealing with work that draws on occult and esoteric thought in particular may need to apply similar 'bespoke' methodological frameworks if they are to do justice to their objects of study. Therefore, this chapter is offered as a report of my experience in navigating the challenges derived from this selection of subject, with the intention of providing possible ways forward—and highlighting potential stumbling blocks—in the process of fusing a variety of disciplinary 'toolboxes'.

To this end, I will provide a brief introduction to Péladan, his literary output and artistic influence. This is followed by a historical contextualization of his thought, in which I suggest that he ought to be perceived more as an early modernist than as belonging to any other contemporary movement. I then offer a definition of the term 'literary esotericism' and an explanation of the notion of 'literature as esoteric praxis', which I believe to be an appropriate term for a specific subgenre of literature. This is followed by a delineation of the methodological problems of working with such material from monodisciplinary perspectives using examples that I encountered during my doctoral research and a summary of my solutions to these problems as well as my research findings. While the full argumentation and findings from my study of Péladan will be available in my published thesis, with this chapter my purpose is to provide something of a roadmap for other scholars who may find themselves facing similar challenges when dealing with niche figures or curious artefacts that have been marginalized or misread on account of their esoteric content. Although this is only one proposal of how to go about such a process, my hope is that it may provide a point of reference for the further development of functional interdisciplinary paradigms, in particular with regard to studying literature and esotericism.

Introducing Péladan

Joséphin Péladan has been poorly dealt with by modern scholarship.[1] When not entirely consigned to oblivion, he is most often remembered in a vague footnote, and overall, his name conjures the image of an eccentric, purple-garbed oddity of little import. 'No literary figure of the late nineteenth century had been more ridiculed, lampooned, and caricatured', writes one biographer (Pincus-Witten, 1976, 2; Emont, 1990, 24).

Guillaume Apollinaire's 'hack's obituary', by turns sympathetic and ironic, made him out to be a tragicomic, 'slightly ridiculous' figure (Apollinaire, 1918, 372).[2]

With a few notable exceptions, most scholarly studies also paint Péladan as an attention-seeking, misguided charlatan who left nothing of worth to the worlds of literature, art, or esotericism. Even his most sympathetic biographers (and there are not many) sooner or later concede that this quixotic, earnest figure is infuriatingly obscure and quite impossible to make sense of (Emont, 1990). Today Péladan's name is barely known outside esoteric circles. Other than that he is usually banished to a footnote or afforded a few pages in textbooks on Rosicrucianism or the French 'Occult Revival'. He is occasionally referenced in volumes on symbolist art, but in these cases his esoteric philosophy—which was the motive force for his public activities—is ignored, and the relevant primary sources have not been reexamined academically until recently (Chaitow, 2014b). Péladan certainly contributed to the situation through his outrageous appearance, bombastic proclamations, and sharp pen. Yet neither of these factors eclipses his singularity of purpose, the originality and cohesiveness of his work, or the audaciousness of his endeavours.

Péladan was enormously prolific, publishing over a hundred articles, books, plays, and pamphlets within his lifetime. He was committed to the belief that creating art was a sacred act that could redeem the Fall of both angels and men. He left modern-day Rosicrucianism a rich legacy and was a key player in the inception and development of the crossover between symbolist art and esotericism in the French *fin-de-siècle*. Overall, his work lies at the nexus between illuminist, perennialist, and esoteric Christian currents. Vastly well-read, he drew on influences ranging from Platonic metaphysics and Kabbalistic cosmology to the new archaeological discoveries in Egypt and ancient Assyria.

During his lifetime he collaborated with some of the greatest figures in the modern esoteric canon and founding figures of modern occultism, such as Papus (Gérard Encausse) and Stanislas de Guaïta, though this acquaintance ultimately led to Péladan being openly ridiculed due to his disagreement with their approach to esoteric thought and a subsequent public feud between them in the early 1890s (de Guaïta, 1884, 1890; Péladan, 1890; de l'Estoile, 2010, 122).[3] While the war of words—dubbed the 'War of the Roses' by journalists of the day—between Péladan on the one hand, and de Guaïta and Papus on the other, raged on in the newspapers, Péladan went on to establish his Ordre de la

Rose + Croix catholique et esthétique du Temple et du Graal (Order of the Catholic and Aesthetic Rose + Cross of the Temple and the Grail). The Order was strongly focused on his aesthetic-esoteric vision and his self-imposed mission of the reinstatement of the *philosophia perennis* of Renaissance philosophers through the ritualization of art (Péladan, 1890c, d, 1891, c. 1891–1892). This, he dreamed, would function as the manifestation of the divine in the material world. He went to extraordinary lengths to share his grand vision with the world, deliberately shunning secrecy in stark contrast to the majority of earlier esoteric and some contemporary occult thinkers and traditions—although it should be noted that he paralleled the relatively public character of the Theosophical Society under Blavatsky, for instance.

Péladan took it upon himself to effect the collective initiation of society at large through exposing it to esoteric symbolism in every form he could think of. Rather than concealing esoteric secrets in such a way as to protect them from 'profane' eyes, Péladan chose to do the opposite. It was profane eyes that he wanted to open; not through secret rituals behind hermetically sealed doors but through nothing less than an artistic revolution. His message was deceptively simple: spiritual evolution, he believed, was available to all, and it was the sacred duty of mankind to turn their very lives into works of art, allowing their true will to guide them toward their divine origin. As he said to American journalist Raymond Daly in an 1893 interview:

> Men may be divided into three classes, the consummate fools, the *animiques*, sensible to questions of sentiment and to the beauties of art, and the intellectuals, capable of contemplating an idea in its splendid nudity, and without aesthetic translation… I have not sufficient genius,' said my interlocutor, modestly, 'to be the dazzling prism of truths; I content myself with bringing the love of art upon the *animique* ground, to translate ideas into aesthetic forms accessible to those who form the second class, of which I have just spoken, the *animiques*, the artists and lovers of art. (Daly, 1893, 13)[4]

This 'art' was a pragmatic, as well as an esoteric process. It was to be achieved through redefining and re-establishing one's perspective and behaviour in all levels of social interaction, in a constant process of mindful living and self-cultivation that Péladan termed *kaloprosopia*. Péladan defines the term thus: 'The first of the arts of personality is kaloprosopia (from *καλός*, beautiful, and *πρόσωπον*, person); […] the embellishment of the human aspect, or […] of the moral character through everyday acts'

(Péladan, 1894b, 54).[5] By this he meant that life should be viewed as a work of art and that one's habits, behaviour, and even appearance should be adapted until one truly embodied the ideal to which one aspired. This process was not simply a precursor to the kind of self-improvement techniques popular today. It is quite firmly rooted upon principles drawing on the full breadth of esoteric thought, from Plato to the collection of mystical Jewish books known as the *Zohar* to the work of Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant). These principles are then echoed in Péladan's treatises on magic and self-initiation.

Infused with a Promethean form of Luciferianism, Péladan rewrote Genesis to explain the problem of evil, following the Romantic Luciferian literary tradition begun by Blake, Shelley, and Byron, soon to be picked up by Revolutionary poets across the Channel (van Luijk, 2013a, 41–52; Schock, 2003). The methods he selected to deploy his philosophy used familiar esoteric languages of symbolic expression, drawing on what he considered to be archetypal forms gleaned from world mythology. The result was a vast, yet surprisingly coherent cosmology, the aim of which was to redeem the Fall of angels and mankind, a task that Péladan believed was the sacred duty of mankind. This could only be achieved through the conscious application of human will in order to achieve self-actualization. This would bring mankind to a direct understanding of divine thought, and thus assist in the collective evolution of humanity and, ultimately, its reintegration with the divine.

Although rival esoteric thinkers such as Papus set up esoteric orders and capitalized on their esoteric knowledge as social currency, Péladan provocatively eschewed the notion of secrecy, believing that all individuals could and must embark on this process of self-actualization. He used four main channels to communicate his philosophy. These included the mass media of the day (the periodical press); religious rhetoric directed both at the Church and the faithful; his Ordre de la Rose-Croix catholique et esthétique du Temple et du Graal (established in 1891); and the arts, including his own novels, plays, his esoteric-aesthetic curriculum for artists, and his Salons de la Rose + Croix. Acknowledging that people of differing temperaments or at different stages of intellectual and spiritual development required different approaches, these four channels corresponded with the four 'types' of personality that he identified: 'Men of God, Men of Ideas, Men of the State, Men of the World'. Each mode of communication spoke to the particular sensibilities of each type. He then proposed three different ways for these 'types' to embark on the process

of self-actualization, depending on their individual temperament: 'Science, which seeks God through reality. Art, which seeks God through Beauty. Theodicy, which seeks God through Thought', and went on to write guides to each of these paths, using different language depending on his target reader (Péladan, 1894b, 33–34).

As evidenced by the subtitles and appendices in many of his publications, Péladan grouped his books into clear-cut series forming five distinct categories and a sixth collection that can be roughly grouped together as miscellanea. The italicized titles given to the following categories are Péladan's own, as they appear on the title pages and listings of his works.

1. (a) *La Décadence Latine: Éthopée* (*Latin Decadence: Ethopoeia*) (1884–1907): 21 novels with symbolic language and plotlines and strongly esoteric content. (b) *Les Drames de conscience* (*Dramas of Conscience*): Five moralistic novels. These novels are directly related to the 21 above (1a) in terms of Péladan's aim of influencing the behaviour of his readers, but are intended for a younger audience.
2. *La Décadence esthétique* (*Aesthetic Decadence*): 24 critical and theoretical works devoted to aesthetics and art.
3. *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes* (*Amphitheatre of Dead Sciences*) (1892–1911): Seven multipart theoretical works discussing the social and political implementation of his theories on occultism and religion.
4. *Les Idées et les formes* (*Ideas and Forms*) (1900–1913): A loosely grouped collection of esoteric and philosophical texts written for his Rosicrucian Order and identified by the use of *Les Idées et les formes* on the title page.
5. *Théâtre de la Rose-Croix* (*Theatre of the Rose-Cross*) (1895–1897): Six plays, performed at the Soirées de la Rose-Croix as well as at other venues in Nîmes in the early 1900s. Péladan also left a further eight unpublished plays (Beaufils, 1993, 373).
6. The miscellanea, containing numerous other critical volumes, articles, reviews, and essays, some published posthumously. This category includes the first French translation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Traité du paysage* (*Treatise on Landscapes*), published in 1914. Between 1914 and 1916 Péladan also published four books dedicated to World War I, with strong influences deriving from nineteenth-century French prophetic texts (Dantinne, 1948, 179–185; Beaufils, 1993, 467–495).

An Early Modernist?

To claim Péladan as an early modernist, rather than a late romantic, or indeed even as a symbolist, a little more historical contextualization is needed. Péladan inherited myriad influences from his family history related to the wider turbulence of nineteenth-century France. As the multiple rifts within the uneasy French Republic began to heal in the post-revolutionary years, new freedoms evolved, and social and ideological boundaries were torn down. By the *fin-de-siècle*, many of these freedoms were taken for granted, marking the end of an era that the romantic poets and painters had grieved for in the wake of the Enlightenment. Only decades earlier, traditionalists had mourned the order and security of a world apparently lost to rampant decadence, yearning for a reimagined, glorious past where God was in heaven, the pope ruled the Holy Roman Empire, social order was maintained by divine mandate, and Catholicism provided the ritual and rulebook for aristocrat and pauper alike.

This sense of loss was a reality for Péladan's father, a devout, outspoken Catholic, staunch legitimist supporter of the *ancien régime*, autodidact, journalist, and host of regular informal Salons which Péladan attended as a boy. Although earlier authors (Pincus-Witten, 21, 30; Beaufils, 1993, 10–12) have suggested that Péladan was simply his father's creature, I have demonstrated that this was not the case (Chaitow, 2014b, 70–101). Those living during the *fin-de-siècle*, Péladan among them, represented a generation poised on a threshold. They were prepared to shed their forefathers' dreams of restoring the *ancien régime* and to embrace the idea of creating a new society, but not at the expense of powerful aspects of their cultural identity. As noted by historian Michael Burleigh: 'eighteen centuries did not disappear from men's characters just by declaring it to be so, the psychological legacy of the *ancien régime* did not simply vanish' (Burleigh, 2005, 92–93; see also Bell, 2001). This held true for post-revolutionary intellectuals and visionaries, for whom to jettison their past was one sacrifice too many—although ironically it was the revolution itself that allowed its re-imagining in the ever-more fantastical narratives that emerged.

In this mercurial world where established order had turned to quicksand and one had to adapt or be damned, we cannot underestimate the impact on the sensibilities of devout traditionalists faced with the rejection of royal authority by the National Assembly that brought a century of political strife or that of the abrupt weakening of the Catholic church

through the imposition of *laïcité*—that is to say, nationwide enforced secularism (Read, 2012, 8–9). By 1794, 'only 150 parishes' across France still held Mass (Burleigh, 2005, 57, 97, 101; Gibson, 1989, 44). Yet, the secularism that replaced Catholicism in post-revolutionary France was more of a 'political religion', and as historian Alexis de Tocqueville phrased it:

> Because the Revolution seemed to be striving for the regeneration of the human race even more than for the reform of France, it lit a passion which even the most violent political revolutions had never before managed to produce. Thus in the end, it took on the appearance of a religious revolution that so astonished its contemporaries. Or rather, it itself became a new kind of religion. (de Tocqueville, 1998, 1, 101)

With this sudden alterity imposed on religion, other 'subalterns' acquired equal potential for inclusion in the new sociocultural landscape.[6] This was amplified by social realignments allowing for widespread education alongside developments in industry and the evolution of the periodical press.[7] The intellectual descendants of the Enlightenment and its foes were embedded within this mêlée of oppositional dynamics and emergent currents (McMahon, 2003, 98–99; see also McMahon, 2001). These generated hybrid narratives and cultural complexes sharing a mutual quest for a new understanding of human origins and history while clinging to familiar notions of allegorical mythography and philosophical historiography (Henry, 2008, 40–41).

It is at this nexus that we find the origins of Péladan's intellectual inheritance. What differentiates him from his father's militant, romantic nostalgia for a lost world are his modernist tendencies: first and foremost his adherence to Platonic rationalism and intellectualism, his often strident criticism of the Church, and his unorthodox decision to eschew the forms of secrecy that commonly frame esoteric thought (Chaitow, 2014b, 70–100). These points render him more a son of the Enlightenment and a representative of modernism than a late romantic. This is in part because of his strong individualism which clearly supersedes earlier partisan mentalities, his persistent eclecticism, and his refusal to serve organized religion or to partake in any collective activity that did not further his one aim.

Even Péladan's adherence to symbolism appears eclectic. Although he made use of symbolic expression for aesthetic purposes, this was a means to an end, since he believed beauty to be capable of communicating truth,

an idea based on his interpretation of Platonic ideals and exhaustively treated in his aesthetic-esoteric manifesto *L'Art idéaliste et mystique* (Péladan, 1894b). This renders the moment of the shift between two very different eras clearly visible within his oeuvre, made all the more palpable when one explores his responses to his multivalent intellectual influences. Péladan did not simply live and work 'on the threshold of modernism'; his oeuvre represents *the act of stepping over that threshold*—drawing inspiration from centuries of esoteric and philosophical thoughts while attempting to forge a new world with individual self-determination as its highest ideal.

In one of his many treatises, Péladan speaks of the unresolved conflict between esotericism and the Church. His solution for this is 'humanism', a concept in which Péladan uses both science and Platonic rationalism in his attempts to participate in the Enlightenment narrative and to legitimize his ideas. Although his hierarchy of being derives from Plato and pseudo-Dionysius, his meticulous attempts at taxonomy—in keeping with esoteric systems of correspondences—also reflect his efforts to incorporate the scientific method into esoteric and philosophical reasoning, a practice that continued within esoteric discourse into the twentieth century (Asprem, 2014b). His attempt to standardize aesthetics within a single, overarching theorem while upholding the intellect as the highest of human faculties, lamenting past glories but acknowledging the needs of his time, corresponds to modernist perspectives (Spender, 1963, 83).

The esoteric influence on modernist thought has been well documented, as have the challenges involved in its documentation and the frequent neglect of the 'occult roots' of both modernism and post-modernism in literary discourse (Surette, 1994, 8–10). While this point has been established by scholars seeking to correct this lacuna, they too, have neglected historical discussion in favour of brief references and generic—frequently inaccurate—terminology (Surette, 1994, 6–7), as Henrik Johnsson explores in Chap. 2 of this volume.

Studying Péladan: Methodological Issues

The preceding summary of Péladan's attractiveness as an object of study ought to obviate the need for further justification of my choice of topic. However, every scholar will know that delineating and justifying a research topic is not always so clear-cut. This section thus details my attempt to forge a methodological framework through which to make sense of

Péladan's vast oeuvre and activities as summarized above, while also fielding objections raised by representatives of different disciplines, all of which were relevant to this topic.

With Péladan's biography already written (Beaufils, 1993), he appeared to be of little consequence beyond his authorship of a few moderately successful novels, scattered within a sprawling, dated oeuvre of little obvious literary interest. Earlier scholars had considered him 'just one voice in a babble of occult and mystical speculators and revisers of history' (Surette, 1994, 142). Nevertheless, I observed that previous studies were strongly dependent on secondary sources and third-party reports, and their evaluation of the primary material was limited by certain foregone conclusions (Chaitow, 2014b, 7–32).

Upon examining the primary sources, I established that Péladan's oeuvre was clearly designed to a specific pattern. Péladan left signposts in his work, and there are clear and intentional correlations between his fiction and his theoretical work, which in turn is based on a coherent and multilevelled cosmology.[8] He was eager to avoid misrepresentation of his intent, as is evident from his repeated attempts at explaining his vision. In the appendices to his theoretical cycle *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes*, he included tables of concordances and synopses demonstrating how his novels and theoretical works interconnect. One of the most overt examples of this is found in his summary of his first novel, *Le Vice suprême* (1884), in which he briefly introduces the *dramatis personae*, noting that each of them represents an (arche)type. These characters reappear throughout his novels, although the novels themselves are self-contained and not serialized. Of his principal character and literary persona Mérodack, he says: '*Mérodack*: the peak of conscious will, a type of absolute entity [...] Every novel has a Mérodack, which is to say an abstract Orphic principle facing an ideal enigma' (Péladan, 1893, 389–391, 1894, 275).

While the intentionality governing Péladan's work was a significant discovery, the following dilemma ensued: how could I best serve my topic, which disciplinary requirements should I seek to satisfy, and to what precise end? A study in Western esoteric historiography would have to trace Péladan's reception of key esoteric ideas, viewing his story as a *petit-histoire*, or perhaps a biographical chronicle within the wider context of esoteric history. Methodological debates in Western esotericism have made it clear that interdisciplinary approaches are theoretically necessary (Asprem and Granholm, 2012, 2013; Asprem, 2014a; von Stuckrad, 2012), but their implementation thus far has largely favoured the toolboxes

of historical and sociological disciplines while neglecting those offered by established humanities subjects such as literary and communication studies or art history (Hanegraaff, 2012, 361–366). Such an approach would not have given a sense of his output or interrogated the 'received wisdom' provided by previous studies. Equally, to satisfy the demands of a full literary critique, I would have to forego any extensive exploration of the esoteric intellectual context that so clearly informed his work.

My ultimate aim was to successfully place Péladan and his intellectual legacy within the nexus formed by symbolist art and the French 'Occult Revival' while taking into account authorial intention given the repeated efforts Péladan made to stress the intentionality governing his work.[9] Therefore, all my methodological decisions were governed by an attempt to offer a clear 'snapshot' of what Péladan had apparently been trying to do with his oeuvre, based on his own words before any further critical analysis of the textual forms of those narratives could be performed (Todorov, 1970, 11–16).[10] My rationale was that any attempt to examine Péladan's literary oeuvre in isolation from its context would be worthless without understanding the complex referential framework that esoteric thought often comprises. My findings (Chaitow, 2012, 2014b, *passim*) suggested that esoteric thought comprises the primary influence and context for Péladan's work, and therefore it had to be central to my approach.

These preliminary conclusions presented a unique, if challenging, opportunity, given that the primary material was almost unexplored. It appeared both possible and timely to propose a functional interdisciplinary approach that would carefully weigh and combine methodologies and disciplinary concerns while dealing with a poorly understood body of work. This could produce a dual result: firstly, a study of Péladan's work which might instigate a rediscovery of a corpus worthy of further exploration on its own merits, and secondly, an attempt at a methodological innovation that could effectively bridge disciplines and serve as a roadmap for other such studies.

Applying a Working Interdisciplinary Framework

Having established that a series of key influences on Péladan's work derived from a particular form of *mythistory* common to esoteric narratives (Mali, 2003, 1), I first explored the mechanics, characteristics, and intellectual basis of this narrative form as they have been identified within esoteric constructions of tradition (Kilcher, 2010, ix–x). These were

examined in relation to sociocultural change and in their implementation in the specific form of philosophical histories deriving from the interrogation of religious and mythical narratives in relation to recorded history.[11] This made it possible to pinpoint Péladan's reception and use of ideas derived from these philosophical histories, locating them within the wider social and cultural concerns of his time, his specific cultural milieu, and the concerns that he explicitly expressed. In addition, I clarified specific terminology and concepts, in order to establish the intellectual framework and forms of expression upon which Péladan drew.

Previous authors had attempted to interpret his work outside this context, using the words 'esoteric' and 'occult' as generic terms to explain Péladan's eccentricity (Fisher, 2007, 79; Lachapelle, 2011; Ziegler, 2012, 76–111; Surette, 2011, 149; Moffitt, 2003, 20; Pincus-Witten, 1976, 4, 37). It was thus necessary to demonstrate that these terms refer to specific modalities of thinking, of interpreting reality, and of expression and that they require qualification according to historical and cultural context. Although an analysis of the methodological minutiae of the study of esotericism is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is a relevant problem when approaching material with significant esoteric influences or content and a critical one when seeking to communicate effectively across disciplinary boundaries.

I propose that effective definitions of esoteric terminology ought to (a) be intelligible to scholars from other disciplines who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the scholarly debate and terminology within esoteric scholarship; (b) offer a sense of the complexity of this debate, the nuances involved, and the bibliography available; (c) not be so detailed that it leads the primary discussion off topic. My contention remains that definitions and methodologies need to act as tools for comprehension and not force the material to satisfy them or serve an agenda. For all of these reasons, I propose that Faivre's typology (Faivre, 1994, 10–15) is partially sufficient subject to the following clarifications: esotericism refers to a group of cultural currents at the intersection between religion and philosophy that incorporate pre-Enlightenment modes of thought. Since the Renaissance, they have often been synthesized into syncretic systems by their adherents. Their individual histories and characteristics cannot be arbitrarily correlated, and they have had a more significant impact on mainstream culture than has been acknowledged (Partridge, 2004, 71–77). Just as 'realism', 'modernism', and 'post-modernism' cannot be used interchangeably or as alternative synonyms to 'literature', so 'alchemy', 'kabbalism', 'esotericism', and

'mysticism' cannot be used interchangeably for 'occultism' or 'Rosicrucianism', to name but a few examples that I located in my exploration of the secondary literature on Péladan (Chaitow, 2014b, 7–32). Each of these terms refers to different currents, which must be identified and contextualized for any accurate understanding of a cultural artefact embedded in these historical currents to take place. This is the understanding of esotericism that I used for the purposes of my research and am using for the current discussion.

A word is needed on the differentiation between esotericism and occultism and my preference for using the former when referring to Péladan. Lengthy debates regarding the most appropriate use of terminology have been waged for some time among scholars of esotericism, but as noted above, and as I discuss in some depth in my doctoral dissertation, it is my conviction that definitions need first and foremost to be useful tools that aid comprehension, and this can often be gauged by the clarity and utility that they offer. As such, I have yet to find a definition that is more useful than Antoine Faivre's, whereby occultism is understood to refer to a practical 'dimension of esotericism' (Faivre, 1994, 33–35). Although Faivre notes that this differentiation only became an issue in the mid-nineteenth century, I believe that Faivre's distinction between theoretical and practical aspects of esotericism is significant, as it can often denote a differentiation between, for example, practical alchemy (occult and universalist in nature) and later 'spiritual' alchemy (infused with more modern thought, but with no practical dimension). Likewise one may differentiate between orders and groups whose area of activity focuses on esoteric thought (such as the Theosophical Society), or those with a dimension involving ceremonial, and therefore practical magic (such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn). Both technically belong to modernity, but it can be useful, or even necessary, to distinguish between the theoretical and practical (read: esoteric and occult, respectively) natures of each. This is where terminology can pose a problem if a given author is not careful to clarify their use of these concepts.

In my research on Péladan, I have not made use of formal frameworks from literary theory because I was looking at a body of work that had never even been fully mapped; therefore, applying such a framework would have been premature. Thus I did not enter into a discussion of why I rejected both formalist, and (de)constructivist, and structuralist approaches, to name but a few examples, nor did I justify every apparent omission when constructing my interdisciplinary framework. In my approach, author

intentionality is paramount, since Péladan has explicitly stated his purposes. Northrop Frye's literary theory and his work on William Blake have strongly informed my approach on this, for despite its age, the argument that theory should not supersede the material at hand remains valid (Frye, 1947, 4–11, 1957, 7). In addition, aesthetical considerations or comparative readings can come later, once the content is understood. For the same reason, I have explained my preference for the term 'esotericism'. Put simply, Péladan's work is philosophical, intellectual, and theoretical. It rests on esoteric thought but lacks a practical dimension. Any practical content involves the internal cultivation and self-awareness of the individual, but this is something that dates from the time of Plato (and that Péladan based on Platonic thought). As such, the debate concerning how to define esotericism and occultism has not been a primary concern in my research. What is always significant, however, is to clarify the terms we use and not attempt to bend our material to fit them.

The approach outlined above was sufficient to reveal the points of reference underpinning the various features of Péladan's work and revealed further useful points of departure for the analysis of the literary, philosophical, and theological aspects of his oeuvre, not as a collection of eccentric fancies but as a body of work clearly located within a specific cultural milieu with a clearly delineated intellectual pedigree.

The Findings: Péladan's Fiction and Literary Esotericism

Strikingly, all of Péladan's different types of writing—fictional, theatrical, and theoretical—complement each other in an almost palindromic fashion. The hidden meanings within his novels are revealed by reading his theoretical works. These in turn are given narrative form in his novels and plays. To gain a complete understanding of his philosophy, both categories of works need to be read, and there is ample textual evidence that Péladan engineered this deliberately, embedding sub-narratives across his oeuvre that would reveal themselves only to the most attentive readers.[12] In his anthology *La Queste du Graal* (*The Quest for the Grail*, 1894), that followed the publication of 12 of his 21 novels from the *La Décadence Latine* cycle and four of his seven monographs from the *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes* collection, Péladan compiled an annotated anthology of these works, noting with obvious exasperation that his readers had quite failed to understand him:

> Twelve novels have appeared, one *éthopée*, and one ethical [treatise], one erotic [one], one aesthetic [one], one political [one], fully aesthetic—what tragedies! One renounces the idea of being an author … in a country so uncivilized that everyone threatens the author: the army, the law, the social mores—a certain notoriety is a kind of security… It is for this perhaps too presumptuous purpose that these lyrical passages have been brought together. May they make it worthwhile for [this] author to tolerate being […] only HIMSELF. *La Queste du Graal* is yet another unfinished effort in mystical drama […] By explaining [my] technique and what [I] wish to produce, [I] will take my place in a world that […] is interested in art; and that world would not be Paris. […] It is not enough to give one's time and intelligence to such a work, this is the last of the Sar, this exile who has brought with him a little light, a spark from the fire of Prometheus. (Péladan, 1894c, 1–2)

It was not to be his last work, but it was a passionate attempt to demonstrate the continuity between his works. Similarly, chapters in many of his theoretical works are preceded by excerpts from his novels, which are then elucidated in the text that follows. In short, his theoretical works are handbooks for unlocking his novels; his novels and plays are attempts to show his theory in action. This discovery was only made possible by allowing the primary sources to speak for themselves.

Péladan's fictional works provide rich illustrations of the processes, characters, and social and interpersonal dynamics that alternately manifest and oppose the individual's effort to follow their proposed path toward the ideal in the Platonic sense. Although on a superficial level many of his stories appear to be tragic romances that reflect his focus on *eros* as the supreme creative force, they are more complex than this. The majority of his narratives comprise morality tales demonstrating the social and individual flaws hindering the realization of ideal love, existence, and society—comprising the 'Western decadence' that is essentially the adversarial force in all his work. His characters strive to overcome this corruption through arduous inner work and sacrifice, the plots are governed by esoteric principles, and the narratives are interspersed with lengthy esoteric and philosophical explanations of the underlying metaphysical dynamics.

Of the use of esotericism in literature, it has been said that: 'we might call [the] transfer of esotericism […] to the sphere of literature a kind of intellectualization, but in the case of […] fiction writers especially it also might be called an imaginization of esotericism' (Versluis, 2001, 186;

Versluis, 2007, 151–154; Faivre, 2000, 184–186). This highlights the distinction between the use of esotericism as a plot or atmospheric device with no systematic, didactic purpose, as a general or specific influence on the author, and literary works designed as 'vehicles of spiritual praxis' (Versluis, 2004, 147–148).

The first case might include works such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842), Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Là-bas* (1891), possibly Honoré de Balzac's *Séraphita* (1834) (see also McIntosh, 1972, 195–197), or the early canon of supernatural gothic literature represented by Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Ann Radcliffe.[13] These may feature esoteric themes and tropes with varying degrees of accuracy, but their primary purpose is narrative, atmospheric, romantic, erotic, or moralistic.[14]

The second case refers to authors whose esoteric influences are well documented but whose work does not have the purpose of transmitting esoteric doctrines. Instead, it comprises the contemplation and synthesis of ideas to which the authors have been exposed—toward which their own feelings may be ambivalent—transmitted through their own creative lens in relation to their cultural context (von Mücke, 2003, 2–4, 14–19, *et passim*). This category is close to the forms of art Péladan encouraged the artists of his circle to create, works drawing on esoteric concepts and disseminated through the artist's vision, in a significant departure from the conventionally esoteric insistence on secrecy and occlusion. Authors and poets in this category might include Victor Hugo, Percy and Mary Shelley (Versluis, 2001, 5, 103; Davies, 1998, 101–103), W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot from the early modernist canon (Surette, 1994, 118, 122–135, 140–144), Dion Fortune, a practising occultist and novelist (Hughes, 2004, 197, 204; Selby, 2008), and early science fiction and horror writers such as Arthur Machen (Valentine, 1995).[15]

The final case refers to works designed to deliver a teaching through their form as well as their content, wherein the form and literary devices go beyond simple literary allegory, reflecting the notion of 'myth as symbol' (Quilligan, 1979, 14–21). They are designed as objects of contemplation and praxis: a subtle process of deliberate and mindful engagement that incorporates both the intellectual and spiritual faculties and is intended to lead to a form of gnosis, produced by the reader's engagement with the text. In this case, narrative cohesion, plot, and character development are subordinate to the role of the narrative as symbol, designed to engage the reader. Prime examples of this form might include seventeenth-century

works such as the *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz anno 1459* (*The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, 1616; attributed to Johann Valentin Andreae), the alchemical compendia synthesizing enigmatic emblems by Michael Maier, lyrics, and philosophical discussion, and possibly the early twentieth-century works of Gustav Meyrink, such as *Der Golem* (1914).[16] Péladan's literature falls clearly in this final category.

Péladan described all the novels in *La Décadence latine* as *éthopées*. The term stems from the Greek *ethologia* or *ethopoiia* and designates the study or creation of *ethos* (customs or morals). As a rhetorical device, it refers to a form of painted or written tableau designed to contain an inherent moral teaching. The tableau is shaped according to the message to be transmitted.[17] Based on Aristotle's *Poetics*, in its classical form the *éthopée* uses the enjoyment factor—or narrative—to draw the audience or reader into an identification with the characters, so that the communicative process becomes participative.[18] Its purpose is literally to forge or influence the public ethos through art, drama, literature, or poetry.

Given his stated objective of sparking societal and spiritual regeneration, Péladan's dramatic and literary fiction comprise perfect examples of the *éthopée* genre. His novels alternate between three main settings: legendary antique lands, decadent and degenerate *fin-de-siècle* Paris, and the provincial France of his childhood. In all cases, the settings are stylized and stereotypical, evoking a mythic atmosphere demonstrating his theory of human and angelic—or daemonic—origins or creating a tension between the environment and the characters that functions to highlight his message.

Péladan's characters are invariably archetypal, but far from being monodimensional, they are living, polysemous symbols of the concepts he wished to impart to his audiences. These symbols, and symbolic interactions, are overlaid onto the ethopoetic tableau, thus creating a layering that must be deciphered by the reader if they are to penetrate its full meaning. Péladan populates the aforementioned settings with three types of character. The first are initiates, sometimes also fallen angels who are conscious or unconscious of their origins. The second are *animiques* whose dormant potential for self-realization becomes a central plot device; the third are representatives of the *ochlos* or mob, the negative force against which his protagonists must strive, into which they are subsumed, or which provokes their transformation. This interplay and its consequences form the main storyline.

The Legendarium

Guided by the morphology of Péladan's work, I observed and recorded the patterns emerging from the array of genres he used: firstly, his mythopoeia and metaphysical exegesis expressed through fiction, dialogue, and commentary; secondly, his aesthetic philosophy expressed through aphorisms; and finally, what might be termed esoteric psychology and social commentary expressed through fiction and didactic annotations.

To achieve this, I applied a simple taxonomy and cross-referenced the main motifs and internal referential framework. I then researched the intellectual history of the most significant ones, documenting Péladan's reception and commentary on them. This made it possible to identify his 'legendarium', a term justified by the coherence, consistency, and continuity running through all of his works. In mapping his cosmogony, I discovered where the guides for self-initiation and the literature fitted in his schema, guided by his tables of concordances, his pre-announcements of publications, and his habit of cross-referencing himself in both his theoretical and his fictional work.[19]

The final piece of the puzzle was the substantiation of the extent of the Platonic influence on Péladan, which resolved the provocative question of why Péladan had dismissed the more 'traditional' and hierarchical esoteric approaches favoured by his contemporaries and had instead attempted to create his own system. His focus on Plato appears to have occurred for the same reason as his preoccupation with Assyrian deities; he had sought the oldest and clearest expression of art and philosophy that, in the context of his cosmology, most purely reflected the teachings of the first divine messengers—or daemons—to guide mankind. Péladan attempted to 'prove' Plato's access to daemonic teachings by correlating the *Symposium*, Péladan's revised version of Genesis, and 1 Enoch. Convinced that these sources corroborated each other, Péladan turned to Plato because he provided what the other sources did not: rational, intellectual philosophy presented through narrative, dialogue, and myth. It is hardly surprising, then, that Péladan sought to emulate a similar mixture of genres in his attempt to contextualize these teachings for his time. Instead of the *Symposium*, we have dialogues and mythical interludes in his 1888 novel *Istar*. Instead of the Socratic dialogues, we have Péladan's colourful novels and didactic handbooks, and instead of *Kallipolis*, we have the Rose-Croix fraternity withdrawing into their enclave to preserve the remains of Western culture—both in his fiction and in real life.

This should suffice to demonstrate why it would not have been sufficient to only *identify* the Platonic influence in Péladan's work, without exploring the use to which he put it. A primarily historiographical approach would have focused on Péladan's reception of Platonic thought. A primarily literary approach would have entailed delving into Péladan's literary expression of Platonic thought. Instead, I strove to discover how Platonic concepts functioned within Péladan's work and how his affinity for Platonic thought shaped his oeuvre. This exploration was carefully contextualized to demonstrate the interplay between various cultural forces that partially explained Péladan's synthesis of Platonic thought with other currents.

The same applies to Péladan's Luciferianism. Through his retelling of the stories of Creation and the Fall, Péladan elaborates an alternative macrohistory corresponding to the mechanics of esoteric mythopoeic narratives. Its purpose is to bring rational order reflected on the individual, the social, and the cosmic scale while responding to existential and ontological questions. This is achieved through his consistent use of a quasi-Platonic hierarchy of being as a structure for his philosophy. All of the central elements within his narrative reflect key Platonic concepts (the *Symposium*, the androgyne, heroes, daemons, genii, the Theory of Forms and of the soul), overlaid with Christianity, synthesized with correspondences drawn from or based upon Assyrian deities, Orphic legend, planetary correspondences, and human typologies, and rendered important by virtue of his referential framework, vital to deciphering his work. This framework incorporates the diverse ideas, including allegorical historiography, the requisitioning of new scientific thought and its methods to legitimize various philosophical and esoteric notions, and the perplexing urgency and responsibility that Péladan often expresses toward humanity and the divine, ultimately deriving from the theosophical concept of the soteriological role of mankind (Zdenek, 1962, 45; Faivre, 2000, 3–48; Weeks, 1991, 114).

It is clear to me that Péladan's use of mythical deities and esoteric references in his philosophical works, as well as in his theatrical plays, are not mere aesthetic tropes. Rather, they perform a specific referential function within the mythical narrative underpinned by a specific hierarchy of being with its own place in esoteric thought. His use of Plato and his retelling of the story of the Fall of mankind suggest that Péladan drew on the highest authorities he appears to have recognized—Plato synthesized with Scripture—to make sense of the problem of evil. He reinterpreted historical

events and mythical narratives to fit into his hierarchy to form the backbone of his cosmology in which angels were the creators of mankind, and fallen angels and men became each other's saviours. This can be derived from combining his various works, as I have argued elsewhere (Chaitow, 2012, 2014b).

Therefore it also stands to reason that any study seeking to explore the Salons and Péladan's impact on artists, writers, and esotericists must necessarily explore the transmission of this line of thought, rather than focusing exclusively on aesthetic or narrative analysis. If similar approaches, tailored to the material under examination, were to be implemented in other cases where esotericism overlaps with literary or artistic expression, and likewise, if esoteric texts were approached with significant loans from the literary and philosophical toolboxes, this can only serve to enrich the fields involved.

All the evidence appears to suggest that Péladan did not write fiction; he wrote esoterically charged philosophy styled as fiction and designed with a strong social agenda. Such a reading of his work is made possible by close attention to the sources Péladan left behind.

Theoretical Implications

This case study represents an attempt to examine the need for improved interdisciplinary frameworks and communication when dealing with cultural artefacts containing significant esoteric content or influences. Subject to the limitations governing its production, in fusing elements of Western esoteric historiography, literary scholarship, art history, and philosophy, my study of Péladan has demonstrated how sufficient contextualization and careful attention to esoteric terminology and connotations may provide a foundation for the decipherment of such texts. While useful for scholars of the occult milieu of the *belle époque*, my hope is that it will provide potentially useful tools and observations for scholars dealing with similar topics in other disciplines and that it will also reveal the necessity of acknowledging the extent of the impact of esoteric thought on wider culture.

Evidently, historical, sociocultural, and discursive data may be embedded in literary texts that are not immediately perceived as useful sources by historians dealing in documentary evidence. Equally, historians and sociologists of religion may lack the specialized skills, methodologies, and vocabulary to approach literary material effectively. The significance of

philosophical and aesthetic elements may be overlooked in the historiographical approach or superficially treated due to their often arcane nature. These issues lead to the kinds of problems that I have identified in earlier studies of Péladan. On the other hand, the relatively young discipline of esotericism studies is not yet sufficiently well known beyond the confines of its field. Literary scholars and art historians confronted with notions such as occultism, esotericism, and magic are not always in a position to fully grasp their nuances and their significance for cultural developments that have impacted numerous aspects of cultural production throughout Western history (mainly, but not exclusively, since the Renaissance). Historicist approaches may be eschewed in favour of aesthetic ones, and methods involving reader-response, quality based on aesthetic frameworks, typologies (the tools of scholars, but not of the producers of culture), and author intentionality are rarely found alongside deep historical contextualization.

As I have demonstrated, a measured combination of approaches, combined with sensitivity to the philosophical content one may encounter, may not only provide a solution to these problems but also provide much fertile ground for further research in all related fields. In sum, Péladan's output should be viewed as a body of work that is strongly representative of the shift from late Romanticism and symbolism to modernism. In this capacity, it offers numerous points of interest to literary history and art history, since it is an encapsulation of the interaction of multiple cultural forces within a significant and eventful historical period. By examining works such as Péladan's, it is possible to map more closely both the relationship between esoteric thought and cultural production, as well as the social role of esotericism.

Notes

1. Parts of this biographical section on Péladan were originally published as part of my article (Chaitow, 2014a). Some of the findings and analysis are drawn from my doctoral thesis (Chaitow, 2014b) which will be published by Brill in 2019.
2. Signed G.A., *Mercure de France*, July 16, 1918, 372–373. Quoted in Pincus-Witten (1976, 1).
3. Letters from de Guaïta to Péladan dated May 24, 1890, November 15, 1884, October 9, 1884 (Bertholet, 1952, 53, 66, 138); Péladan (1890c), cited in de l'Estoile (2010, 122).

4. Language, spelling, vocabulary, and syntax as in original.
5. The other two arts are diction and elocution, respectively, corresponding to the soul and the spirit.
6. I use the term 'subaltern' in relation to matters of cultural hegemony as discussed by Gramsci, although clearly not in relation to the political issues that concerned him. For a nuanced discussion of Gramsci's work, see Adamson (1980); for a close exploration of its role in the development of modern French culture, see Henry (2008).
7. A thematic study of illustrated books in France is found in Silverman (2008); a significant study of the role of print media as a means of understanding a given culture is Mussell (2012). For a thorough discussion of the relationship between media influence on politics in a comparative study of Britain and France in the early days of the press, see Harris (1996), van Horne Melton (2001).
8. Péladan's cosmology draws heavily on the work of Fabre d'Olivet, most notably his reinterpretation of Genesis. Péladan collated a number of cosmogonical myths to build his own Promethean outlook, including elements borrowed from Plato's dialogues, Orphic cosmology, Gnostic mythology, Aeschylian tragedy, and fragments of world mythology.
9. As with each of the methods I implemented, my decisions have been governed by the needs of the material at hand. Since authorial intent is strongly expressed in Péladan's work as noted in the discussion of his practise of cross-referencing his own work, I considered that it would have been a disservice to the material to do otherwise. Reader-response or other approaches may be useful in further studies of his reception, but would have been extraneous to this study.
10. Péladan's work has also been included in studies devoted to *le fantastique* such as Boulos Hage (1993) and Schneider (1964).
11. For more on the concept of philosophical history, see Godwin (1979, 2009), Findlen (2004), Fletcher (2011).
12. Chapter 1 of *Comment on devient Fée* begins with four quotations from Péladan's other works: *Le Vice suprême* (fiction, 1884), *La Victoire du mari* (fiction, 1889), *La Queste du Graal* (anthology compiled by Péladan, 1894), and *Comment on devient Mage* (theoretical, 1892). He frequently cites *Comment on devient artiste* (theoretical, 1894) for further reading on various aspects of his treatise. The insertion of cross-referential quotations is a common feature of his theoretical works.
13. For examples, see Bulwer-Lytton (1842), Kearns (2007), von Mücke (1986, 51, note 16), von Mücke (2003, 294). Péladan's work has been compared by Leon Surette to that of Bulwer-Lytton, but unfortunately Surette has based his understanding on Pincus-Witten (1976), and perpetuates the same stereotypical impressions of Péladan encountered in earlier biographies, focusing only on a few specific works (Surette, 1994, 149).

14. For more on this point, see Messent, ed. (1981, 1, 13), Geary (1992), Botting (1996), Smith (2007), Botting and Townshend, eds. (2004), Willard (1998), Valentine (1995).
15. On these points, see also Surette and Tryphonopoulos, eds. (1996), Senior (1959), Materer (1995), Lembert (2004). Surette (1994) is valuable study with detailed explorations of the influence exercised by Péladan on Ezra Pound, as well as Péladan's reception of Dante, Wagner, and Rossetti.
16. Many other books deriving from the spectrum of esoteric currents are characterized by the primacy given to leading the reader toward esoteric contemplation, but they are wholly esoteric works, rather than literary vehicles containing elements of esoteric doctrine, hence they are not listed here. For examples and discussion, see Versluis (2004, 147–148). On Meyrink, see Klaus (2010), Jansen (1922), Marzin (1986), Treitel (2004).
17. In further studies it may be worth pursuing a line of analysis from the perspective of modern communication theory, with Marshall McLuhan's seminal axiom 'the medium is the message' as a point of departure. See McLuhan (1994).
18. (Aristotle, 1932, vol. 23, section 1448b.) For a study on the genre in French literature contemporary to Péladan, see Amato and Schamp (2005); see also Carnevali (2010).
19. In the introductory section of *Coeur en peine* (1890), Péladan lists the two first 'septenaries' of his *La Décadence latine* cycle of novels, with a summary of each (including the unwritten novels) and a 'Schéma de Concordance', describing the internal connections between the novels. The first septenary had already been published and ended with *Coeur en peine*; the second began to appear from 1891 onward. Of the seven novels presented as forming part of the second septenary, only one appeared under a different title. The novels were written and published between 1891 and 1900 (Péladan, 1890, xvi–xxi, 1893, xxiii–xxiv, 389–391, 1894, 1).

CHAPTER 7

Ghosts Before Breakfast: The Appetite for the Beyond in Early Avant-Garde Film

Benedikt Hjartarson

Hans Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* (1928) is traditionally counted among the key works of avant-garde film in the early twentieth century, along with works such as Man Ray's *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), Viking Eggeling's *Symphonie diagonale* (1923), René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924).[1] Whereas there seems to be a scholarly consensus about the canonical status of Richter's film, its classification in the context of the historical avant-garde has turned out to be more problematic. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, has described *Vormittagsspuk* as one of 'two or three short films by Richter' that qualify as 'uncontested Dada films' (Elsaesser, 1996, 15). Other scholars, however, have pointed out the constructivist and surrealist elements of the work (McFarland and Purves, 2012, 29; von Hofacker, 1986, 145) or emphasized the use of 'different styles' in the film, linking dadaism with futurist and constructivist ideas (Scheugl and Schmidt, 1974, 746), although the links to dadaism have most consistently been emphasized by scholars. Yet, as Justin Hoffmann has noted, the classification of *Vormittagsspuk* as a 'Dadaist' work seems peculiarly anachronistic, because 'according to art historical

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sources Dada only lasted until 1923' and Richter 'had lost close contact with the Dada movement by 1919' (Hoffmann, 1998, 72). The links to dadaism thus seem paradoxical, which is hardly surprising if one considers Richter's claims that 'after 1924 there was no Dada' and that later works were in fact 'no longer Dada, but quite simply new art, the fruit of Dada' (Richter, 1965a, 197).

The difficulty with classifying *Vormittagsspuk* is in a certain sense triggered by the artist's confusing career, although careers of this kind were rather the rule than the exception in the transnational network of the avant-garde.[2] It should also be noted that the different views on the classification of *Vormittagsspuk* are partly based on conflicting notions of the avant-garde, which is determined either on the basis of the activities of specific art movements or with reference to style or aesthetic qualities. References to dadaism and constructivism thus usually draw on Richter's involvement in the activities of these movements, whereas the emphasis on surrealism, for example, focuses on aesthetic elements. The question of classification may be particularly poignant in Richter's case, because his career 'leads through a perplexing network of artist groups, editorial boards and collectives as well as into an incoherent, conflicting or even contradictory cluster of currents, ideas and concepts' (Bareither et al., 2012a, 14). Richter's avant-garde career indeed ranges from his early activities in expressionist groupings, through his involvement in dadaism and his collaboration with Viking Eggeling on abstract film, and finally to his involvement in international constructivism with the publication of the journal *G* from 1923 to 1926.[3]

More importantly, however, the dominance of the question of classification has served as an alibi for not discussing the content that is explicitly stressed in the film's title: *Vormittagsspuk* or *Ghosts Before Breakfast*. Scholars have debated whether Richter's treatment of the phantoms should be seen as a burlesque play in the spirit of dada, as a response to surrealism and its notions of the marvellous or as a characteristic expression of constructivism's exploration of the possibilities of the filmic medium. Scholars have noted that the film plays with paranormal phenomena, but the role of these phenomena has been reduced to a springboard for the artist's experiments with the technological potential of the new medium and the subversion of aesthetic conventions. The key question has been whether Richter's wrestling with the paranormal is of

dadaist, constructivist, or surrealist origin, and the phantoms have been dispatched as a superficial element of interest only as part of the film's cultural context. As a result, scholars have overlooked the film's dialogue with the visual culture of Spiritualism and other currents of modern esotericism or *occultism*, understood here as a notion that refers to the new variants of esotericism that emerge in modernity. These currents were an integral part of modern culture in the early twentieth century, shaping not only the works of artists involved in occultist circles and initiatory societies but also the works of an artist like Richter, who apparently had little interest in the occult and didn't leave any writings dealing explicitly with occultism. When discussing Richter's work, it is useful to fall back upon the notion of *occulture* developed by Christopher Partridge (Partridge, 2014; see also Partridge, 2004–2005). Occulture in the early twentieth century can be described with Partridge as 'ordinary', because the circulation of ideas and products rooted in occultism was not restrained to the activities of dedicated individuals or isolated groupings.[4] Responding to ideas and notions rooted in esotericism was just as common as responding to new philosophical teachings, scientific discoveries, or technologies, and analyzing the role of occultism should be just as self-evident as discussing other ideas or theories that shaped notions of cultural and aesthetic modernity in the early twentieth century. The blindness toward the paranormal phenomena that lie at the core of Richter's film is the expression of a more general blindness toward occultism, which, as Alex Owen has noted, has 'received remarkably little scholarly attention, possibly because the notion of mysticism and the occult seems to run counter to our conception of modern culture' (Owen, 2004, 6).

When analyzing occultism, it may be useful to fall back upon the methodology of new historicism and Stephen Greenblatt's concept of 'cultural' or 'social energy' (1988).[5] This term refers to common or general knowledge that circulates in a certain period and shapes discourses in complex ways but becomes alien and difficult to decipher from a later historical viewpoint. The notion of 'energy' here refers to the socially generated power of 'cultural objects, expressions, and practices' to cause 'a stir to the mind' (Greenblatt, 1988, 5–6). The role of the historian consists of describing this context and showing the 'traces' of this cultural reality in the work, thus reconstructing the cultural and social conditions of its symbolic representations. These 'traces' are seen as the products of

an epistemological process, as cultural phenomena—'principally ordinary language, but also metaphors, ceremonies, dances, emblems, items of clothing, well-worn stories, and so forth'—are moved 'from one culturally demarcated zone to another' (Greenblatt, 1988, 7). The aim of the analysis is to describe this process or 'circulation', which is always 'partial, fragmentary, conflictual' (Greenblatt, 1988, 19). Any cultural product can in principle enter the circulation, and the notion of 'social energy' thus equally refers to notions of 'power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience' (Greenblatt, 1988, 19).

The following analysis of the 'social energy' that surfaces in the ghosts in Richter's film focuses less on the work's location in the history of film or modern art than on the cultural and epistemic moment of its emergence. The aesthetic is not seen as an autonomous social field but as a discursive realm that is intrinsically linked to other discourses. *Vormittagsspuk* is simply seen as an open discursive forum in which cultural phenomena appear. Whether Richter studied occult ideas or had any intention of mediating such ideas is certainly open to debate, but the images of the ghosts that appear in his film are simply a historical fact, no less real than the images of hats or fire hoses that appear on the screen as products of a specific cultural reality. The ghosts in Richter's film are traces of an epistemic moment, and as such they document a cultural reality now lost—or, to quote Greenblatt's somewhat cryptic description of the initial desire of new historicism, they enable us to 'speak with the dead' (Greenblatt, 1988, 1).

How to Avoid Seeing Ghosts: *Vormittagsspuk* and the Allegorical Imagination

In *Vormittagsspuk* the spectators witness powerful scenes of haunting. The opening scene stresses the specificity of film as an art medium bound to time and leads the spectators into a visual space governed by a different temporality: they see a clock that shows ten o'clock before its hands start moving in a five-minute rhythm—when the clock strikes 11, mysterious events take place (Figs. 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3).

The events do not build up a coherent plot; their succession rather presents a series of intersected short narratives, which makes it difficult to see where one narrative ends and another begins. Eva Wolf has pointedly described these characteristics of Richter's filmic language: it aims at

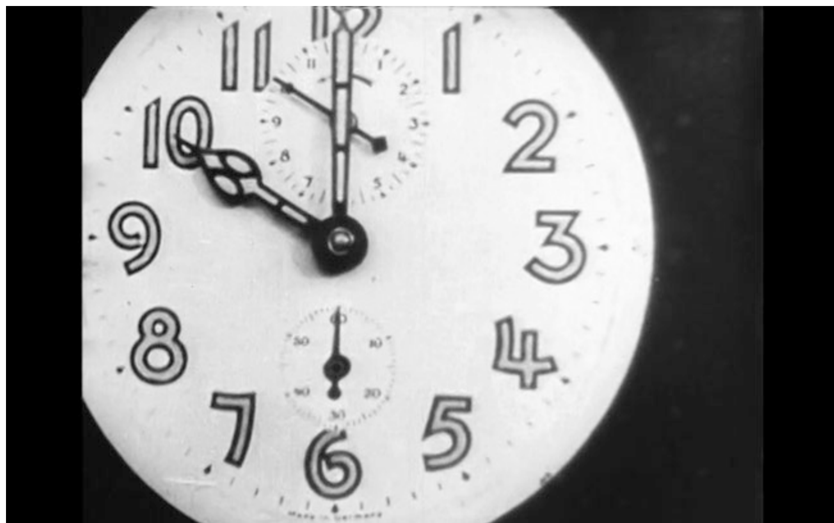

Fig. 7.1 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

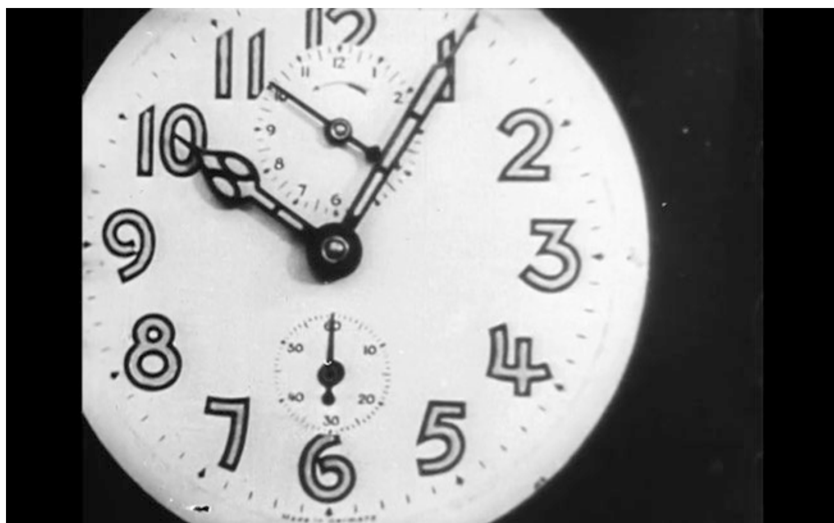

Fig. 7.2 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

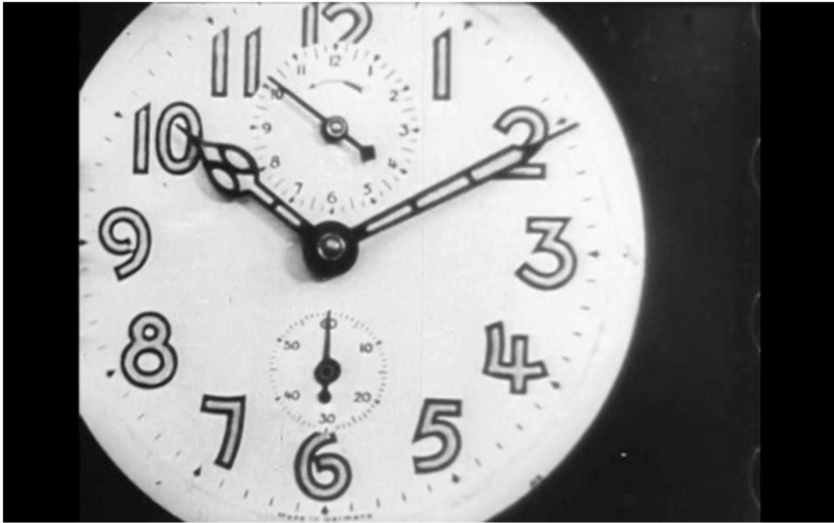

Fig. 7.3 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

'making visible what one can actually not talk about' by creating an 'open space' of 'wonders' (Wolf, 1986, 22).

In order to gain a clearer picture of the paranormal phenomena witnessed by the spectators, it is useful to attempt a description of the film's narrative plot(s). When the clock strikes 11, we see four bowlers fly into open air, their journey then serving as a *leitmotiv* in the work until they settle on the heads of four men sitting at a coffee table at the end of the film (Fig. 7.4).

The next scene shows cups and tableware on a coffee tray falling mysteriously to the ground and breaking apart. A collar and a bow tie revolt against their master when he attempts to put them on, and then we see a shooting target with the image of a man, his head tearing itself loose from his body (Fig. 7.5).

A shooter who has been aiming at the target throws away his gun, which awakens to life and multiplies, guns of different sizes performing a kind of mechanical ballet on the screen. The clock appears again, its hands moving in a five-minute rhythm from 11:00 to 11:45. The head of the man with the bow tie appears again, and we see it split into two. Another

Fig. 7.4 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

Fig. 7.5 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

head enters the frame, apparently looking for the hats, its movement defying the laws of nature as it enters alternately from the left or the right. Windows fly open and are thrown back again. A fire hose unfolds itself and holds one of the hats in the air with its water jet, then spouts the hat over the ground until the water re-enters the hose and it returns to its original state. In the next scene we see six men wearing bowlers who enter a lamppost (Fig. 7.6).

The faces of four bearded men appear, probably looking at the necks of the four women seen in the following shot—the beards disappear, as well as the ponytails on the women's necks. Feet creep across the screen diagonally from left to right and then in the opposite direction, and then we see a close-up of feet crossing the screen, either vertically or diagonally, backward or forward, with increasing speed. A pair of feet can be seen climbing up and down a ladder, and these images are intersected with shots of the clock, the hands now moving more rapidly from 11:05 to 11:40. Four men crawl up the screen, apparently to get hold of the hats. The clock reappears, now at 11:50 and waddling, and is split into two. The shooter reappears, aiming his gun at young female legs in stockings, which sud-

Fig. 7.6 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

denly vanish. A mysterious being waves to the spectators, its hand tearing itself loose from the wrist, and then we see the outlines of another being that is mysteriously dismembered. The fragments of the tableware, which was broken in the film's beginning, gather together on the tray and fly into open air. Then we see a table and four chairs, a man enters the frame with the coffee tray, the cups suddenly disappear from the tray and reappear on the four sides of the table. Four individuals enter the frame and sit down, the flight of the hats finally coming to an end as they settle on the four men's heads. The cups are drawn toward the coffee pot in a mysterious way and fill up with coffee. Yet again the clock appears, time now moving in a one-minute rhythm from 11:50 to 12:00. The haunting ends at the strike of noon.

This brief summary should suffice to give an impression of the mysterious events that occur in *Vormittagsspuk*: things are obviously not as expected in this haunted space. As soon as one takes a closer look at the actual images presented in the film, the scholarly blindness toward the presence of paranormal phenomena becomes even more striking. It should be noted, however, that the silence about the obvious links to Spiritualism has not only marked scholarly writings on the film but also found its expression in Richter's later work. In retrospect the artist chose to disregard the scenes of haunting and described the work as showing 'the revolt of objects: hats, cups, ties, hoses, etc., against man' (Richter, 1965a, 198). He further explained that 'the objects are also people' (Richter, 1965b, 65) and that *Vormittagsspuk* shows how they free themselves from the role of the slave in a revolt against their master (Richter, 1965a, 198). In the post-war period, Richter thus described the film as an allegory that presented an appeal against totalitarianism, further stressing the historical lesson to be drawn from the work. In a similar way (albeit with a different historical reference), Marion von Hofacker has claimed that the film is 'about anarchy during the post-World War I era and suggests the collapse of everything that is self-understood, whether institutional, political, or social' (von Hofacker, 1998, 131). By placing the work within a well-known historical narrative, such interpretations turn the focus away from the cultural reality that it represents. The haunting is reduced to a political allegory, a document of tragic historical development or even an omen of things to come. The ghosts become pure allegorical signifiers that refer to a different and more important context—we may be seeing phantoms on the screen, but they are merely a point of departure for the ideological critique that is the film's substance.

The strategy of operative blindness referred to above is well known in the context of occultism. Scholars acknowledge that occult ideas were widespread in the early twentieth century and played a certain role in shaping new aesthetic currents, but the impact of occultism is often seen as an 'unwelcome religious flavour' (Mitter, 2008, 538) in works that are otherwise progressive. A characteristic example of this approach can be found in Michael W. Jennings' and Detlef Mertins' description of the journal *G*. From their perspective, Richter's journal is marked by the tension between a 'mandarin *Geistigkeit*' on the one hand, which refers to an 'admixture of the spiritual and the intellectual that has been the stuff of German humanism since the Enlightenment', and 'the modern materialism and emphasis on process that characterize the very idea of *Gestaltung*' on the other hand (Jennings and Mertins, 2011b, 12). The notions of the 'spiritual' are thus seen as remnants of a knowledge that belongs to the past and clashes with the radical and secularized modes of expression that lie at the core of Richter's aesthetic project. Occultism is thus seen not only as a residue of archaic knowledge or a religious worldview but also as an element that merely belongs to the cultural context of the aesthetic, which is an autonomous field governed by its own principles. It may be useful to take a look at the cultural context in order to get a clearer picture of an artwork's historical surroundings, but these surroundings are not an integral part of the work, and they are not relevant for an understanding of its radical and genuinely 'modern' aesthetics. Occultism is thereby reduced to the role of 'inspiration', artists being aware of these currents and even making use of them, but on their own *aesthetic* terms. The clear distinction between the autonomous artwork and its cultural surroundings is certainly not restricted to the exclusion of occultism as a formative element in the aesthetic field, but it gains relevance in this context because occultism's role in modernity is often seen as somewhat embarrassing. Occultism is usually seen as a child of its time and fits badly into our dominant models of historical evolution, technological progress, accumulation of scientific knowledge, and the progression of artistic modes of expression.[6]

When attempting to describe the role of occultism in the early twentieth century, it is useful to fall back not only upon the new historicist notion of 'social energy' but also upon the methodology of historical discourse analysis, which rejects the clear distinction between the autonomous artwork and its cultural context, focusing rather on the overlapping of differ-

ent discourses within a given culture (see Landwehr, 2008). From this perspective occultism is seen as an important discourse in constant interaction with other contemporary discourses rather than as a current limited to a number of individuals or isolated groupings. One way to close off the discussion about occultism has been to approach it as the remains of an antiquated knowledge that struggles to survive in a secularized world. Another way, probably more important and often linked with the first, has consisted of restricting the role of occultism to a select group of authors and artists who were devoted readers of occult publications. The best known cases in the early twentieth century would be Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, but other relevant artists and authors in this context might be František Kupka, Velimir Khlebnikov, Hugo Ball, Mikhail Matyushin, Kazimir Malevich, or Hilma af Klint. In these artists' works, the important role of occult ideas is so blatant that it is not easily discarded, but the scholarly discussion about such links to occultism can be said to serve a double role: on the one hand, it has pointed out the obvious links to occult currents and explored these in some detail; on the other hand, it has served to limit the role of occultism to a small number of artists working explicitly with such ideas. As a result, the works of these artists have come to serve as an alibi in the history of modern art and literature. With detailed analyses of the use of occult symbolism and ideas in these specific artists' works, the role of occultism has been dealt with, and the discussion can be closed. This may be one of the main reasons why the historical analysis of the links between occultism and modern art and literature has been peculiarly old fashioned in its emphasis on influence and sources. A second reason certainly has to do with the ambivalent status of esotericism, which Wouter J. Hanegraaff has described as the 'dustbin of history', storing the body of 'rejected knowledge' throughout the history of modern culture (Hanegraaff, 2013, 13; see also Hanegraaff, 2012). The dismissive attitude toward occultism dominant in the historiography of modern art and literature has forced scholars dealing with links to occultism to be highly cautious and only to claim such links on the basis of irrefutable philological evidence.

A more fruitful approach to occultism can be found in new studies of modern esotericism that are based on a broader notion of knowledge referring to ideas articulated in different discourses within science, religion, and aesthetics. From different perspectives, Andreas B. Kilcher, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Nina Kokkinen have stressed the heuristic value

of discourse analysis for an exploration of the role of esotericism in modernity. Esotericism is here not regarded as a restricted tradition that presents a critical response to the secularizing process, calling for a return to spiritual values. Esotericism is rather seen, to quote Kilcher, as a 'fluid product of discourses and interpretations' shaping different currents and notions of modernity (Kilcher, 2009, 143). Along similar lines Kokkinen has proposed a definition of 'occulture' that does not see it in terms of a 'defined system of belief or set of certain currents' but rather as 'a constantly evolving field of discourses and practices into which various different cultural products, scientific inventions, political ideologies and natural phenomena are absorbed' (Kokkinen, 2013, 31). In this sense occultism can be seen, following von Stuckrad, as an important epistemological practice that 'involve[s] the *discursive transfer* between the individual areas of European culture, especially religion, natural science, philosophy, literature and art' (von Stuckrad, 2005, 9; see also von Stuckrad, 2013). The affinity with the notion of 'social energy' is obvious: historical discourse analysis focuses on the manifestations of esoteric knowledge in different cultural fields rather than a limited number of esoterically inspired works or isolated groupings. As Kilcher points out, esotericism is 'subject to the dynamics of historical and cultural conditions and interpretations' and should thus be seen as 'the result of ever new discursive negotiations and displacements' (Kilcher, 2009, 147). This perspective stresses the necessity of approaching esotericism on the basis of methodologies rooted in different disciplines such as 'philosophy, historiography, ethnology, cultural studies, literary studies and the history of science', because esotericism is no longer defined as 'a singular religious phenomenon' but as an epistemological praxis that makes its appearance in different cultural settings and contains its own 'sociologies, politics, techniques, cultures, and poetics of knowledge' (Kilcher, 2009, 144–145). Historical discourse analysis thus opens up the possibility of a broad description of the dialectical relationship between esoteric and exoteric or accepted knowledge in different periods. Esotericism's impact on the currents of aesthetic modernity often referred to as 'modernism' cannot be restricted to a small number of artists; it is rather an integral part of its discourse and shapes it in complex ways. Richter's early works are an intriguing case that shows how ideas and epistemological practices rooted in esotericism become the driving force of aesthetic innovation, cultural subversion, and ideological critique even in the works of an artist only marginally interested in the occult.

The Badly Trained Soul: Notions of Magic in Richter's Writings on Film

In *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* (1929), Richter discusses 'associations' as 'a means of filmic poetry' and one of the key 'elements of visual language', further stressing that 'the means of association can become a pure enchantment [*Zauber*] that changes the things in their core, gives them a new value, a substance they have never had' (Richter, 1929, 89). For Richter the specificity of the film medium lies in its 'magic, poetic, irrational qualities' (Richter, 1951, 159), which enable it to 'give men a new substance of life, activate them, teach them to see, refine their senses, strengthen them by means of diversion, sharpen their human reason and knowledge, broaden their horizon, turn them into cosmopolitans' (Richter, 1929, 97). The affinity with the rhetoric of occultism is not only obvious in the imagery of Richter's texts (both in those from the 1920s and in later publications), in which he describes film as a medium leading to the expansion of knowledge, spiritual awakening, or rebirth. The artist's reflections on the 'enchantment' and 'magic' of film are more than simply a decorative metaphor or a reference to magic shows, which was a recurring praxis in the works of Georges Méliès and other pioneers of film (see Gunning, 2000). Notions of magic were widely distributed in European culture in the early twentieth century, and in occultism magic often served as 'a connection between the occultist tradition and contemporary science' that 'would bring about a total science of nature, the body, and the mind' (Lachapelle, 2011, 44). Magical practices were seen as crucial to the process of regenerating man's willpower and vitality and were often connected with ideas of self-cultivation and self-creation.[7] Modern magic belonged to a tradition of cultural critique that was aimed against the dehumanizing, alienating, and demoralizing effects of modernity. In Richter's writings on film, such notions of magic were linked with utopian visions of a new artistic medium intended to evoke a new consciousness that would foster a vital culture.

The title of one of Richter's key programmatic texts, 'Die schlecht trainierte Seele' ('The Badly Trained Soul', 1924), shows that the new film was meant to lead human consciousness out of the impasse of societal modernization. The role of film was no less than to liberate and cultivate 'the badly trained soul' of modern man: 'The living force that we possess in the form of feeling has grown obese; its breathing has grown short; the

soul is without a culture of its means, less *a power than a weakness*' (Richter, 2011a, 148; italics in the original).[8] Richter here refers to the play with geometric form in *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and his other abstract or 'absolute' films, but the description can clearly be connected with the subversion of habitual visual perception in *Vormittagsspuk*, in which traditional laws of movement and gravity are cancelled. In his exploration of the technical possibilities of film, Richter is not dealing with 'special "formal" questions' but with 'the elemental questions of educating our psyche' (Richter, 2011a, 148). The artist's abstract or 'absolute' films can be described as an attempt to loosen the fetters of modern man's soul and open up a new field of vision by means of aesthetic shock (see Hjartarson, 2012). In *Vormittagsspuk*, on the other hand, he leads the spectators into a realm of mystery and chance. The film's aesthetic is based on Richter's understanding of 'filmic poetry' as 'a pure play of fantasy' that creates 'a new, totally unknown space, new and unknown events' (Richter, 1929, 30–31). The film presents an exploration of the artistic qualities of the film medium, which Richter opposes to a tradition of filmmaking that 'covers the *rational* side of our lives' but which is 'a priori' forced to exclude 'any free use of the magic, poetic, irrational qualities to which the film medium might offer itself' (Richter, 1951, 159). At stake are the 'essentially cinematographic' qualities of magic, poetry, and the irrational, which in Richter's view 'promise future development' (Richter, 1951, 159).

Such remarks show the extent to which the emphasis on visual perception, technology, and aesthetic form belongs to a project of spiritual regeneration in Richter's writings. The artist's reflections on the filmic medium need to be seen in the context of avant-garde filmmaking in the 1920s, as film became 'a model of the spiritual in art' (Elder, 2008, 83). The immaterial, fleeting, and transitory medium was seen as capable of capturing movement as such, thus presenting a 'new truth' by opening up 'a new dimension to the optical consciousness of today's humans' (Elder, 2008, xi), further shedding light on the energies dormant in the material world that had their correspondence in the consciousness. The links to occultism become even more explicit in a short article from 1926, in which Richter discusses the 'absolute film' and describes how the spectator's perception leads to spiritual rebirth: 'In the rapidity of motion, the eye acquires a new soul and experiences things that until then have been brought to its consciousness only in a scattered way and not in an artform. What one experiences, is movement' (Richter, 2011a, 212). Richter's

exploration of kinetic geometric forms deals not only with physical perception but also with a perception embedded in deeper layers of the soul. The explicit aim of absolute film and its 'pneumatic epistemology', to borrow a notion from R. Bruce Elder (Elder, 2008, xi), is the shaping of a new thought that is opposed to the 'static spatial form of the fine arts' and capable of 'think[ing] in *optical series*' (Richter, 2011b, 212).[9] In Richter's films the spectator sees 'only movement, organised movement', the film 'awakens, awakens opposition, awakens reflexes (?) but—perhaps—also pleasure' (Richter, 2011a, 146). If occultism is seen in terms of 'claims of higher knowledge and ways of accessing this knowledge' (von Stuckrad, 2005b, 88) rather than as a religious current in the narrow sense, Richter's vision of a new consciousness can clearly be seen as a product of occulture in the early twentieth century, when 'discursive elements' rooted in esotericism 'appear in ever new constellations' in 'scientific, philosophical and juridical systems as well as in the field of art' (Kokkinen, 2013, 28).

The work with oppositions, which Richter discusses as an elementary aspect of his exploration of the contrasts of colours and geometric forms in his abstract films, appears in a different manner in *Vormittagsspuk*. The basic contrast in the film is between the well-known material world and the 'phantasmatic' movements of the apparitions on the screen, which defy traditional laws of gravity. The 'phantasmatic' here refers to Tom Gunning's definition of 'images that oscillate between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, often using transparency or some other manipulation of visual appearance to express this paradoxical ontological status' (Gunning, 2007, 99). *Vormittagsspuk* abounds in such 'phantasmatic' images, paranormal phenomena clashing with the material world of everyday life. Characteristic examples of this clash can be seen, for example, in the scene where we follow the group of men chasing the bowlers that constantly slip away from them and in the image of the man battling with his revolting bow tie and collar. Richter later described the 'contrast-analogy' and the conflict between chance and conscious creation as a core element of dada, which was related to the movement's effort to 'restore to the work of art something of the numinous quality of which art has been the vehicle since time immemorial' and to the 'incantatory power that we seek, in this age of general disbelief' (Richter, 1965a, 59). The incantatory power that Richter refers to is inseparable from the law of chance that was the 'new stimulus to artistic

creation' and the 'central experience of Dada, that which marks it off from all preceding artistic movements' (Richter, 1965a, 51). For the dadaists chance was 'a magical procedure by which one could transcend the barriers of causality and of conscious volition, and by which the inner eye and ear became more acute, so that new sequences of thoughts and experiences made their appearance' (Richter, 1965a, 57). The recurring references to notions of magic in Richter's writings show an obvious affinity with the rhetoric of occultism, in which willpower and imagination played a key role in the process of spiritual and cultural regeneration. The entry into the realm of chance marks not only the subject's liberation from conscious will but also its entry into a realm ruled by a higher rationality. From Richter's perspective, art is based on 'a synthesis of intuition and rational will, chaos and order' (Elder, 2008, 148), in which 'the truth of the chaotic' is expressed 'but it is controlled by will' (Richter, 1998, 209). The search for a higher rationality in the 'absolute films' not only stresses the links between dadaism's aesthetics of chance and constructivism's exploration of the elementary principles of form and movement, it furthermore reveals threads that can be traced back to Richter's early works, in which he entered the role of a 'seer', creating a series of works based on visions of the 'inner eye' (Turvey, 2011, 20–22; see also Benson, 1998).

A closer look at Richter's oeuvre reveals an interesting continuity of ideas revolving around a new vision that will lead to a higher rationality, and it is precisely in these ideas that the dialogue with occultism appears most clearly. The connecting thread in Richter's work lies in his utopian vision of a new subject, which in the historical avant-garde was often linked to the idea of the 'new man'. A highly playful image of the 'new man', which can be described as one of the utopian ideals that serve as the driving force of the avant-garde project, can be found in Richter's late description of dadaism: 'We wanted to bring forward a new kind of human being, one whose contemporaries we could wish to be, free from the tyranny of rationality, of banality, of generals, fatherlands, nations, art-dealers, microbes, residence permits and the past' (1965a, 65). Richter's vision of a new subject liberated from the yoke of bourgeois material culture not only sheds light on the aesthetics of subversion often seen as characteristic of dada, it also has a clear affinity with ideas circulating in the discourse of occultism in the early twentieth century.

Visualizing the Beyond: *Vormittagsspuk* and Spirit Photography

The dialogue with occultism that surfaces in Richter's work finds its most obvious expression in *Vormittagsspuk*, the aesthetic principle of chance generating peculiar images that enable the spectator to glimpse into another realm. The dead material world brought to life in the work's opening scene, when the four bowlers fly into the air, is not a pure exploration of the possibilities of the filmic medium or merely a dadaist burlesque governed by chance, anarchy, and the subversion of conventions. The film also carries obvious traces of the engagement with occult notions of the beyond and its representations, the material world appearing less as dead matter than as a living unity driven by latent powers.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the visual culture that shapes Richter's film, it is useful to take a closer look at its links to Spiritualism. These connections are explicitly stressed in the closing scene, when the fragments of tableware are brought together and carried on to the coffee table, where the four men sit down. In its staging of a well-known image of a séance, the closing scene unmistakingly refers to spiritualist activities: the four men sit still with the palms of their hands resting on the table's edge and wait for mysterious events to take place, before the coffee pours into their cups and the four bowlers settle on their heads (Fig. 7.7).[10]

Vormittagsspuk thus clearly belongs to the corpus of works dealing with Spiritualism in Germany in the early twentieth century, when the movement came to play an important but controversial role in popular culture as well as in scholarly debates (see Treitel, 2004; Sawicki, 2016). The allusion to a séance furthermore provides us with a key to decipher the social energy surfacing in Richter's film.

Spiritualism emerged in the nineteenth century as a syncretic teaching that brought together notions of modern science and ideas rooted in esotericism, the dominance of science growing stronger around the turn of the century. The distinctive feature of Spiritualism in the context of esotericism consists, however, less in its claims of presenting a new scientific knowledge, which is rather typical for a period that was 'preoccupied with invisible realities' and characterized by 'the fluid interpenetration of science and occultism' (Henderson, 2007, 391), than in its popular habitus. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke has pointed out, Spiritualism distinguished itself most clearly from other occult currents through its negation of tra-

Fig. 7.7 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

ditional modes of initiation. Spiritualism presented itself as a popular movement intrinsically linked to the space of bourgeois everyday life; instead of depending on 'esoteric spirituality', 'the primal language of nature', or 'angelic intermediaries', it communicated with the spiritual world through 'spirits of the dead' that simply used 'trite codes to tap out messages and employ seemingly mundane practices' (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, 188). Beings from another realm appear in a vulgar manner as they knock on tables or appear bluntly on photographs and sound recordings, which triggered criticism from more traditionally minded advocates of occultism, who rejected the 'need of such prosaic proofs' (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, 188) and depicted Spiritualism as a product of the materialist spirit of modernity, which the spiritual traditions were intended to oppose.

Whereas Goodrick-Clarke correctly stresses the mundane character of Spiritualism, he overlooks the important role of electronic media. Visual and acoustic manifestations of the 'beyond' around the turn of the century were closely linked to new media, and Spiritualism can in fact be described

with Jeffrey Sconce as the first movement to create an '"electronic elsewhere", an invisible utopian realm generated and accessed through the wonders of electronic media' (Sconce, 2000, 57). The distinction between mediums of flesh and blood and electronic media was often blurred, the medium's role being to capture phenomena floating in the wireless space of the ether. The communication channels, often referred to in terms of spiritual telegraphy, were bound not only to physical mediums but also to electronic media, which played a key role in registering phenomena of the afterlife. With the invention of wireless telegraphy, many spiritualists were convinced that it had become possible to 'unlock the mystical enigmas of the ether, that mysterious substance once believed to be the invisible medium through which all light, electricity, and magnetism moved' (Sconce, 2000, 61).

When focusing on Spiritualism's relationship with bourgeois culture, it is important not to ignore the role of technology and new media. Of specific interest is the tradition of spirit photography, which played a central role in documenting the paranormal phenomena that took place at séances. As Serena Keshavjee has remarked, Spiritualism was a 'democratic popular religion', and spirit photographs were 'readily available' for a broad audience 'in journals, newspapers and books' (Keshavjee, 2013, 54). In the visual culture of Spiritualism, different types of such photographs emerged, the two most important being 'photographic recordings of materializations', which 'captured a phenomenon perceptible to all those present at the séances', and 'spirit photography' in the narrow sense of that term, capturing phenomena 'not perceived by those participating in the séance, except, in certain cases, by a clairvoyant medium' (Fischer, 2005, 171–172). The important aspect for an analysis of *Vormittagsspuk*, however, is less the typology of the spirit photographs than the common characteristics of their iconography, pointedly described by Gunning: 'Ghosts or spirits appear in Spirit Photographs primarily as phantoms—bodies rendered optically strange, semitransparent or out of focus, dissolving into shrouds of gauze or simply incongruously "floating" in the space of the photograph' (Gunning, 2007, 99). The 'optical strangeness' of the apparitions is furthermore stressed with settings in which they usually 'appear alongside "normal" figures in familiar spaces' (Gunning, 2007, 99). The apparition can thus be described as an invasion into the well-known space of quotidian life, giving the spectator a glimpse into the afterlife, where the physical laws of movement and gravity are cancelled.

A highly playful example of such practices and the burlesque elements they may contain can be seen in a photograph of the medium William Eglington with the materialization of a spirit, made by Alexander Aksakov in 1886 (Fig. 7.8).

Gunning's description of the iconography of spirit photographs sheds an interesting light on the subversion of bourgeois existence in *Vormittagsspuk*. The ludicrous play presented in the film, as ghosts appear effortlessly in the film medium, engages in a dialogue with this spiritualist

Fig. 7.8 Alexander Aksakov, *The Medium William Eglington with a Materialization of a Phantom 19 July 1886*. Proof on silver gelatine print, dimensions unknown, private collection

tradition. The spectacle presented in Richter's film is based on the clash of two different realms: beings from beyond invade everyday life and cause chaos by disturbing the conventional role of bowler hats, coffee pots, collars, and bow ties.

The distinction between the two realms is partly blurred in the film, which makes it difficult for the spectators to pin down which appearances on the screen are traces of physical bodies and which ones are traces of spiritual entities. The viewer is left uncertain, for example, whether the beings that disappear into the lamppost are spectres or men of flesh and blood who become the plaything of occult forces and whether the male beings who lose their beards and regain them in an instant are living or dead. The men chasing their bowlers seem to be of flesh and blood, however, whereas another uncanny being that appears around the middle of the film rather seems to be a typical product of the iconography of spirit photography (Fig. 7.9).

The nature of the head that the spectators see splitting early in the film, which is obviously the same head that struggles with its necktie and collar in another scene, seems more ambiguous (Figs. 7.10 and 7.11).

Fig. 7.9 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

Fig. 7.10 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

Fig. 7.11 Hans Richter, still from *Vormittagsspuk* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*), 1928 © Estate Hans Richter

The film provides the spectator with indications about the nature of these different bodies, but it remains impossible to categorize them in an unambiguous manner. The problem of a clear distinction between physical and spiritual bodies in the film may partly be explained by the fact that in occultism one frequently comes across notions of man possessing other bodily manifestations besides the physical. The head splitting in front of the spectator may in fact represent two different bodies of a being belonging to the physical world rather than a ghostly apparition. In occultism, such notions of extra-physical bodies were not merely metaphors for the existence of some kind of spiritual being outside of the physical body but could even possess the same organs, such as 'spiritual bones, muscles, heart, lungs, nerves, brain, &c' (Fishbough, 1852, 1; cited in Sconce, 2000, 42–43).[11] Richter's film can certainly be seen as a characteristic product of dadaism and its adherence to the tradition of *épater les bourgeois*, but one should not ignore the role of spirit photography in shaping its iconography. In line with the tradition of spirit photography, the images of the beyond in *Vormittagsspuk* serve as contrasts to everyday life, the invasion of the phantoms into the sphere of bourgeois culture causing disturbances and confusion.

When stressing the affinity with Spiritualism, one should be aware of a fundamental difference between Richter's film and the tradition of spirit photography: *Vormittagsspuk* is not intended to bring the spectator any proofs of the afterlife. If the film is discussed in terms of its relation to the broader practices of *occulture*, however, the links to spirit photography can be seen from another angle. The production and distribution of spirit photographs was not restricted to photographs that were linked to scientific experiments and meant 'to prove or disprove that ghosts or unknown forces existed'; the early twentieth century also saw the distribution of 'commercial photographs' that rather belonged to popular culture (Keshavjee, 2013, 55). Richter's film refers less to spirit photographs produced within spiritualist circles than to commercial photographs that embraced the spiritualist tradition and appropriated it for different ends. In this context it should be noted that the attempts of spiritualists to register paranormal phenomena with the use of electronic media were usually bound to photography and sound recordings rather than to film. The reason was apparently the difficulty capturing the afterlife in continuous motion, the ghosts usually appearing in isolated moments of illumination. In film, 'phantasmatic' visions of beings thus came to play a different role, primarily becoming elements of an entertaining spectacle.

Concluding Remarks

Richter's film belongs to a cinematic tradition and needs to be seen as a variation on 'the idea of the ghostly' that 'has accompanied cinema from its earliest manifestations' (Curtis, 2008, 150). The primal act of *Vormittagsspuk*, which consists in bringing dead matter to life, opens a dialogue with early cinema, which often contained images of things animated on the screen. Richter's work is in this sense typical of early avant-garde film and its appropriation of the cinema of attraction, which often served the avant-garde as a tool to subvert the conventions of narrative filmmaking (see Gunning, 2000). Richter's phantoms thus belong to a tradition of early cinema, in which ghosts were usually far from evoking any sense of the uncanny. Scenes of haunting rather served as narrative frames for spectacular experiments with the possibilities of the film medium, and as Barry Curtis has noted, *Vormittagsspuk* can be seen as an example of the continuation of this tradition in the avant-garde film of the 1920s (Curtis, 2008, 53). The most important examples from the history of early cinema would be the films of Méliès, such as *Le Portrait spirituel* (*The Spiritualist Photographer*, 1903), *Les Cartes vivantes* (*The Living Playing Cards*, 1904), or *Le Château hanté* (*The Haunted Castle*, 1897), which clearly refer to Spiritualism in their animation of dead images and their presentation of beings from beyond.[12] As Curtis has noted, the ghosts in early film 'frequently adopted a slapstick role, exploiting [their] freedom from the constraints of materiality and gravity', and they usually 'function as anarchic mischief-makers, terrorize towns, or take holidays from the graveyard' (Curtis, 2008, 158).

A diachronic perspective on film history sheds an important light on the genealogy of the phantoms in *Vormittagsspuk*, yet it needs to be combined with a synchronic perspective on contemporary discourses that circulated in the cultural field and shaped the work's aesthetic, loading it with social energy. This refers not only to the historical situation of the Weimar Republic and the obsession with death that marked its cultural products in general (see Kaes, 2009), but more specifically to occult notions of the epistemological powers of the filmic medium and the spiritualist traditions of séances and spirit photography in which Richter's film is rooted. *Vormittagsspuk* undoubtedly deals with the practices of Spiritualism from a critical and ironic distance, these practices serving as a point of departure for the play with the technological possibilities of film. The profound irony that marks Richter's presentation of the beings from

beyond does not indicate, however, that the links to Spiritualism play only a subordinate or superficial role that can easily be discarded. The irony should rather be seen as fostering a complex dialogue with this tradition, and in the last instance it is hard to ignore that although *Vormittagsspuk* is not a spiritualist or occultist work, it nonetheless presents the spectators with disconcerting visions of the afterlife. The seemingly chaotic world that appears in the film, where the living and the dead hover side by side in an alien space and the laws of time and gravity are cancelled, is a product of Spiritualism's visual culture no less than it is a result of the artist's engagement with filmic motifs and modes of representation. Rather than excluding occultism from the analysis as a superficial element belonging to the cultural context, it may be reasonable to take it as a point of departure in our attempts to describe Richter's filmic visions of the afterlife. Instead of renouncing the obvious and looking through the ghosts in *Vormittagsspuk* from an allegorical viewpoint, scholars dealing with cultural history should dwell on their presence and simply ask what they are doing there.[13]

Notes

1. Richter made the approximately ten-minute-long film, produced by Tobis, in collaboration with the composer Paul Hindemith in the years 1927–1928. The film was made for the international music festival in Baden-Baden and premiered there in 1928. Richter later made a sound version of the film, with a score by Hindemith, which is now considered lost. The actors appearing in the film are Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith, Walter Gronostay, Hans Richter, Werner Graeff, Madeleine Milhaud, Willy Pferdekamp, and Jean Oser. The director of photography was Reimar Kuntze. The analysis presented in this article is based on the version of the film on the DVD *Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* published by Kino Video in 2005.
2. For a discussion of the historical avant-garde in terms of a transnational network, see van den Berg (2005), Hagener (2007).
3. For a more detailed discussion of Richter's career and its avant-garde context, see McFarland and Purves (2012), Elder (2007), Wolf (1989), Fest et al. (2013), Finkeldey (1995), Dimendberg (2013), Zimmermann (2013).
4. For a discussion of *occulture* from an art historical perspective with a focus on the turn of the century, see Kokkinen (2013).
5. On new historicism, see, for example, Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000), Baßler (2001).

6. The role of occultism may be particularly problematic in the case of film history with its dominant 'rhetoric of purity' (Jutz, 2010, 35).
7. For a more detailed discussion of the links between modern magic and the aesthetic practices of the European avant-garde, see my monograph *Visionen des Neuen. Eine diskurshistorische Analyse des frühen avantgardistischen Manifests* (2013).
8. All quotations from articles in *G* are taken from the English translation of the journal by Steven Lindberg and Margareta Ingrid Christian (Jennings and Mertings, 2011a). For a facsimile of the German original, see von Hofacker (1986).
9. Related ideas can be found in an article by the architect Ludwig Hilberseimer that appeared in the constructivist journal *Ma* in 1923, in which he claims that the time of a new 'cosmic consciousness' has come, when man will leave 'this so-called reality, which is nothing but conventional naturalness, toward the spiritual, which creates a new reality'. Referring to film, Hilberseimer further declares that the new 'kinetic art' has 'revived old cosmic correspondences, because this problem has since time immemorial existed in the realm of ideas: as the language of the psyche' (Hilberseimer, 1923, no pagination in the original).
10. The bowlers flying in the air also serve as a traditional symbol for the avant-garde's assault against bourgeois culture. The best-known example of the use of this motif can probably be found in the poem 'Weltende' (1911) by Jakob van Hoddis, which gained a paradigmatic status in German expressionism as the opening poem of the anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1919): 'Dem Bürger fliegt vom spitzen Kopf der Hut' (van Hoddis, 1955, 39).
11. On the different bodies referred to above in the context of film history, see also Nead (2007, 171–245).
12. In this context it should be noted that one of the films planned by Richter but never materialized had the working title *Baron Münchhausen*. Richter intended for Méliès to design the set but abandoned the project when the French filmmaker passed away in 1938. See Scheugl and Schmidt (1974, 748).
13. I thank my colleagues in the research network *BTWH* for fruitful discussions about Richter's works at the network's annual conferences in Tübingen 2011 and in Reykjavík 2012. I also thank my students and colleagues at the University of Iceland for useful conversations about the topic, not least Pétur Pétursson, Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir, Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, and Guðni Elísson.

CHAPTER 8

Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis in Conversation: Surrealism, Imagetext, and Occult Aesthetics in *Terre de Diamant*

Victoria Ferentinou

In 1958 a book written in French and furnished with both images and texts, *Terre de Diamant* (*Land of Diamond*), was published in Athens in a limited edition (Fig. 8.1).

Terre de Diamant was a collaborative work by two young artists affiliated with surrealism in Paris in the 1950s, American painter Marie Wilson (1922–2017) and Greek poet Nanos Valaoritis (b. 1921). Wilson created 16 black-and-white lithographs, and Valaoritis wrote 16 texts as a literary response to his partner's images. The interplay between word and image makes this work an illustrative example of the concept of 'visual poetry', that is to say, poetry that combines pictorial and verbal features, created in the 1950s in line with surrealist aesthetics which privileged such intermedial connections.[1] *Terre de Diamant* further reflects the surrealists' revived interest in automatism and their re-assessment of what is loosely desig-

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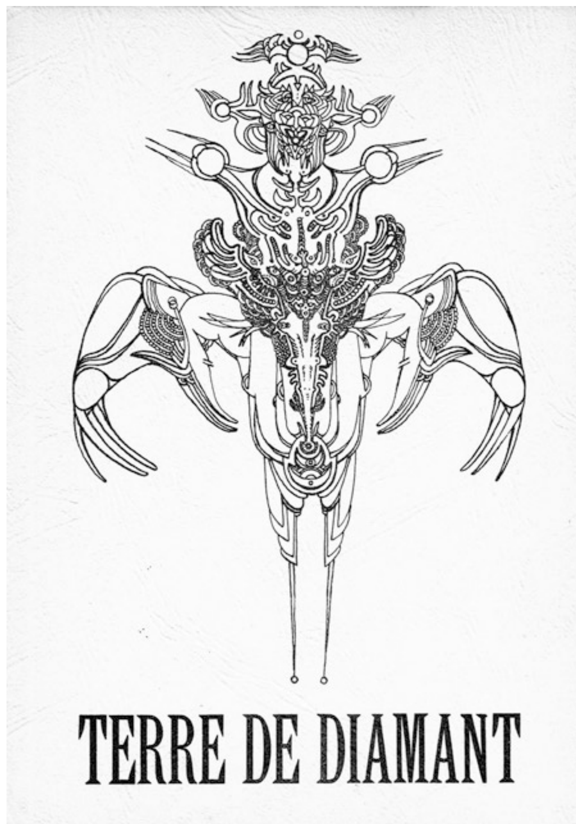

Fig. 8.1 Marie Wilson, *Vehicle of the Gods*, lithograph, 1958. Cover image from Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis, *Terre de Diamant*, Athens, 1958 © Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis. Image reproduced courtesy of Nanos Valaoritis

nated as 'the occult' as a site for artistic expression in the post-war era.[2] For the surrealists the occult provided tropes or techniques that could provide avenues of subversion of, or act as counteragents against Western mainstream culture, its conventional aesthetics and conservative politics (Mahon, 2005; Ferentinou, 2013, 105–106; Bauduin, 2014, 159–190; Parkinson, 2015a, 1–22). *Terre de Diamant* was produced within this context, and as all surrealist collaborative works, it poses questions in terms of interpretation and authorship.

At the time of publication, *Terre de Diamant* was primarily regarded as a collection of poems and did not receive any reviews. Even today scholars of surrealism and of Greek modernism either ignore it or simply list it among Valaoritis's prolific output. Similarly, Wilson's images have been thought to function as illustrations of Valaoritis's texts or are seen entirely separately along with her other paintings, drawings, and lithographs (see, e.g. Argyropoulou, 2000). In other words, no study has analysed the work as an integral composition of texts and images produced to be seen/read alongside each other, reflecting the artistic cross-fertilization between the two artists (see Papariga, 2006, 11–12 on their artistic dialogue). Moreover, no scholarship has properly identified and explored the use of an 'occult language' in the work, most specifically the bricolage of motifs and themes drawn from myth and alternative spiritualities.

This chapter aims to re-assess Wilson's and Valaoritis's *Terre de Diamant* and situate the work within its proper historical context. *Terre de Diamant* will therefore be studied in the light of both surrealism's avant-garde aesthetics and the part played by occultism and heterodox spiritualities in surrealist art theory during the 1950s. This contextualization is essential since an interdisciplinary and historically situated reading is needed to appreciate the occult vocabulary and the text/image conjunction of the collection. The artistic trajectories of Wilson and Valaoritis will also be briefly discussed since each artist brought into the work their knowledge of a network of discursive practices. My argument is that they swiftly moved between other currents and traditions and surrealism in order to affirmatively respond to André Breton's revolutionary project of the 1950s which embraced occult tropes as potentially liberating. Still, the contextualization of the production of *Terre de Diamant* does not suffice to shed full light upon the interaction between Valaoritis's cryptic texts and Wilson's abstract geometric drawings. Both Valaoritis and Wilson leaned on a set of tropes, themes, and techniques drawn from the occult that are crucial to the process of reading, since they render the work intertextual.[3] The parallel juxtaposition of text and image further problematizes the search for a singular author and for a real meaning. Going back to the emblematic art of the early modern period, this conjunction recalls alchemical treatises and the role of 'emblematic images as encapsulations of literary meaning' (Mitchell, 1986, 155). Yet it also alludes to the deployment of poetry as a literary companion to artworks that need words to invest them with a set of meanings—a form of art criticism in a literary mode.

This nuanced relationship between text and image will be explored with the help of W.J.T. Mitchell's theoretical construct of the 'imagetext' (Micthell, 1994, 106). According to Mitchell, 'the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself' (Mitchell, 1986, 43). He argues that there is no difference in principle between literature and painting (Mitchell, 1986, 49) and resolves this opposition of phenomena by synthesizing the 'theoretical *figure*' of the 'imagetext' as the 'composite, synthetic work(s)' that intermingles text and image (Mitchell, 1994, 89, n. 9) and as the 'site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation' (Mitchell, 1994, 106). Mitchell further claims that it is the interaction of images and texts that constitutes the realm of representation, since all media and all representations are mixed and heterogeneous rather than pure forms of arts (Mitchell, 1994, 5). The construct of the 'imagetext' is therefore particularly useful for revisiting *Terre de Diamant* as a heterogeneous composition, an anti-paradigm of purist aesthetics. Additionally, in my analysis I will employ Valaoritis's own theory of writing and of art in an attempt to re-read *Terre de Diamant* in relation to surrealism, occult aesthetics, and the weaving together of texts and images.

Marie Wilson: Abstraction, Mediumistic Automatism, Surrealism

Marie Wilson grew up in California, developing a fascination for Native American imagery through her grandfather's collection of handcrafted indigenous American artefacts (Wilson, 2000, 39). In the 1940s she obtained a BA in Fine Arts from Mills College (1944) and a Master of Arts degree from the University of California at Berkeley (1948). She left behind her conventional art education when she met Greek artist Jean Varda, who taught her 'the language of modern painting' and acquainted her with his semi-abstract style (Wilson, 2000, 40). In 1951 Wilson met Austrian-born surrealist Wolfgang Paalen and in 1952 followed him to Paris, where she was introduced to surrealist frontman André Breton and his circle. Initially, she felt intimidated; she was not fluent in French, and as she remarks, she was 'groping for self-worth in a man's world' (Wilson, 2000, 40). She and Paalen spent the summer of 1953 with Breton and his wife Elisa at Breton's country house at Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a thirteenth-century village in South-Western France. They visited medieval castles,

studied birds and butterflies, and played surrealist games to stimulate creativity. Breton encouraged her to paint and later included her drawings in surrealist magazines such as *Médium*, *Le Surréalisme même* and *Bief: Jonction surréaliste*.

Wilson's paintings from the early 1950s are abstract and small in scale, recalling Varda's decorative style and Paalen's lyrical abstraction. Paalen, in particular, was a major influence on her art and introduced her to automatism. In the late 1930s, he had invented an automatic technique called *fumage*, which exploited the effects produced by candle soot on paper (see Winter, 2000). He also showed an interest in pre-Columbian art and archaeology and cutting-edge scientific theories, such as non-Euclidian geometry and the fourth dimension, which was appropriated by occultists such as P.D. Ouspensky in *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought* (1912) as well by various artists of the avant-garde (see Henderson, 1998). All of these themes return in Paalen's art. His novel aesthetic that sought to reconcile anthropology and science with occultism as well as his eclectic interests were promoted through the founding of the Dynaton group in Mexico in 1941 and the review *Dyn* (1942–1944), which was characterized by an eclectic mix of modern art and poetry, archaeology, ethnography, aesthetics, and scientific discourses. As Paalen himself remarked, his aim was a 'universal osmosis' and the abolition of all differences to achieve 'the negation of all exorcism' (Paalen, 1943, n.p.).

Wilson was exposed to Paalen's aesthetics and his eclectic weaving together of modernism and 'primitivism', especially through their trips to Mexico where he familiarized her with indigenous art and totemic objects and their magical qualities (Argyropoulou, 2000, 11). Through Paalen, Wilson became acquainted with the publications of Swiss-born surrealist Kurt Seligmann. Seligmann researched magic, alchemy, the tarot, and other occult topics through his readings and amassed a huge library on the occult which informed his art (Sawin, 1986, 76–81; see also Rabinovitch, 2014). Wilson and Paalen stayed in Seligmann's home in Paris for almost two years. Wilson explicitly mentions Seligmann's book *The History of Magic* (1948) so it can be presumed that she was cognizant of Seligmann's comparative study of the occult and his interlinking of alternative spiritualities with art (Wilson, 2000, 41). Seligmann's appreciation of 'the aesthetic value of magic and its influence upon man's creative imagination' resonated in Wilson's art in the 1950s and beyond (Seligmann, 1948, 21). Wilson was receptive to the surrealist aestheticizing of occultism, alterna-

tive spiritualities, and indigenous cultures, showing a particular interest in pre-Columbian myth and Eastern forms of spirituality, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (interview with Nanos Valaoritis, 8 April 2015).[4] In contrast to Breton and other surrealists of the Parisian circle whose perspective was informed by their readings, Wilson's knowledge came mostly from conversations and collaborations with fellow surrealists (interview with Valaoritis, 24 April 2015). Wilson's most important paintings of this period all bear occult and mythical titles, such as *The Birth of the Celestial Monkey* (1957), *Rites of Passage* (1957–1958), and *Owl Spirit* (1950–1960).

Wilson's close contact with Breton further shaped her art. She experimented more systematically with automatism, having as her model mediumistic art. She further embraced the possibilities of what Jean Dubuffet in 1945 called 'art brut', that is, art by naïfs, mediums, mental patients, and other creators working outside society's cultural norms (Maclagan, 2009, 29). Breton himself collaborated with Dubuffet on the creation in 1948 of the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut*. For Breton, these artists, along with visionaries, so-called primitive peoples, the mentally ill, and mediums, shared a commitment to authenticity since, as he and Dubuffet saw it, they all produced an art that was anti-intellectual, closer to a modernist, primitivist aesthetic, and thus unconstrained by culture or 'reasonable objectives' (Breton, 1972, 317; Dubuffet, 1949). This sort of art, labelled 'outsider' by Roger Cardinal (1972), was highly valued among the surrealists precisely because it attacked the standards of the established art world and the romantic cult of the artist as a visionary genius. Alternative forms of creativity challenged artistic authorship but at the same time promoted the 'subjective nature of authentic creativity' (Maclagan, 2009, 10). But while mediumistic artists located their source of inspiration in a metaphysical realm, for the surrealists the ultimate source was the unconscious mind.

Wilson explored the 'psychopathological art' of the mentally ill and medium painters who worked in a trance-like state. In particular, she was attracted to the symmetrical work of medium painters, such as former plumber Fleur-Joseph Crépin and miner Augustin Lesage, who heard voices and made drawings dictated by the dead (Maclagan, 2009, 180–182). Wilson first encountered their work at Breton's atelier in Paris (Wilson, 2000, 40–41). Breton grouped together Crépin and Lesage with other medium artists and with art by mental patients, remarking that their work is characterized by 'a special hypnotic virtue' (Breton, 1972,

298–307; see also Conley, 2006, 134). For Wilson, it was Crépin and Lesage who 'opened up a vision', and within two years her work became equally symmetrical (Wilson, 2000, 41). Wilson's works can profitably be compared to art brut, in that they are 'often marked by a constant returning to the same motifs and an intense elaboration of them' as if driven by 'some invisible compulsion' (Maclagan, 2009, 13).

Wilson's work is equally governed by automatic processes which she valued highly, following Paalen and Breton. She explains her automatism as follows:

> When I look at an empty canvas, I go to the center automatically. Usually I start a little before center, and draw a dot or maybe a little shadow there—something. Then I put another bit to the right and to the left, and then above and then below. It's like a cross. I work like that, as if I were making lace. I invent it as I go. I am not starting with an idea. I don't know where or what I am going to do when I begin a drawing or a painting. As the drawing or painting develops, something of modern art weaves itself into what I am doing. (Wilson, 2000, 41)

Wilson was intrigued by automatism as a technique for stimulating creativity. Yet she employed automatism as a form of 'conscious passivity' as Breton defined it in 'Le Message automatique' ('The Automatic Message', 1933) and combined it with the primitivistic aesthetic of simplicity and spontaneity of indigenous art (Conley, 2006, 131). She also appropriated Breton's interior model in the sense that she produced her art in an act of giving form to images drawn from within: 'I never erase or change anything, even in my pencil drawings. My work is like charting out an unknown territory' (Wilson, 2000, 42). Wilson's production is automatic, yet it entails concentration. It is meticulous and filled with ornamental motifs in highly organized compositions which resemble 'Tibetan tantras' or Mayan hieroglyphs (Adam Biro and René Passeron quoted in Argyropoulou, 2000, 75), showing that she consciously exploited the creative potential of automatism but also reflected upon her fascination with images of spiritual content. Wilson's experimentations with automatism were further enhanced through her collaboration with the Greek poet Nanos Valaoritis, whom she met in 1954.

Nanos Valaoritis: Surrealist Trajectories and the Occult

Nanos Valaoritis was born in Lausanne but spent his youth in Athens. In his teens he immersed himself in French symbolist writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud and became familiar with the work of Greek modernists, most prominently the poet and Nobel laureate Giorgos Seferis. He also encountered surrealism through the poetry of another Nobel laureate, Odysseus Elytis, in the literary review *Τα Νέα Γράμματα* (*New Letters*). In 1939 he met both Seferis and Elytis and in the early 1940s became friendly with these poets, who formed the Greek surrealist circle in which psychoanalyst Andreas Embirikos played a central role. Valaoritis frequented their meetings and partook in discussions about surrealism during the Second World War. He took refuge in London in 1944, where he translated Greek poets and befriended surrealists, such as Toni del Renzio. Valaoritis moved to Paris in 1954 where he met Breton and his circle via Wilson. The couple participated in surrealist activity until 1960, at which point they relocated to Greece. Valaoritis is, along with Nicolas Calas, the only Greek intellectual cited in Breton's writings. This is a testimony of Breton's appreciation for Valaoritis, who combined in his work elements from Greek modernism and surrealism with tropes and techniques used within the French surrealist circle.

In Greece surrealism shares a complicated relationship with modernism; both currents arrived rather belatedly during the 1930s. It was in 1935 that the modernist poet Seferis published *Μυθιστόρημα* (*Mythical Narrative*), the first modernist work to introduce free verse in Greece. The same year, another and more provocative work, *Υψικάμινος* (*High Furnace*), was also published by Embirikos. *High Furnace* was heavily influenced by surrealist automatism and is regarded as the first collection of surrealist poetry to be published in Greece. The absurdist language of Embirikos, who had spent the late 1920s in Paris and maintained contact with the surrealist circle around Breton, was taken further in Nikos Engonopoulos's poetry collections, *Μην ομιλείτε εις τον οδηγό* (*Do not Speak to the Driver*, 1938) and *Τα Κλειδοκύμβαλα της Σιωπής* (*The Clavichord of Silence*, 1939). In these poems automatism produced a language that transgressed all rational control over meaning, stirring up debates among conservative and leftist critics who, across the board, reacted 'with shock and derision' to such surrealist experimentations (Maskaleris and Valaoritis, 2003, 144).

Greek surrealism's shock effect, however, quickly diminished as the movement gradually became adapted into a national context, in line with Greek modernism's 'antimodernist strategy' that involved 'the reactivation of tradition' (Tziovas, 1997a, 2). In Greek modernism a Western outlook was often infused with a form of Eastern mysticism that entailed the blending of Greek pagan mythology with Christian imagery (Tziovas, 1997b, 28). Seferis used ancient Greek myth as part of his modernist poetry, which could be viewed as an example of what T.S. Eliot described as the 'mythical method' (Tziovas, 1997a, 4). Like Seferis, the Greek surrealists appropriated myth but in a more subversive manner, challenging aesthetics, poetics, and society (Stabakis, 2006, 1).[5] To 'propagate Surrealism in a country that ignored the very notion of an "avant-garde"' was, however, a difficult enterprise, making the reception of surrealist art in Greece a thorny issue (Stabakis, 2006, 2).

This was the cultural environment in which Valaoritis emerged. In Paris his poetry gradually shifted from modernism to avant-gardist experimentation. It began to incorporate play and humour and unconventional language and to show a hybridization of genres as well as an appropriation of occult themes that were relatively alien to the Greek context. Valaoritis was aware of the adaptation of occult discourses by Greek intellectuals Angelos Sikelianos and Nikos Kazantzakis, and of what he calls 'the metaphysical or super-natural enterprise, which only poetry could embody' (Valaoritis, 1997, 31; see also Ferentinou, 2016). Sikelianos, in particular, is described as the poet who attempted 'to revitalize the mytho-historical antiquity' against Western rationalism (Valaoritis, 1997, 32). For Valaoritis, metaphysics, defined as the experience of what is beyond the boundaries of our experience, corresponds (in his words) to what the French surrealists in the 1950s called 'parapsychology' or 'occultism'; he also argues that such an interpretation and use of 'metaphysics' is equally evident in the work of Greek surrealists (Valaoritis, 2006, 21).[6]

Although Valaoritis partly locates his engagement with occult tropes in the Greek intellectual context, mixing, in his commentary, occultism with parapsychology, it was mainly in Paris of the 1950s that he explored a wide range of occult sources. He collected books by early modern alchemists and magicians, and contemporary studies on the occult and Eastern spirituality.[7] He was also acquainted with the work of René Alleau, president of the Alchemical Society of France, and with Eugène Canseliet's studies on alchemy as well as Robert Amadou's parapsychology (interview with Valaoritis, 8 April 2015). In the same interview Valaoritis observed that he

was the only Greek intellectual who explicitly appropriated these discourses in the post-war era. He also admitted that it was his participation in the surrealist circle in France that provided him the forum from which to re-assess ideas drawn from the occult and value occult topes for their artistic potential, agreeing with Breton that it is the 'most poetic form of art' (interview with Valaoritis, 8 April 2015). His discovery of occultism as a reservoir of poetic tropes is implicitly articulated in his poetic collection *Κεντρική Στοά* (*Central Arcade*) but made more explicit in *Terre de Diamant*, both published in 1958.

In Search of the Diamond Land: Poetry and Art as Alchemy

Terre de Diamant was produced by Wilson and Valaoritis in the summer of 1958 while they were vacationing in Greece. Wilson automatically created a series of 16 lithographs, claiming later that they were 'done with an affinity to the cosmic sacred' (Wilson, 2000, 42). Valaoritis, who regarded Wilson's images as mandalas or yantras, wrote short texts to interact with her lithographs (interview with Nanos Valaoritis, 8 April 2015). Later he confessed that he preferred to use the language of occult and spiritual texts rather than simply practice automatism; he further described his textual response as 'a form of art criticism in a poetic mode', as the verbal equivalent of Wilson's images (interview with Valaoritis, 8 April 2015). Yet, in the dialogue he enacted between text and image in *Terre de Diamant*, he was not concerned with content. Valaoritis invented his titles after gazing at the formal elements of each image, relying upon the suggestiveness of lines, shapes, and forms that he experienced as a spectator. Then, he attempted to express verbally the intricate motifs he identified in Wilson's geometric abstract images.

Valaoritis's act of reading suggestive forms, using free association, recalls the surrealist Max Ernst's account of the genesis of visual automatism in *Beyond Painting* (1948) and reflection upon the complex relation between word and image in automatic art. According to Ernst, automatism brings forth an intensification of the artist's visionary capacities. Following Breton, Ernst believes that 'the painter has to […] give objective form to *what is visible inside him*' (Ernst, 1948, 20). He continues: 'it is now possible to photograph either on paper or on canvas the amazing graphic appearance of thoughts and desires,' in other words the concrete manifestation of poetic thought is a feasible enterprise (Ernst, 1948, 20).

Wilson worked automatically to recover mental images drawn from what she calls the unknown. For Wilson, 'the thing is not to care where the images come from but to be devoted, to have a devotion for the path, for the unexplored, for the unknown' (Wilson, 2000, 43). Her statement recalls occultist Robert Amadou's motto for his journal *La Tour Saint-Jacques*, published in the 1950s: it was dedicated to the 'investigation of the unknown', to which poets and artists were invited to contribute (Amadou cited in Parkinson, 2015a, 8). Wilson, who likely knew Amadou's work via Valaoritis, explored the unknown as a response to the former's invitation thereby establishing a link between the unconscious and 'the cosmic sacred' (Wilson, 2000, 42). Valaoritis in turn used Wilson's images to stimulate his poetic imagery, in a manner akin to Ernst's act of projecting his unconscious visions into automatically produced pictures.

For Valaoritis, automatism is a medium of 'archaeological and philosophical investigation that aims at the discovery of the primeval source of poetic language, the alchemists' prima materia […] When [the surrealists] learnt where to find it, the technique of automatism ceased to be useful' (Valaoritis, 2006, 159). Yet Breton himself did not identify the 'primeval source' of poetry; he was rather concerned with the search for the source of poetic inspiration, which he saw as itself a creative process—a *leitmotif* of Bretonian poetic theory and practice (Valaoritis, 2006, 46). For Breton, automatism responds to the need to 'draw blindly from our subjective treasure for the unique temptation of throwing here and there onto the sand a handful of foamy seaweed together with emeralds' (Breton, 1992, 376). In a similar vein, Valaoritis argued that it is through the surrealist perspective that 'the adventure of life […] is transformed into a polyhedron jewel that signals revelation' (Valaoritis, 1990, 29). Valaoritis's own appreciation for alchemical symbolism and the magical meaning attached to (precious) stones might have been the inspiration for the title of the collection. His reading of Wilson's images as mandalas/yantras also points to his use of the metaphor of the diamond as an allusion to the clarity of the mind achieved through the disciple's initiation in Tibetan Buddhism (Beer, 2003, 194). *Terre de Diamant* could thus stand for what Wilson called the unknown, or for what Valaoritis defined as the primeval source of creation and the treasure hidden within the self, that is a crystal-clear sense of identity.

Terre de Diamant begins with an epigram that highlights the way the two artists appropriated Breton's mediumistic automatism. It is a passage drawn from the writings of the Perates or Peratae, a Gnostic sect of the

second century AD, as quoted in *The Refutation of All Heresies* by theologian Hippolytus of Rome (cited in *Donaldson and Roberts*, 1885, Chapter IX, 60). The passage relates the creation of the world from Logos, the Word:

> I am the awakening voice in the eternal night. I begin now to deliver the controlling power of the veil of chaos. The power of the abysmal silt that brings and carries the mud of eternal and mute humidity; the whole power, always in movement, aqueous convulsions, which take that which is unmoving, holding what is tottering, freeing what comes, comforting that which rests, destroys what believes [...] that reveals the seal to the power that reigns in the middle of the invisible water, power that had been called the sea. This power, the ignorant called it Kronos; Kronos that had been chained when he had closed the net of Tartarus, thick and nebulous, obscure and dark. (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 9)

This passage reflects Valaoritis's theory of writing and art, in which word as speech has the power to create the world and impose order on chaos. The word-speech is always in movement, in a process of becoming and transformation, acting on matter in a multitude of ways in order to bring to the surface all contradictory forces, leading to gnosis—awareness of all aspects of life. Following Breton, word is treated by Valaoritis as a form of primal material, which contains everything that is necessary for the production of the alchemical gold, that is, poetry and art (Bauduin, 2014, 186–193). Furthermore, the creative process is seen as a means of attaining self-knowledge.

In line with the alchemical process and rites of initiation, the collection is divided into separate sections or stages that gradually lead to the Diamond Land. Yet, there is no logical connection between the sections. Time is treated as a circular, recurrent, and fragmented principle that undermines linear time and historicity. In this quest, Valaoritis opens a dialogue with occult and spiritual texts, which he adapts to his poetic needs. His texts contain passages drawn eclectically from these sources or emulate their cryptic language. Thus he moves between occult motifs, personal interpretations, and Wilson's images to suggest intertextuality and interdependence between representational and discursive practices, thereby disrupting the notion of stable readings or the dominance of one medium over the other.

Imagetext or Pictorial Art Versus Poetic Art Criticism

In formalist terms, Wilson's images are highly intricate, labyrinthine, symmetrical, and abstract. They involve geometric, organic, and decorative minute patterns often used in mandalas, yantras, talismans, and similar images that carry spiritual meaning. Wilson's lithographs are suggestive yet ambivalent; they do not contain literary elements, such as narrative and readable signs, and resist interpretation. They are not mimetic of an external reality but rather attempt to give form to the invisible, either conceived as the cosmic unknown or the unconscious in line with the aesthetics of early abstraction and automatism.

The difficulty in deciphering Wilson's images is resolved by Valaoritis through a poetic art criticism that 'settle[s] into a relationship of free exchange along open borders' (Mitchell, 1986, 43). If we consider each of the 16 sections as an imagetext, Valaoritis's use of language can be sketched out as an effort to elucidate Wilson's images, evoking Charles Baudelaire's dictum that 'the best criticism of a painting might be a sonnet or an elegy' (Baudelaire, 1976, 418). In Mitchell's taxonomy this is a form of 'ekphrastic poetry where the text attempts to represent a work of visual or graphic art' (Mitchell, 1986, 155). But Valaoritis deviates from the canon of classical *ekphrasis*. In his ekphrastic poetry language is neither accommodated to vision nor seen as the 'best available medium for evoking the unseeable, unpicturable essence' (Mitchell, 1994, 114). Wilson's images purport to transform the intangible forces of her unconscious into visible language and engender Valaoritis's poetic reconfigurations, which in turn attempt to bridge the rift between word and image in an act of endless re-readings/reviewings.

For example, the first image served as a stimulus for the title 'The Palace of the Eyes' and the accompanying text (Fig. 8.2).

This is a token of the artistic dialogue taking place between the two partners and between their imagetext and the iconic symbols of occultism and Eastern spirituality. The words lead back to the image, trying to make the spectator/reader see what is semantically articulated in the text. Yet the text does not describe, interpret, or critique the image but appropriates the occult language of Éliphas Lévi's *La Clef des grands mystères* (*The Key of the Great Mysteries*, 1861) to suggest a new dimension of signification, a thematic imagetext informed by the occult. Lévi, pseudonym of

Fig. 8.2 Marie Wilson, *Le Palais des Yeux* (*The Palace of the Eyes*), lithograph, 1958. From Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis, *Terre de Diamant*, Athens, 1958 © Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis. Image reproduced courtesy of Nanos Valaoritis

Alphonse Louis Constant, played a seminal role in nineteenth-century French occultism (McIntosh, 2011, 177–205). His writings were highly influential upon symbolist art and also informed Breton's poetry (see Balakian, 1971). Valaoritis's familiarity with Lévi can be attributed to his involvement with French surrealism.

In 'The Palace of the Eyes', Valaoritis quotes Lévi selectively to recast the substance from which everything is brought into being, a form of primal matter (see Lévi, 1861, 117–118). The ubiquitous presence of *prima materia* signals the beginning of the creative act which is conceived as both an exoteric and esoteric journey. In this process, Valaoritis highlights the role of sight in conceiving the world, further alluding to the gaze that is essential for perceiving the literal image and therefore Wilson's art

through our senses. Eyes are configured as a reflection of the psyche and as a mirror image of the cosmos, transcending their role as organs of mere visualization. Thus the faculty of sight is transformed into the faculty of imagination through which the medieval schema of microcosm/macrocosm is reconstructed, and the boundaries between exterior and interior life are blurred. The act of seeing not only activates imagination but also 'recreates desire', as Breton remarked in *L'Amour Fou* (*Mad Love*, 1937) (Breton, 1987, 15). Desire is the motivating force of the quest in surrealism but also in *Terre de Diamant*, as Valaoritis suggests in the text.

If this is the textual reconfiguration of a quest, the following texts do not follow a linear structure but rather play with the visible patterns identified by Valaoritis in Wilson's arbitrary (automatically produced) series of images. Valaoritis invites us to see Wilson's forms as 'the sensuous surface of calligraphic and typographic forms' (Mitchell, 1994, 147), but also as hieroglyphs that call upon our familiarity with occult writings in order to arrive at an interpretation. His words are either straightforward, identifying certain motifs which occur often and could become recognizable, for example, a pair of eyes, or allusive, pointing to identifications that are possible or become visible through his suggestive yet coded language. Thus the reader, as in visual poetry, must 'perform a series of gyrations in order to arrive at the destination' (Bohn, 2011, 16). In these gyrations 'visual and verbal cues work together to guide the reader through the intersemiotic maze' (Bohn, 2011, 16). Yet the reader/viewer is given cues that each time might provide new insights. A comparative reading of the thematic imagetexts articulated through language in *Terre de Diamant* can therefore offer potential comprehensive re-visions. In my sketching out of imagetextual themes, I will rest upon Valaoritis's textual deployment of specific motifs and their sources and suggest a possible reading/viewing within the context of the work itself.

A dominant theme of the collection is the revelation of spiritual entities, benevolent or evil, that control the interior life of humanity, facilitating or impeding the gradual transformation of the self and the world. This observation is based on Valaoritis's poetic re-appropriation of occult motifs alluding to supernatural creatures and transforms the lens through which we view Wilson's images: through the conjunction of word and image, the reader/spectator may recognize the emergence of phantasmagoric entities whose role in the narrative remains ambiguous or rests on the beholder and his/her knowledge and interpretation of occult concepts.

For example, Valaoritis identifies in Wilson's third lithograph an anthropomorphic figure, which he calls 'The Demon of the Sky' and which he describes, using Lévi's words once more, as follows. It is 'the metallic man', whose body is composed of metals: 'His head is gold … [his] chest and arms of silver … [his] belly and thighs of copper … [his] legs of iron … and the feet half iron and clay' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 25; the source used is Lévi, 1861, 450–451). This is a vision of earthly man who should be destroyed, Valaoritis claims, after the 'cubic rock' will 'strike' his feet and 'reduce him to dust' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 25). The cubic rock may stand for the philosophers' stone, which in alchemy designates the agent of transmutation (Newman and Principe, 2001, 388) and which in Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) is reinterpreted as 'that which was to enable man's imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things' (Breton, 1969b, 174–175). Valaoritis iterates the idea that man can transform his interior life through a process he calls 'the four ages of poets' or 'four great periods of the historical universal cycle' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 25). The text alludes to the transformative politics of both occultism and surrealism and aids in our viewing of Wilson's figure as man's baser self which can be liberated from 'violence' and 'weakness' through the power of imagination. But again this imagetext could also be read as a reflective comment on the Renaissance model of the artist/poet (see Soussloff, 1997) as 'a demonic genius' (demon of sky) and the role of imagination (cubic rock) in generating an art that is unconstrained and authorless.

In an imagetext entitled 'Devotion', Wilson created a different figure that contains larger surfaces and is more stylized and geometrical. In the accompanying text, Valaoritis does not quote from occult sources but rather describes the appearance of a fantastic creature using a language that mimics the style and vocabulary of occult texts. In this instance, Valaoritis relates the presence of the monstrous winged creature 'in the hours of intense emotion before the marvelous being, before the prehistoric image, the exceptional stone of beauty' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 31). In other words, the emerging entity is described in terms of the romantic sublime in an admixture of religious feeling and aesthetics, linking Wilson's images to nineteenth-century discourses on art as a form of religion.

In other imagetexts, the idea that 'spirits' can manifest themselves becomes central through intra-textual and intertextual transformations: 'Apparition of the Spirit' has recourse to Platonic cosmology as expounded

in *Timaeus*, the Book of Revelation, and Hieronymus Bosch's apocalyptic paintings, to describe the hybrid guardian of the seventh door of earthly paradise; 'The Spirit of the Desert' is identified with the sacred ram of the oracle of Ammon Zeus in Egypt, which haunts people in distress; 'The Genie of Time', predicated upon the Vedas and in particular Aitareya Aranyaka, illustrates the idea of time as a dual principle responsible for both life and death (*The Sacred Books of the East*, 1879, 238).[8] In all cases, the reader/viewer is haunted by these imagetextual compositions which deploy a spiritual hybridity to stage the performance of the materialization of the unseen. The pictorial informs the textual even as the textual transmutes the pictorial to bring the unconscious fantasies of both the author/artist and the viewer/reader to the fore.

Three other imagetexts are explicitly linked with the theme of desire. 'The Condition of the Slave' elaborates on the trope of the soul which is configured as enslaved in material existence and as driven by 'the desire of the solar plexus, the vaginal and abdominal desire' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 43). The soul is described as a monstrous witch/demon who carries within herself the seeds of reproduction. It is her dependence on desire as a torturing malevolent force that does not permit her liberation from the constraints of carnal life. 'The Interior Sovereign', a title pointing to (neo-)Masonic grades, is identified as the guardian of the egg which fertilizes women, animals, and the earth, indicating the Orphic version of the role of the winged androgynous Phanes-Eros in the creation of the world (Edmonds, 2011, 76–83). Desire is again central but portrayed as the motivating force for the regeneration of life, not a self-destructive force. 'The Archangel of Pleasure', finally, drawing from the Quran and biblical accounts, is represented as the divine being which created desire and the garden of delights before the Fall. Valaoritis's textual evocation of the return to the golden age of primordial happiness, in which the spiritual and sexual were identified, legitimizes erotic pleasure. All three texts allude to certain formal elements of the images, and the images shed light on the content of the texts, although no definitive reading/viewing is secured. But once the combinative practice of seeing and reading begins, both images and texts as imagetexts acquire a new scope dependent on the beholder and the use of their imagination to search for meaning.

The idea of desire is also connected to the recurrent genesis and destruction of the world in 'The Origins of the Universe', in which Valaoritis shifts to Eastern sources and Hinduism, quoting selectively or paraphrasing from *The Laws of Manu*, Book I (lines 24, 25, 38, 43, 49, 50), and in

'The Diamond Belt' in which he describes the green lights emitted from the Ark of Diamond, signalling the end of the cosmos, through a vocabulary informed by Christian mysticism and astrology. The intermingling of all the aforementioned sources is impressive and connotes that from Valaoritis's and Wilson's standpoint, the notion of desire in mythical and religious narratives is central. Desire, and most specifically love, was also principal in the re-conceptualization of poetry and art as magic within French surrealism (see Bauduin, 2014, 142). Yet, in *Terre de Diamant* desire/love is presented as both creative and destructive, that which brings forth the creation of life and art but also leads to death and the end of the creative cycle.

Another important theme is that of the threshold that can allow the passage of the reader/viewer, enabling their journey toward self-discovery. This concept was significant for post-war surrealism. In particular, it was crucial to the 1947 *International Exhibition of Surrealism*, which was staged as a series of initiations, a quest toward the total comprehension of the movement and of its aspiration to value knowledge 'as an elusive, extraordinarily receptive state of mind that encompasses imagination, intuitive awareness, and reflective empiricism' (Rabinovitch, 2002, 58). In a similar vein, the viewer/reader of *Terre de Diamant* passes over thresholds amazed by their revealed, fragmentary sense of reality: 'The Door of the Serpents' that represents the liminal space between the sensual world of illusions and the realm of absolute light that is the borderland where material and spiritual life interface with each other; referencing the Egyptian cult of Isis and Osiris, 'The Passage of the Moon' prefigures the liminal state in which the sun and the moon intersect with each other, an intercourse that brings forth a new life. The third threshold is encapsulated by the imagetext entitled 'On the Threshold of Knowledge' and leads the viewer/reader to the literal discovery of the Palace of Gnosis, as suggested by both Valaoritis's textual description and the architectural elements of Wilson's image (Fig. 8.3).

The revelation of this palace heralds the end of the cycle of history and the ensuing beginning of the 'esoteric era' that would liberate the world from powerful greedy rulers, Valaoritis claims, echoing theosophical discourses of the early twentieth century.

It is through these transitions that 'The King of the Planets' is revealed nearly at the end of *Terre de Diamant*. This imagetext could serve as a portrait of the self as Divinity through a poetic intermingling of passages from texts such as the Isha Upanishad (2003, 9–10, lines 15–16) and a fragment attributed to Hermes Trismegistus by twelfth-century French

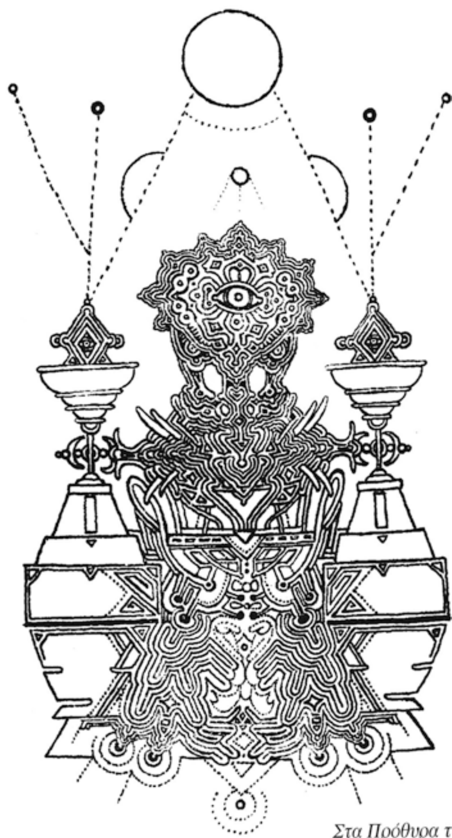

Fig. 8.3 Marie Wilson, *Au Seuil de la Connaissance* (*On the Threshold of Knowledge*), lithograph, 1958. From Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis, *Terre de Diamant*, Athens, 1958 © Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis. Image reproduced courtesy of Nanos Valaoritis

theologian Alan of Lille and found in *Liber XXIV Philosophorum*. It reads: 'an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere' (Wilson and Valaoritis, 2015, 51; see also Braeumker, 1927, 194–214). The 'King of the Planets' is therefore recast as an imagetextual configuration of the accomplishment of self-consciousness, the primary objective of the alchemical *Opus* in post-Enlightenment readings of alchemy as a spiritual practice with which Valaoritis was familiar.

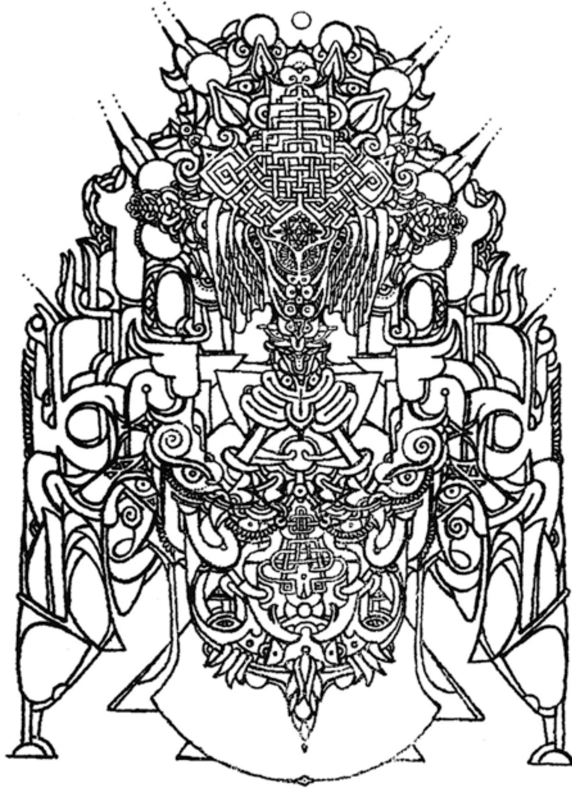

Fig. 8.4 Marie Wilson, *La Tour du Desir* (*The Tower of Desire*), lithograph, 1958. From Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis, *Terre de Diamant*, Athens, 1958 © Marie Wilson and Nanos Valaoritis. Image reproduced courtesy of Nanos Valaoritis

The last imagetext, a culmination of the fragmented, non-linear narrative, is entitled 'The Tower of Desire' (Fig. 8.4).

It points to the conclusion of the search for the spatio-temporal utopia identified with desire in its several manifestations. The fulfilment of desire is realized through the reconciliation of opposites but also its transgression. In Valaoritis's words, this condition is akin to the thought of the (Antique) Sceptics and the Buddhist nirvana (interview with Nanos Valaoritis, 24 April 2015). The annihilation of contraries expressed in the

last imagetext could also be compared to what Breton described as surreality in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924): 'a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions' (Breton, 1969a, 123). This is the supreme point that is encapsulated for Breton in the trope of the diamond 'as the annihilation of being [...] which is no more the soul of ice than that of fire' (Breton, 1969a, 124), a surrealist concept that underpins *Terre de Diamant*. The perception of the momentary reconciliation of antinomies through a dialectical symbiosis of opposites lies at the heart of surrealism and significantly informs Valaoritis's ekphrastic texts and Wilson's symmetrical lithographs. In this respect, it could be argued that they deliberately weave together word and image, or the practice of the (masculinized) automatist poet and of the (feminized) mediumistic painter, as opposites to be brought together, in a complementary fashion, to create a surrealist work as a form of the simultaneous surpassing and preservation of contraries. If there is a gendered power-struggle at play, it is appropriated in the active, dialogical, and symmetrical production of meaning as an act of textual/visual or imagetextual intercourse.

Imagetextual Strategies and the Surrealist Image

Terre de Diamant is characterized by the deployment of discourses to search for but also to challenge the possibility of a unified, coherent meaning. I have proposed one possible reading above. Other readings are made available through Valaoritis's art criticism. In several of his art critical texts, Valaoritis explains that Wilson's image-making can be compared to 'the construction of a crystal, always symmetrically in a labyrinth' (Valaoritis, 2005, 62). He continues that her art 'becomes visionary when various monstrous fantastic entities emerge through this process' (Valaoritis, 2005, 62). Wilson's lithographs can be read as concrete manifestations of precious stones and Valaoritis's texts as attempted efforts to emulate the labyrinthine forms of Wilson's pictorial crystals. Thus *Terre de Diamant* could be reviewed as a locus of imagetextual crystals or diamonds, a poetic terrain through which the viewer/reader wanders in bewilderment guided and misled by fantastic creatures and the occult or mythical symbolism they evoke.

That *Terre de Diamant* calls for different interpretations is not coincidental. In Valaoritis's words, this is characteristic of surrealist art that could be construed as

> a search for the truth of the 'inner' in relation to the 'outer' world. This search occurs by way of a system of 'analogies,' whereby the internal facts, truly mysterious in a way, respond to the external ones. [This is] a complex system of correspondences […] [in which] [e]ach situation is a link in the chain, which […] allows us to guess, the 'surrealist'-image […] The things described often remain 'uncertain'—yet perspectives do open, and probabilities spread all around us, *ad infinitum*. (Valaoritis, 2000, 237)

This is how we should read Valaoritis's and Wilson's collaboration: as an open-ended work, infused with manifestations of interior visions, which invite the spectator/reader to infinitely complement or recreate their own narratives using analogical—that is, in Breton's art theory, magical—thought.

Terre de Diamant can further be seen as a collage in which word and image are juxtaposed without the visual being subordinated to the textual and vice versa. As Ernst argued, 'when the thoughts of two or more authors were systematically fused into a single work (otherwise called collaboration) this fusion could be considered as akin to collage' (Ernst, 1948, 17). In this sense, *Terre de Diamant* is a surrealist collage made of texts and images, an imagetext. Through the combination of the visual and the textual, aesthetics and poetic prose, it becomes a work of 'hybrid genre' (Bohn, 2002, 143), but also an intertextual creation and a site of dialectical exchange, since it captures the artistic dialogue and dynamic intellectual interaction between the two partners.

Being a collectively created product, it further questions notions of authorship; although poetic language is expressed by Valaoritis and pictorial art by Wilson, we cannot ascertain to what extent Valaoritis's knowledge of occult sources informed Wilson's image-making or how Wilson's engagement with Hinduism, totemism, and new age psychology enters into Valaoritis's texts. Yet there is, in a sense, a differentiation between the primarily book-focused Valaoritis and the more intuitive, mediumistic Wilson, rendering their artistic collaboration essential for the production of a surrealist work: two gendered opposites that interact on the artistic plane and penetrate each other's medium. This is an imagetextual process that encapsulates the intra-textual and intra-visual connections taking place in surrealist collaborative works and prefigures postmodern representational strategies that move beyond media oppositions to hybrid genres. It also suggests a shared authorship, a two-voiced or even polyphonic discourse, whose agents are discernible yet dependent on each other.

This dialogism or, in certain instances, *heteroglossia* is also evident in the poetic appropriation of concepts originating in diverse discursive *loci*, such as nineteenth-century occultism, alchemy, astrology, Gnosticism, Christian mysticism, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Quran, Egyptian religion, and Plato. This spiritual hybridity is unique within the context of French surrealism since it deviates from Breton's own preferences that dismissed classical thought or forms of Eastern spirituality. Wilson's and Valaoritis's intellectual heterogeneity is mainly a product of their different cultural backgrounds and the discursive practices of modernism and surrealism in these specific contexts. The two partners freely move across spiritualities and mythologies from all over the world and eclectically draw discursive and iconic elements from a broad spectrum of sources. Yet they distance these elements from their cultural contexts, thus stripping them of their unique religious or philosophical content. It is the very appropriation of these discourses as an imagetextual strategy that functions as the means of wedding together automatic images and ekphrastic poetry, therefore constructing the surrealist image verbally and visually—a heterogeneous image that requires surrealism's integrated vision.

Occult Aesthetics and the Politics of Surrealism

The surrealists sought to blend or juxtapose different modes of expression as a means of transgressing oppositions (and imagetext barriers) and revolutionizing aesthetics. This new aesthetic stance, informed by a wide range of heterodox *topoi* such as fantastic popular fiction, cinema, comics, indigenous art, Celtic artefacts, or the art of the mentally ill, should not be viewed independently from politics and history. The aesthetics appropriated by Valaoritis and Wilson can be construed in the context of post-war surrealism in France and its appropriation of occult tropes and techniques as part of the surrealist agenda to transform consciousness and society through art.

It was in this period that surrealism saw a revival of research into 'mediumism, spiritualism, clairvoyance, telekinesis, extra-sensory perception and telepathy, under the term "parapsychology"' (Parkinson, 2015a, 3) as media with which to probe the unconscious. The surrealists turned to alchemy, magic, and indigenous and medieval art as forms of a revolutionary poetic art. This attitude culminated in *L'Art magique* (*Magic Art*, 1957), co-authored by Breton and Gérard Legrand, in which the geneal-

ogy of 'magic art' from prehistory to modern times is traced using specific artefacts and artworks. As Tessel Bauduin succinctly remarks, *L'Art magique* brought into the discussion 'the specific functioning of art magic' that presupposes 'a rapport with an audience' and might effect change (Bauduin, 2014, 182). The belief in the transformative potential of magic art is equally relevant to *Terre de Diamant*, which relies upon the aesthetic quality of alchemical emblems or spiritual diagrams and the coded, analogical language of occult texts. In this light, the two artists' imagetexts could function as magical objects or votive images, as mandalas that might aid contemplation and liberate the mind from rigid strictures, offering a key to the marvellous. This incursion into the realm of surreality could solely be accessed through the holistic mentality of the middle ages, of Eastern spiritualities, or of indigenous cultures that challenges Cartesian dualist thought. In surrealist theory this is translated as the reconciliation of life and art, word and image, self and society—into surreality.

Both Wilson and Valaoritis show their awareness of surrealism's embrace of Western culture's 'Others' to foster creativity. It is therefore not surprising that the two artists' conception of aesthetics changed considerably in the 1950s in the light of surrealist art theory. In line with Breton, Valaoritis in particular related: 'what other call "aesthetic criteria", the surrealists call "self-knowledge", a clear comprehension of what happens within them, a knowledge of whether the text, painting or sculpture produced derives from a true source of one's self or whether it is mere caprice' (Valaoritis, 2000, 236). In other words, Valaoritis configured aesthetics as a revelation of the interior life of the artist, thereby fusing aesthetics and semantics. This revelation brings forth 'the true gnosis of Surrealism', defined as 'the equivalent of an "initiation" undergone by students of Zen, whereby the aim of spiritual and physical violence is to remove […] all […] conventional ideas, so that the "student" is prepared to accept the "experience" of comprehension' (Valaoritis, 2000, 237). But if initiation is described as a psychological ordeal that leads to gnosis, Valaoritis is quick to argue that surrealism 'complements psychoanalysis with "meta-psychics", without for all that falling into the trap of "mysticism", or of a naïve faith in the "beyond"' (Valaoritis, 2000, 238). After all, according to the poet, the conflicting relationships between Marxism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and esotericism are just artificial, that is to say, constructed (Valaoritis, 2000, 239).

Evidently, Valaoritis legitimizes the appropriation of occultism within surrealism in reaction to several contemporary critics and scholars who have seen this modernist fascination as regressive, nihilistic, and reactionary. The Greek poet was familiar with Breton's stance toward the occult and his call for a new collective mythology from 1935 onward. This new myth was conceived as a modern, coherent artistic language that would convey a revolutionary vision for mental and social change and communicate the surrealists' objective of human emancipation (see Chadwick, 1980, 1–18; Rabinovitch, 2002, 57–70). In keeping with the role Breton ascribed to occultism and other heterodox traditions in the construction of this new myth, Valaoritis exemplifies his own attitude:

> The appropriation of certain explosive expressions, or psychic phenomena, of 'extreme' cases […] are an essential part of the surrealist effort to create a new mythology, responding the most profound human demands—in other words to shed before it the shadow of a 'future faith' […] without risking accusations of mysticism or 'religiousness,' given Surrealism's very aggressive and much-documented objection to all kind of churches. (Valaoritis, 2000, 240)

From this, it is evident that he acknowledges the eclectic use and emancipatory potential of occult discourses within surrealism. Valaoritis explicitly connects revolutionary philosophies with politics, arguing that Pythagoreanism became unpopular because it appealed to the aristocrats (Valaoritis, 2000, 241). In contrast, the surrealists are compared with the Orphics, the Platonists, and the Gnostics, who strove toward 'a poetic revolution, a psychic or intellectual explosion' (Valaoritis, 2000, 241–242).

The work of Valaoritis and Wilson participates in this revolution by resorting to automatism, occultism, and alternative spirituality as tools in the artists' probing of the verbal and pictorial imagery of the unconscious, which is however perceived as continuous with the world. Both artists treated words and images as the primal matter which they transformed into art in dialogue with occult discourses. They also valued the occult as a form of revolutionary aesthetics. Their cryptic language should not be seen as a testimony of their direct communication with the supernatural, but rather as a product of their exploration of the mind's riches. Surrealist automatism attempted to investigate this uncharted territory but negated the very concept of individual creation and authorship. Similarly, Valaoritis

and Wilson annihilated the role of the poet/painter in the production process in line with surrealist art theory: Wilson was led by her hand and her compulsion toward symmetry; Valaoritis replaced authorship with language itself, arguing that surrealism, even as social action, is situated mainly in the realm of language (Valaoritis, 2000, 239). In this reconfiguration of surrealist aesthetics, occultism as a 'method' of understanding the world and exploring the self played an important role. *Terre de Diamant* should be seen as part of surrealism's art theory and its aestheticization and politicization of occultism and related currents in the post-war era. It can also be read as a highly complex composite whose surrealist imagetextual configurations constitute an integral part of the work's 'occult aesthetics'.

Imagetext as a Tool in the Study of Occult Modernism

The incorporation of imagetexts into the work's occult aesthetics can be fairly regarded as an artistic innovation put forward by Valaoritis and Wilson. In other words, the couple produced a new medium, which could be characterized as an imagetext, through their integration of texts and images inspired by the occult aesthetically and semantically. As we have seen, the conceptual tool of the imagetext helps us to revisit such artistic conjunctions and the difficulties they pose in terms of interpretation. Thus, we can move our reading beyond analyses delimited by media boundaries, since from the vantage point of the imagetext, both text and image are treated as an integral part of an artwork.

Yet the imagetext, as propounded by W.J.T. Mitchell, is not always a symmetrical interface between words and images; it is a site of struggle or dynamic dialogue between artistic forms in the same work or, else, the liminal space in which the conflict and confluence between the visual and the textual takes place. In this light, the imagetexts of *Terre de Diamant*, inspired by Breton's appropriation of Hegelian dialectics and his notion of surreality as dynamic encounter of contraries, function as composite *loci* in which constant exchange and interaction occurs. Boundaries between medially different semiotic entities are simultaneously clearly defined (images and texts are juxtaposed on opposite pages) but also fluid since the text requires the image and vice versa for the production of meaning. Images and texts should therefore not be understood as forms

of representation which are essentialized and stable. The imagetext suggests an open understanding of the relationship between the two media that utilizes difference as a point of departure. It also points toward the emergence of a new, syncretic medium that deviates from the homogeneous, single-discoursed monologue of conventional media. The artwork is thus seen as a springboard for readings that oscillate between visuality and textuality toward an imagetextual (that is intra-medial) terrain that reviews 'representation as a kind of activity, process or set of relationships' (Mitchell, 1994, 420).

If representation is conceived as a process or a relationship, then it also involves the reader/beholder who is invited to perform the interaction or intersection between visual and verbal modalities, using their perception, knowledge, and imagination. In *Terre de Diamant*, the participation of the viewer/reader in the construction of meaning and in aesthetic reception is based on the codified sign systems of premodern and early modern art forms and on the aesthetics of occult publications which often combine discursive and optical figures. The interdependence of text and image for semantic and aesthetic purposes in, for example, alchemical books or illustrated manuscripts is highly significant. In these genres, language is no longer treated as specific to a particular medium and images often 'involve multisensory apprehension and interpretation' (Mitchell, 1986, 13–14). Valaoritis asserts this very aesthetic function when he writes that visionary artworks (by which he means works of poetry and art inspired by metaphysical or interior visions) could stir all senses, provoke any kind of sentiment, and reveal a world that is unknown to the beholder (Valaoritis, 2005, 63). If a visionary artwork combines medially different components, then it can be argued that its power to enhance our senses and liberate our imagination is augmented through its hybrid aesthetic.

Mitchell's concept of the imagetext can benefit the studies of occult modernism and specifically paradigms of aesthetic and medial hybridity that have remained uncategorized and neglected in scholarly accounts of modern art and of its alleged purist politics of representation. I suggest that a different conceptualization of art as a relational and heterogeneous representational site can be more constructive when exploring the ways in which the visual and the textual intersect with each other and interpenetrate in modernist works of occult inspiration in terms of production, representation, meaning, and reception. Occult modernism, as Bauduin and Johnsson have defined it, is a hybrid field that calls for a 'rhizomatic,

decentred, and/or non-linear' approach (see the Introduction to this volume). The construct of the imagetext is itself a hybrid genre which views representation as the blending together of 'politics, economics, semiotics and aesthetics' (Mitchell, 1994, 419). It also privileges the instability of borders between different media and artistic forms, offering the space to investigate the co-existence or contamination of genres and of individual or shared authorships. Identifying the 'diversity and heterogeneity' (Mitchell, 1994, 419) of all cultural formations and their agents, as well as the 'social structure of representation' (Mitchell, 1994, 180), the imagetext provides a useful methodological tool for the research and study of the multifaceted, highly synthetic, and only partially charted field of occult modernism.

Notes

1. Theorist of surrealism André Breton defined the poème-objet as a form of visual poetry that is 'a composition which combines the resources of poetry and plastic art, and thus speculates on the capacity of these two elements to excite each other mutually' (Breton, 1972, 284). On visual poetry as a hybrid genre, see Bohn (2011, 13–18). Surrealist aesthetics run counter to classical notions of aesthetics as an autonomous realm. In this essay aesthetics will be utilized as a term that designates the 'general regime of the visibility and intelligibility of art' as well as 'a mode of interpretive discourse' (Rancière, 2009, 11, n. 6).
2. Occultism/the occult will be used as a subcategory of Western esotericism that best describes nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments of esoteric currents and their complicated connection to science. Although, as Wouter Hanegraaff explains, the terms 'occultism' and the 'occult' refer to different meanings, in this chapter they will be treated a synonyms for convenience only. See Hanegraaff (2006, 887–888).
3. For Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, a text is a 'permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text' in which 'several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize each other' (Kristeva, 1980, 36; see also Allen, 2000).
4. The author interviewed Nanos Valaoritis on various dates in April 2015.
5. Mario Vitti had famously argued that Greek surrealism was 'socially mutilated' since it appeared 'only as individual revolution, excluding from its objective the [social] revolution'. He grounded his argument on the fact that none of the artists involved subscribed to the Communist Party; see Vitti (1977, 85–193).

6. He uses the term 'μεταψυχική' (meta-psychics) used by the Greek Organisation for Psychical Research founded in 1937 to denote parapsychology. In Greece there was a proliferation of publications on the scientific investigation of spiritualistic phenomena and mediumism in the post-war era, especially in the 1950s.
7. His library contains titles by John Dee, Henri Khunrath, Christian Rosenkreuz, Éliphas Lévi, Édouard Schuré, Fulcanelli, and Gurdjieff, among others.
8. Although the source is given as *Aitareya Aranyaka* Book 2, 4, the text quotes from *Aitareya Aranyaka* 2, Fourth Adhyaya, Book 1.

PART III

Occulture

CHAPTER 9

Magic Art Between the Primitive and the Occult: Animal Sacrifice in Jan Švankmajer's Drawer Fetishes

Kristoffer Noheden

In 2014 and 2015, the Czech surrealist artist Jan Švankmajer (b. 1934) created six assemblages that he called 'drawer fetishes' (Figs. 9.1 and 9.2). Lacking individual titles, each drawer fetish is constructed out of a kitchen drawer filled with discarded household objects. When he exhibited two of these at the exhibition *Jan Švankmajer: Naturalia* at the Museum Kampa in Prague in the winter of 2014/2015, Švankmajer accompanied them with a note revealing that they were the result of an idiosyncratic ritual. He described how his studies of African ritual practices inspired him to buy pig's and bull's blood from a nearby slaughterer and mix this with porridge. He poured the mixture into the drawers before covering their contents with ashes. He left them out in the sun, and after a few days a vast amount of flies were drawn to the festering mass. The flies laid eggs in the drawers; the eggs soon hatched, and fat larvae were eating their way through the drawers and their contents. Švankmajer then completed the objects' status as fetishes with an act of violence. He attacked the lively

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Fig. 9.1 Jan Švankmajer, *Drawer fetish 3*, mixed media, 2014–2015 © Jan Švankmajer. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist/Athanor Productions

Fig. 9.2 Jan Švankmajer, *Drawer fetish 4*, mixed media, 2014–2015 © Jan Švankmajer. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist/Athanor Productions

larvae with a heat gun, and they 'began to swell, until one after the other they exploded loudly'. The bloody porridge started to sear, and Švankmajer finished his destruction by pouring hot bitumen into the holes, before once again covering the drawer fetishes with ashes.[1] Materially and visually, the result is half-recognizable shapes strewn around in the wooden drawers, partly shot through by holes caused by the larvae and Švankmajer's attacks with the heat gun. The ritualistic outcome, however, is a collection of objects that, according to Švankmajer's own statements, should, firstly, not be considered art and, secondly, changed his life. The drawer fetishes, as I will argue, can therefore be thought of as a form of magical objects, resulting from a highly personal ritual of primitivist inspiration.

The unassuming appearance of Švankmajer's drawer fetishes belies their violent creation. In one sense, Švankmajer may seem to be on familiar surrealist ground in constructing them. The drawers are filled with found objects, and the objet trouvé has a long history in surrealism, while surrealists from Alberto Giacometti to Švankmajer himself have frequently incorporated household items into their sculptures and assemblages (see Kelly, 2007, 134 ff.; Breton, 1987, 25–38). The drawer fetishes can also be inscribed in a surrealist tradition of using or depicting boxes and drawers, which can be seen in works by such diverse artists as Joseph Cornell and Salvador Dalí. Yet, there is little in the appearance of the drawer fetishes that marks them out as specifically surrealist. The drawer may signify a potential for finding hidden treasures, for uncovering buried content, and for digging through memories and the unconscious, but Švankmajer's drawers nevertheless reveal little of this mystery. Instead, their surrealist qualities can be located in their combination of everyday objects and an idiosyncratic ritual execution. The affective quality of the blood, flour, and scorched larvae in the drawers may also bring to mind André Breton's line in the 1932 poem 'Facteur Cheval' about 'drawers of flesh with handles of human hair'—a shiver of disgust accompanies those imagined objects, which resonates with Švankmajer's highly material ones (quoted in Bohn, 2005, 75). As a contemporary surrealist artist, Švankmajer extends and reshapes concerns that have underpinned surrealism since the movement's inception. The way that he and other contemporary surrealists both continue and revise modernist practices questions ingrained historiographical assumptions about modernism in general and surrealism in particular (see Parkinson, 2015b). As Michael Löwy puts it, surrealism remains both actively engaged in contemporary issues and

highly untimely (Löwy, 2009, 115–116). The questions I will raise indicate much of the way in which Švankmajer relates to issues with a long surrealist pedigree and brings them in contact with topics and practices of a more directly contemporary slant.

In the note accompanying the works, Švankmajer describes how his covering of the drawers with ashes meant that 'the original encounter of a "sewing machine with umbrella" at the bottom of the drawer disappeared under a blanket'. He alludes here to the proto-surrealist writer Lautréamont's notion of an encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella, which became a cornerstone for surrealist poetics (see Breton, 1990, 53). Yet, here the artist veiled such an encounter. Creating his drawer fetishes, Švankmajer did not settle for the familiar strategies of juxtaposing and estranging objects in order to 'bewilder sensation' and so liberate them from utilitarian constraints (Breton, 1972, 263). Instead, he transposes the works' surrealist relevance and resonance from the visual plane to one of ritual and magic. The drawer fetishes are then arguably the most obvious example of his attempts to displace art from aesthetics and instead restore it 'to practical life, as a tool of everyday rituals and the expressive medium of myth' (quoted in Solari, 2005, 5). More than anything, Švankmajer's drawer fetishes can indeed be seen as an extension of surrealism's conflation of esoteric and primitivist conceptions of magic (see Maurer, 1984, 541–544). While many surrealist artists have created works with explicit inspiration from what surrealists still tend to call 'primitive' art, these similarities have mainly been on the level of visual appearance.[2] That holds true for much of Švankmajer's work, too. But his drawer fetishes, in contrast, are directly inspired by the African Bakongo people's ritualistic making of *minkisi minkondi* objects, often labelled 'nail fetishes' or 'vengeance fetishes' when exhibited in Western contexts. A *nkisi nkondi* is an object that is frequently, but not always, made up of a human-like figure equipped with a pouch containing an array of substances; as the epithet 'nail fetish' suggests, its most characteristic visual aspect tends to be the large number of nails driven into it (see MacGaffey, 1993). Švankmajer's creative emulation of these practices suggests further venues for understanding his tendency towards alchemical transmutation of everyday objects in the service of a magical transformation of the self and the world, as I have argued elsewhere (see Noheden, 2016). They also point to seldom explored aspects of surrealism's relation to magic, ritual, and initiation.

In this chapter, I will situate the drawer fetishes in the context of surrealism's construction of magic from occultist and ethnographic sources, with a particular focus on how Švankmajer has elaborated on this connection. I will then proceed to demonstrate that the drawer fetishes can be placed in the context of a little remarked upon surrealist current predicated on initiatory ritual. Here, I will suggest Švankmajer and other surrealists have veered particularly close to Georges Bataille's proposition that there is an intimate but obscure relation between surrealist art and the repressed practice of sacrifice. In this specific case, Švankmajer's interpretation of the ritualistic creation of objects is bound up with his use of blood and his cruel treatment of the larvae. These elements can be related to the killing or incorporation of animals in other artworks, from Kim Jones's immolation of rats in the 1976 performance *Rat Piece* to Damien Hirst's infamous incorporation of sharks and butterflies in his three-dimensional pieces (see Baker, 2013, 4 ff.; Aloi, 2010). But Švankmajer's works also transgress the rationale behind other examples of ethically dubious treatment of animals in the making of art. The artist himself defers questions about his actions by pointing to the example of destructiveness among some of his surrealist predecessors and contemporaries. I will, however, argue that the incorporation of animals in the drawer fetishes constitutes a significant component of their ritual gravity, which suggests other connections and interpretations.

Myth and Magic in Post-war Surrealism

In order to approach Švankmajer's work and thought, an overview of surrealism's overall immersion in myth and magic is needed. Already in the 1920s, surrealists were drawn to conceptions of magic that were indebted to occultism as well as to ethnographic sources. In 1929, Breton's second surrealist manifesto called for 'the profound, the veritable occultation of surrealism' (Breton, 1972, 178). Breton now proposed that magic, alchemy, and astrology provided viable ways to new knowledge. Ethnography, similarly, provided the surrealists with insights into the connections between magic and more primordial forms of life; the surrealists were drawn to 'primitive' art and thought since it seemed to manifest collective creation, reveal the latent poetry in everyday things, and act as a magical force of societal cohesion (see Bataille, 1994, 104; Jamin, 1987, 81; Löwy, 2009, 38–39). The movement was particularly struck with

Sigmund Freud's notion, derived from ethnographic readings, that art originated in magic (Maurer, 1984, 544). Breton and other surrealists henceforth devoted increasing attention to both 'primitive' magic and phenomena from the annals of what scholars have come to place under the umbrella term Western esotericism, including alchemy, astrology, and the tarot.[3]

During and after World War II, the movement further intensified its engagement with occultism and magic (see Mahon, 2005, 65–141). In exile in the USA, Breton immersed himself in occultism, collected Native American art, and pondered the need for a new myth that could foster a society shaped by surrealist principles (Breton, 1972, 287–288). Shortly after returning to Paris following the end of the war, Breton organized the large exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* at the Galerie Maeght. The exhibition was intended to manifest the continued existence and cohesion of surrealism, but also to announce what Breton called a certain 'change in direction' for the movement, which was now to centre around the search for the new myth that he had outlined (Breton, 1947, 135). As the exhibition made clear, this new myth was intimately bound up with occultism as well as with 'primitive' thoughts and objects (see Mahon, 2005, 118–132). *Le Surréalisme en 1947* referenced the tarot, Emanuel Swedenborg, and James G. Frazer, and it culminated with a Labyrinth of Initiation, in which a series of 'haloed objects' were placed on altars modelled after pagan and vodou practices. The exhibition was structured as an initiatory journey for the visitor to wander through, and it was meant to culminate with a magical rebirth into the fluid new myth constructed by surrealism. Yet, for all the exhibition's ritualized references to myth and magic, Breton insisted that the surrealists maintain an attitude of 'enlightened doubt' in relation to them (Breton, 1995, 96). Accordingly, the exhibition was not meant to emulate an actual initiation but was rather intended as a 'guideline' (Breton, 1995, 96). As Breton conceived *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, then, it deliberately distanced itself from the occult, ritualistic, and mythic references that permeated it. In an interview a few years later, he clarified his stance. For Breton, surrealism could never be in a relation of 'fideism' to occultism; it always subsumed its influences under the movement's own aims (Breton, 1993, 229). This approach places surrealist art in a peculiar relation to the occult.

Esotericism scholar Marco Pasi has outlined four overarching ways in which modern art relates to the occult. The first of these entails the use of esoteric images or symbols in art; the second pertains to the creation of

magical objects or fetishes; the third encompasses art that seeks to induce a transformative experience; the fourth, finally, arises when the artwork is the result of direct communication with spiritual entities or a visionary experience (Pasi, 2010, 107–108). While the first three of these may appear applicable to *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, with its prevalent employment of esoteric imagery, display of magical objects on altars, and initiatory design, Breton's insistence on enlightened doubt and, as he also puts it, 'simulation' in relation to these occult qualities means that it is only really the first category that is meaningful to apply to the exhibition (Breton, 1995, 95). For Breton, surrealism may have affinities with alchemy, the tarot, and occultism as well as with 'primitive' magic, but this is ultimately a question of poetics, and possibly of epistemology. He emphasizes this point further in his 1957 monograph *L'Art magique* (*Magic Art*). In it, he consolidates the similarities he detects between 'primitive' art, the imagery used by Western occultists and alchemists, and surrealism, but the 'magic' of the title is primarily located in art that, as he puts it elsewhere, 'triggers the mechanism of correspondences' (Breton, 1991; 1995, 240; italics removed). But Breton's theoretical statements have never encompassed the entirety of surrealist practice. Švankmajer's drawer fetishes are pertinent examples of how surrealist art may approach Pasi's second and third categories of magical objects with a transformative purpose.

Jan Švankmajer and His Fetishes

For Švankmajer, magic and surrealism are so intertwined that he considers surrealism to be 'a magical outlook on life and the world' (López Caballero, 2014, 187). His view of magic can be exemplified by the 1987 collective tract 'Hermetic Bird', which he co-signed with a range of contemporary surrealists. In it they claim that surrealism is 'an obstinate attempt to re-establish the magical aura of art as it could be found in the so-called primitive societies or in the esoteric (hermetic) tradition', indicating that there is a continued surrealist conflation of 'primitive' and esoteric notions of magic (Bounoure et al., 2001, 79). Švankmajer's work, however, emerges from a markedly different social and artistic context than the post-war Paris in which Breton announced a surrealist change in direction. It needs to be situated in the more specific development of Czechoslovak surrealism. This is not the place to delve into the complicated specifics of Czechoslovak surrealism; suffice to say that the

Czechoslovak surrealists considered Breton's thought to have taken turns that were decidedly out of synch with their own post-war situation in a highly economically disadvantaged and politically repressive climate (Fijalkowski et al., 2013, 91). Instead of searching for myth, they called for surrealism to develop a more specific and material approach and sought to locate poetry in what the theorist Vratislav Effenberger called 'raw, brute reality' (Effenberger, 1987, 439). This development entailed an increased emphasis on material reality, everyday objects, and embodied experience.

Švankmajer joined the Prague group in 1971 and contributed to the reintroduction of magic and alchemy as viable concerns within Czechoslovak surrealism; this development was primarily motivated by Effenberger's systematic exploration of analogical thinking (Dryje, 2013, 300). Švankmajer, however, retained the Czechoslovak focus on the material specificity of everyday objects and environments. His films and objects are telling for his magically informed, creative treatment of matter. In his films, he employs stop-motion animation as an instrument for transforming the unassuming locations in which he tends to film. He states that he considers this to be a modern, technological substitute for old shamanic powers of magical animation (López Caballero, 2014, 188). He constructs many of his assemblages out of discarded household objects, pieces of wood and metal, and tufts of grass or hair. In so doing he is informed by an alchemical poetics of transmutation of base matter into poetic gold, which extends Max Ernst's idea of 'the alchemy of the visual image' (Ernst, 2009, 21–24). He has made this connection with occultism explicit in a number of works with names derived from alchemy, most notably his *Alchemy* cycle of objects. These works, however, relate to esotericism and initiation in a playful and somewhat distanced manner, in line with Breton's approach and Pasi's first category of esoteric art.

Švankmajer's drawer fetishes seem to draw on a more tangible and experientially anchored initiatory and transformative function. They can also be related back to earlier surrealist ruminations on the magical qualities of 'primitive' artworks. Like the objects collected by the former surrealist Michel Leiris during the famous Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931–1933, Švankmajer's drawer fetishes are 'intimately involved in both ritual and everyday practices' (Kelly, 2007, 124). Again, continuing the surrealist tendency to valorize the 'primitive', Švankmajer also frequently refers to his other objects as 'fetishes'. Visual allusions to African art have cropped up in his art from at least the 1990s, but in 2001

Švankmajer started to make a variety of fetishes that were directly inspired by ritual practices in Gabon, Congo, and Cameroon (Dryje and Schmitt, 2013, 386).[4] Fetish is of course a problematic concept of colonial provenance, which has been used to designate the supposedly superstitious, irrational, and fear-ridden cult objects of African peoples (see Pietz, 1985, 5–17). Švankmajer's insistence on using the concept can perhaps be seen as a steadfast refusal of the tendency to instead interpret these objects as 'art' in the Western sense (see MacGaffey, 1998). As such, they pertain to precisely Švankmajer's intention of removing his own art from the aesthetic sphere and incorporating it into an everyday life enchanted and expanded by magic. Among his fetish works are objects such as *My Favourite Shoes* (2001), *Tortured Marionette* (1994), and *Tortured Fetish* (2001). While these works are visually divergent—the first is chiefly made up of a pair of battered shoes, the second features a puppet hanging from strings, and the third is a vaguely anthropomorphic shape amassed from organic-looking material planted in a metal pot and with a motley array of objects hanging from its arm-like appendages—all have a large number of nails inserted into them. As the name *Tortured Fetish* indicates, they are directly inspired by the Bakongo people's *minkisi minkondi*, which are often riddled with nails (MacGaffey, 1988).

While the inspiration surrealist artists have culled from primitive art has often been vague, it is possible to discern a more particular appeal that *minkisi minkondi* may hold for a surrealist like Švankmajer (Maurer, 1984). The anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey points out that the notion of fetish is mainly problematic because it reduces the complexity at work in the construction of such objects; Edward Burnett Tylor, for instance, mistakenly believed that fetishes are simply unusual natural objects when, in fact, they tend to be 'composite fabrication[s]' (MacGaffey, 1977, 172). The procedure of constructing a *nkisi* is then 'conceptually and materially far more complex than the conventional idea of "fetishism" allows for' (MacGaffey, 1977, 176). MacGaffey explains that the elements that go into a *nkisi* are carefully selected according to their metonymic and metaphorical meaning. The container itself 'is part of this metaphorical apparatus' (MacGaffey, 1990, 55). It is first filled with grave dirt, a bone, or a relic, and is so connected to a specific person, or else dirt or porcelain clay, both of which connect it with the earth, considered the domain of the dead. This is the metonymical use of matter, which works by the principle of contiguity, or direct contact. The container is then filled with matter that metaphorically manifests the powers that the *nkisi* is meant to possess;

these materials have an analogical resonance, since they often denote qualities that are homophonic in relation to their names (MacGaffey, 1988, 190–192). Along with this reliance on wordplay, the metonymical and metaphorical character of the *nkisi* means that their exact meaning remains elusive, something that is an inherent feature of 'the sense of mystery they convey' (MacGaffey, 1988, 194). The importance of metaphor, metonymy, and wordplay in the construction of these objects relates them in a number of ways to surrealism's approaches to occultism and magic in the post-war era, particularly to the surrealist interest in such analogically fecund phenomena as the multifaceted symbolism of the tarot, the alchemical linguistics of phonetic cabala, and the link between occultism and poetry that is constituted by correspondences.[5] Here there is a tangible overlap between the poetic effects that the surrealist reception of primitive and occult magic postulates.

Many of Švankmajer's fetishes indeed mirror their Bakongo sources of inspiration not only in the presence of nails and ropes but also in the fact that their constitution is partly made up of everyday objects that carry a metaphorical-analogical resonance (MacGaffy, 1998, 231–233). Švankmajer also appropriates these Bakongo practices in some works that are more closely related to other concerns. The Czech surrealist Frantisek Dryje indeed points out that, in a sense, Švankmajer's objects overall can be deemed to be fetishes, in that they are all meant to embody 'mytho-magical correspondences' (Dryje, 2012, 135). Švankmajer, for instance, inserts nails in a lump of clay that forms part of the *Wunderkammer*-like *Opus Magnum* (1994), from the aforementioned *Alchemy* cycle of works. As that example shows, he tends to let his diverse interests in various forms of magic cross-fertilize. The complexity inherent in Švankmajer's allusion to *nkisi* can be seen even more clearly in a scene in his 2005 feature film *Šílení* (*Lunacy*). A character known only as the Marquis conducts a black mass in the basement of his mansion, during which he hammers nails into a life-size crucifix. The mass is replete with references to the wider surrealist tradition and is indebted to J.-K. Huysmans's *Là-bas* (1891), with its depiction of a descent into the satanic underground of fin-de-siècle Paris. While hammering, the Marquis recites a particularly blasphemous passage from the Marquis de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (*Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 1795), which condemns Christ as the source of all of humanity's sufferings and promises that, were he there now, the Marquis would make sure that the nails were hammered into his flesh with even more damaging

force. But the Marquis does not limit his hammering to Christ's hands and feet. Large parts of the figure's entire body are riddled with nails. They protrude from his arms, torso, face, and engorged member. Christ's body is also bound with ropes. The Marquis, then, transforms Christ into a *nkisi nkondi* (see also Schmitt, 2013, 407).

These two examples show something of the way in which Švankmajer, like so many surrealists before him, inserts his appropriation of fetish-making into works alluding to broader surrealist concerns. Alchemy, blasphemy, and a playful construction of a black mass are all occasions for 'torture' inspired by *nkisi* making. But as playful as the ritual in *Lunacy* may be, it also points to the fact that Švankmajer's creative reconfigurations of Bakongo and other African practices are fraught with a desperate urge to transform the world through the magic of art. This is most apparent in regard to the drawer fetishes. Švankmajer's way of coating these mishmashes of household objects with ashes is close to the strategies he used in the making of his 2009 *The End of Civilization?* cycle of objects. He made those by submerging doll parts, mittens, shoes, and other ordinary objects in the hot springs of Karlovy Vary, in the Czech Republic. Upon retrieval, they had been exposed to a rapid ageing process that covered them with a sickly orange crust, rendering their shapes intelligible but their appearance deteriorated. Švankmajer describes them as 'fossils of this fucked-up civilization, as if an archetype of its demise' (Švankmajer, 2013, 482). As I have argued elsewhere, these objects can then be seen as a magical willing of the end of this civilization by bringing some of its products to the alchemical *nigredo* phase of dissolution (Noheden, 2016). With these works, it may be viable to consider Švankmajer as approaching the second of Pasi's categories, relating to the creation of magical objects, even though their magical qualities remain veiled, arising out of their ritualistic construction.

Švankmajer's drawer fetishes are similar examples of objects with a magical purpose, but the magic at work in them is less symbolic and playful and takes on an acute experiential dimension. In their appearance, the drawer fetishes deviate from his other fetishes. No nails protrude from them, and they display nothing like the anthropomorphic shape of the earlier *Tortured Fetish*, which resembles the figures that form the basis of some *minkisi*. But all *minkisi* do not share the visual characteristics for which they have become known in the West. The objects can take many different shapes, and not all of them involve nails (MacGaffey, 1990, 54).

Švankmajer's use of blood in the creation of the drawer fetishes may, however, be more directly inspired by objects by the Bamana people in Mali. Both their *boliw*, or altars, and *komo*, or masks, are covered with coagulated blood. As Sarah Brett-Smith has pointed out, the masks 'display a rough, indeterminate surface created by layer upon layer of sacrificial blood mixed with millet porridge (*dègè*)', and this obscures 'the sharp outlines of the original forms so that it becomes difficult to determine the features of the mask with any precision' (Brett-Smith, 1997, 79). The resulting 'dull surface and deliberately unpleasing appearance' can be compared with the anti-aesthetic character of the drawer fetishes (Brett-Smith, 1983, 49). But much like the *boliw* are highly valued for their underlying meaning, Švankmajer notes that the fact that he covered the poetic jumble in the drawers means that the objects' 'imaginative power […] becomes unseen, esoteric, magically augmented by the energy of the cornmeal porridge and blood'. Švankmajer's subsequent killing of the larvae that hatched in the drawers brings them back to the logic of *minkisi*, in that it can be seen as a way of torturing not only the animals but also the fetishes themselves. The insertion of nails into *minkisi* is intended to activate them by annoying them, to arouse their anger against an enemy (MacGaffey, 1988, 199). But to drive nails or blades into them is but one of the many ways in which they can be tortured and activated; MacGaffey described that one way of arousing a *nkisi*'s anger is to insult it, by 'using standard Kongo obscenities referring to the genitals of the *nkisi*'s mother-in-law' (MacGaffey, 1990, 54). Švankmajer's use of a heat gun on the contents of the drawers can then be seen as an inventive way of adapting these practices of torture in order to complete and activate the fetishes. Still, *minkisi* are often created in order to mete out revenge. Švankmajer's drawer fetishes appear to have been made with a vaguer purpose, and the profound transformation of the artist that resulted, according to his own description, seems to have been an unexpected effect. Either way, with his drawer fetishes, Švankmajer appears to indeed have created magical objects that induced a transformative experience that, as we will see, had personal, political, and even cosmological ramifications. The drawer fetishes then suggest that surrealist art can indeed approach the second and third of Pasi's categories. They are, however, prefigured by some other instances of surrealist ritualistic art, together with which they constitute what I would argue is a subterranean surrealist current. A brief look at this current can shed further light on the role of such transformative experiences in surrealism.

Subterranean Surrealist Currents

Several surrealist artists, including Alberto Giacometti, Roberto Matta, and Max Ernst, have incorporated elements of 'primitive' art in their works. As indicated in this chapter, with his drawer fetishes, Švankmajer complements this aesthetic primitivism with ritual practice. In this, he joins a more obscure surrealist lineage of engagement with the perilous but radically transformative potential of art turned into magical ritual, a lineage that tends to be bound up with blood, madness, and mutilation. What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of surrealist attempts to go beyond the attitude of 'simulation' that Breton advocated in relation to *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. There are undoubtedly many other instances when surrealist art can be said to have approached the status of magical objects or entailed transformative, initiatic experiences. Rather, my aim is, on the one hand, to place Švankmajer's drawer fetishes in a different surrealist context and, on the other, to suggest further venues for exploration of the interrelation between surrealism and magic.

Following the war, Breton confided that his understanding of occultism had undergone a drastic qualitative change since he had called for the occultation of surrealism two decades earlier (Breton, 1993, 229). A decisive, but still little recognized, influence on Breton's development was the surrealist and doctor Pierre Mabille. Mabille, who first joined the surrealists as a member of the editorial board for the journal *Minotaure*, was a Freemason, had been taught by the occultist Pierre Piobb, and had a persistent interest in initiation (Laville, 1986, 73; Breton, 1998, x). As I have argued elsewhere, his 1940 book *Le Miroir du merveilleux* (*Mirror of the Marvelous*) was likely one of the most significant sources for Breton when he set out a change in direction for surrealism. For Mabille the question of initiation and transmutation was a very real proposition (Noheden, 2014). In *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, he conducts a thorough redefinition of the central surrealist concept of the marvellous and expands it into an element found throughout the ages and across the world, in myths, incantations, esoteric texts, and modern poetry alike. But Mabille also detects an esoteric side to the marvellous, and he argues that all the tales and other texts that he discusses have a more or less veiled initiatic narrative. According to his definition, the marvellous is an equally perilous and enchanting phenomenon, and any encounter with it is fraught with both great risks and the potential for radical transformation. Whereas Breton cautiously posited

the initiatory structure of surrealism in 1947 as a mere guideline, for Mabille, an initiation into the marvellous is a very real proposition offering the potential to thoroughly transform the initiate.[6]

Just a few years after Mabille's book was published, a young surrealist artist and writer put its insights to use, further validating the transformative potential of Mabille's initiatic expansion of the marvellous. English-born Leonora Carrington suffered a mental breakdown during World War II and was (now famously) incarcerated in a Spanish mental asylum. Upon escaping she was haunted by her experience of psychosis and attendant delusions and the involuntary interpretive delirium she suffered. Reading Mabille's book, she came to conceive of her illness as a journey through the dangerous topography of the marvellous, and during several intense days, she revisited her traumatic experiences and interpreted them through the lens of Mabille's thought. The result was the autobiographical account *Down Below*, published in the journal *VVV* in 1944 (Carrington, 1988). Writing it, Carrington conducted something akin to a personal ritual, providing the surrealist understanding of initiation with an experiential foundation and emerging on the other side with what she described as increased occult knowledge. She had been ontologically transformed through her ritualized channelling of intolerable agony into knowledge. Breton's notion of initiation as 'simulation' or 'guideline' falls rather short of this experience.

A quite different example of this subterranean current of surrealist ritual can be found in the Canadian-born surrealist Jean Benoît's performance 'The Execution of the Testament of the Marquis de Sade', which was set up to lead into the large international surrealist exhibition *ÉROS* (1959–1960). Benoît's performance was an elaborate homage to de Sade, in which Benoît was adorned with an advanced costume, the parts of which referenced Oceanic ritual garments as well as the writings of de Sade. Over urban sounds recorded and prepared by Croatian author Radovan Ivšić and accompanied by Breton's reading of de Sade, Benoît ceremonially undressed before appearing naked with his skin adorned with symbols and equipped with a giant phallus. He then grabbed a red hot iron which spelled out SADE and branded himself on the chest. Caught up in the moment, the painter Roberto Matta ran up to Benoît, grabbed the iron, and branded himself, too (see Breton, 2002, 386–390). In this performance, the violent eroticism of de Sade's writings was channelled

into a ritual culminating in self-mutilation. Michael Richardson remarks that, according to the testimony of those present, Benoît's performance was awe-inspiring, and it appears to have acted as a sense of ritual affirmation of the community of those present (Richardson, 1998, 384–385). Breton both participated in the event and then lauded the ritual in an essay featured in the exhibition catalogue (Breton, 2002, 386–390). This would seem to suggest that such transformative rituals were not necessarily beyond the scope he had set up for surrealism, but rather that he had a marked reluctance for theorizing them.

Švankmajer's drawer fetishes share some central qualities with these examples. Much as Mabille points out that there are deep similarities between myth, incantation, and occultist initiation, Švankmajer fuses his interest in 'primitive' ritual with an understanding of magic derived from surrealist engagements with occultism. Much as Carrington drew on her painful experience of psychological trauma and Benoît ritualized self-mutilation in order to create idiosyncratic rituals with a transformative outcome, Švankmajer constructs his drawer fetishes through a process involving blood and sadistic sacrifice. It would again seem that Pasi's notion that art may engage with the transformative, experiential aspects of occultism is a more viable proposition than Breton made it out to be in relation to *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. Yet these surrealist experiments with magic art are lent a different experiential gravity through the centrality of embodied experience, blood, mutilation, and madness. This means that they also approach central concerns in the thought of Georges Bataille. Bataille is often claimed to have stood for a dissident surrealism that post-modernist theorists have been fond of placing in opposition to what they perceive as Breton's mainstream surrealism.[7] This, however, is a highly simplified opposition (see Lübecker, 2009). In the period after the war, Bataille collaborated with Breton and the surrealist group, and they struggled with similar concerns about myth and ritual (see Bataille, 1994). Richardson even considers *ÉROS* to be precisely a transposition of Bataille's ideas to surrealism, to the extent that the exhibition was close to providing 'the sort of genuinely contemporary expression of the sentiment informing sacrifice [Bataille] had dreamed of' (Richardson, 1998, 384). With his drawer fetishes, Švankmajer continued this sacrificial surrealist practice in a more direct way.

Convulsing Civilization Through Ritual

As an explanation for the destructive behaviour he engaged in when creating the drawer fetishes, Švankmajer compares his actions with the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Marcel Duchamp's cracking of *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même/Le Grand verre* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even/The Large Glass*) (1915–1923), and Sigmund Freud's idea of the death drive. He then states that he 'simply copied the Africans of Congo who hammer nails and sharp pieces into their fetishes'. For Švankmajer, this activation of the fetishes makes them into potent agents of both personal and societal changes:

> Once it [the fetish] has experienced this pain it is ready to change the world/ let civilisation shake/.
>
> My drawer fetishes aren't art, but when I made and tortured them, they transformed my life.

Švankmajer, then, considers his drawer fetishes to have had a double effect: they are instruments for changing the world and transforming life. Drawing on Karl Marx and Arthur Rimbaud, respectively, surrealists have referenced this dual ambition since the movement's early years (Breton, 1972, 241). But Švankmajer's emulation of African ritual practices in the making of his drawer fetishes also points to other dimensions of surrealism's magic art. Robin D.G. Kelley proposes that surrealism does not just appropriate African culture but has 'real affinities with aspects of Afrodiasporic vernacular culture, including an embrace of magic, spirituality, and the ecstatic—elements Marxism has never been able to deal with effectively' (Kelley, 2002, 192). When Švankmajer, in order to counter the tenets of Western civilization, constructs an idiosyncratic conception of magic, he approaches precisely those concerns that Kelley lauds in surrealism. The drawer fetishes are soaked in blood and sadistically tortured in order to turn them against the very civilization that produced the original drawers, and thereby they are ascribed a direct power of transformation that is often lacking in surrealism. But there is also a further dimension to the drawer fetishes and their presumed power to effect poetic and political change, and this relates to the role that animals play in their making.

The drawer fetishes are unusual examples of how Švankmajer incorporates animals into his work. His films abound with animated animal taxidermy, bones, flesh, eyes, and brains, and he has made a vast number of

assemblages of animal bones combined with seashells, branches, and agates. In the 1970s, Švankmajer began working on a series of collages based on material culled from natural history books and guides to human anatomy. He called these *Švank-Meyer's Bilderlexikon*, and they form an encyclopaedia of imaginary animals, skilfully constructed from heterogeneous elements and, when reproduced as engravings, sometimes hand coloured for added exotic vivacity. In a comment he explains that his creation of these imaginary animals is a reaction against the mass extinction of species. 'If the environmental catastrophe we are now experiencing means that dozens of animal species die each year, there is nothing for it but for the imagination to replace them with others' (Švankmajerova and Švankmajer, 1998, 59). His collage combinations of mollusc and man, bird and butterfly, also mark a defiance of conventional naturalist taxonomies. Overall, Švankmajer's creation of new hybrid animals in collages and assemblages, as well as his animation of animal parts in his films, can be seen as a perverse injection of life into the discarded parts of animals that Western civilization leaves behind. While these instances of animal art are tinged with black humour, they can be interpreted as an appeal to rethink human exploitation of animals. The drawer fetishes are less benign and they are macabre in an altogether different manner. They seem to lack any constructive aspects. Rather than positing these fetishes against the exploitation of animals, Švankmajer's sacrifice of animals is integral to them. Yet, although counter-intuitive, this sacrifice can also be interpreted as a critical practice directed against the instrumental killing of animals in the contemporary West. In order to grasp this, we again need to turn to Bataille rather than to Švankmajer's own appointed predecessors.

For Bataille, modern art in general and surrealist art in particular were a response to a world in which sacrifice had lost its meaning. The 'flash of destruction' motivating the surrealist painter strikes from the same sky that spawned the human sacrifices of the Aztecs. The attraction of sacrifice, Bataille argues, stems from its capacity to liberate humans from a utilitarian approach to the world. Sacrifice frees objects from their conventional use and so abolishes the separation of humanity and the world (Bataille, 1949). But while the canvas provides a safe haven for exploring these impulses in modernity, with his drawer fetishes Švankmajer approaches sacrifice in a more literal sense. Richardson argues that sacrifice, as Bataille conceives of it, is not so much a destructive and cruel practice as it is a restoration of a sense of equilibrium between humans and the surrounding world. In this sense, a sacrificial killing is the near opposite of the

industrial killing of animals that is an integrated part of contemporary life. Industrialization is an attempt at conquering death, while sacrifice is directed towards communication with life in its integral state, including death. Thus, while sacrifice also disrupts natural processes, it denies 'the claim of human mastery of the world' and so tempers human attempts at conquering the rest of nature (Richardson, 1998, 376–377). Such an interpretation of animal sacrifice may be scant comfort for the exploded larvae and slaughtered pigs and bulls whose bodies and blood went into the making of the drawer fetishes. But, as Giovanni Aloi remarks, it would also be hypocritical to single out such animal killings while ignoring the systematic exploitation of animals that goes into the making of paint pigments and the gelatine layer that covers celluloid film, or in other words, the sublimated, hidden preconditions for the material existence of art and media (Aloi, 2015, 13–17). And while Švankmajer's attempt at making *minkisi* is largely divorced from the religious significance they hold for the Bakongo, the artist's drawer fetishes and the *minkisi* share an experiential foundation tied to their goals of having political as well as personal impact (compare this with MacGaffey, 1990, 54–55). Even more pointedly in relation to Švankmajer's cruel treatment of the animals, they may also be seen as attempts at creatively reinstating a cosmology in which humans are not the masters of animals but commune with them in the practice of sacrifice, undermining human mastery in a confrontation with the rhythms of life and death.

Švankmajer also does not restrict himself to the sacrifice of animals, but sacrifices the everyday objects in the drawers and even himself. The very act of gathering discarded household objects and transforming them into a surrealist fetish is a destruction of the utilitarian in line with Bataille's reasoning. For Bataille, such sacrifice, even of highly mundane materials, does not merely destroy the object but also questions 'the solidity of the subject'; again, sacrifice counteracts separation by placing the human and the world in a relation not determined by utility and modern individual existence (Bataille, 1949). Švankmajer's contention that the drawer fetishes changed his life is tantalizingly vague. But Bataille's thought on the relation between art and sacrifice suggests something of the potential experiential effects that his sacrificial behaviour may have. Indeed, as Mabille indicates in *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, surrealism's turn to occultism cannot be separated from its continued desperate attempts at transforming not only the world but also the self. It is frequently bound up

with its interest in ethnographic observations and practices of magic that render the everyday into a potent conduit of repressed forces. Švankmajer's drawer fetishes constitute a complex and unusual response to the daunting question of how to render art into a form of modern magic, a question with which surrealism has struggled for decades. Here, his appropriation of *minkisi*, along with the sacrifice of animals, is among the most significant aspects. The drawer fetishes are then bound up with questions that surrealism has otherwise been reluctant to explore, or at least to theorize. The belief that these objects evince in the radically transformative capacity of ritualized, transgressive art can be related to the examples of Mabille, Carrington, and Benoît, and they point to other surrealist forms of magic that still need to be excavated.[8]

Notes

1. Jan Švankmajer, 'Drawer Fetishes', unpublished text. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from this text.
2. For an overview, see Maurer (1984).
3. For the scholarly construct of Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff (2012).
4. The authors do not elaborate on how Švankmajer became acquainted with these practices.
5. For the surrealist reception of the tarot, see Breton (1994); for phonetic cabala, see 'Fronton-Virage' (Breton, 1995); for analogy and correspondences in relation to poetry and film, respectively, see 'Ascendant Sign' and 'As in a Wood' (Breton, 1995).
6. See Mabille (1940). For an extended discussion of Mabille, the marvellous, and initiation, see Noheden (2014, 35–36).
7. The most influential such study is Foster (1993).
8. This chapter was first conceived as a paper at the symposium *Blood Rituals—Past and Present* in Stockholm in the spring of 2015. I thank the organizers Per Faxneld, Peter Jackson, and Paul Bouissac for inviting me and Gabor Bora for his incisive comments. I also thank Pavla Kallistova at Švankmajer's production company Athanor for providing me with information about and photographs of the drawer fetishes.

CHAPTER 10

Retrogardism and Occulture in Håkan Sandell's Poetry

Giuliano D'Amico

> Sandell […] has a burning interest in different heathen and occult tendencies and movements. He is well versed in alchemy, and part of the pre-nordic cultural heritage he […] wishes to reawaken is the runes and their supposed secrets […] but also Celtic mysticism and Tarrot [sic] cards. […] What rubs me the wrong way is the constant flirting with occult traditions. […] More myths, more magic, more original, more authentic. Put concisely, less modernity and enlightenment. (Dahl, 1999, 129–130)

This worried statement about the Swedish poet Håkan Sandell (b. 1962) is taken from sociologist Göran Dahl's *Radical Conservatism and the Future of Politics* (1999) and implicitly addresses a particular question in literary studies. How are we to account for 'heathen and occult'—to borrow momentarily Dahl's confused definition—themes and topoi in literature, and more specifically in poetry? Are they to be given any room in literary and lyrical studies? Although some preliminary studies have been carried out, for example, in the anthology edited by Per Faxneld and Mattias Fyhr (2010), the mutual entanglements between literature and occultism are still fairly virgin scholarly ground.

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According to Dahl, these 'occult tendencies' or 'traditions' seem to be an alien and dangerous element for literature (and politics), echoing the simplifying equation between occultism and far-right ideologies that arose in the wake of World War II (see Goodrick-Clarke, 2002). This chapter will not perpetuate Dahl's prejudices and preoccupations but will instead try to show how occultism informs Håkan Sandell's poetry and how it enriches his 'retrogardist' poetics. How are shamanic, alchemical and gnostic elements represented in his poems, and can the performative aspect of his poetry remind us of a form of magic? In order to account for the diversity of elements and currents that are present in his poems, Christopher Partridge's concept of *occulture* will be used as the main theoretical framework.

In the following I will show how Sandell's retrogardist poetics ties in with an 'ancient wisdom narrative' that is commonplace in Western esotericism and in occultural forms of expression. I will develop this train of thought by looking at Dana Gioia's reflections on 'poetry as enchantment' and at how Sandell's retrogardism incorporates shamanic elements. I will introduce the occultural elements in Sandell's poetry, focusing my discussion on gnostic topoi, and draw upon theories of poetry performance to discuss how one of Sandell's poems can express a form of magic. Before I begin my discussion, however, I will give a brief outline of the term *occulture* and of how it can be used in literary analysis.

Although the genesis of the term can be traced back to the 1970s (Partridge, 2013, 124–125), occulture rose to a theoretical status with Partridge's *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004–2005), where he uses it to include 'those often *hidden*, *rejected* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices' that have developed in the last 50 years (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:68; emphasis in the original). These practices do not necessarily constitute a coherent religious system with committed adepts. As Partridge continues,

> occulture itself is not a worldview, but rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols. Consumers of occulture may be witting or unwitting; they may engage with it at a relatively superficial level or they may have strong religious commitments; they may themselves contribute to the pool of occultural knowledge or they may simply drink from it. (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:84–85)

So defined, occulture becomes a melting pot of practices that allows to account for the differentiated references to Western esoteric traditions, occultism and paganism that appear in contemporary literature, and which Sandell's poetry, with its mixture of ancient wisdom narrative, shamanism, Gnosticism, alchemy and magic, is a good example of.

Furthermore, Partridge argues that the arts, including literature, are crucial to the development of occulture. His main interest is in popular culture, which 'disseminates and remixes occultural ideas, thereby incubating new spores of occultural thought' (Partridge, 2013, 116). As his main interest lies in the processes of dissemination of occulture and the mutual influence between it and the arts, it is not surprising that he devotes the most of attention to works that have achieved a certain commercial success, such as vampire or fantasy fiction (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:126–142). The very presence of occulture in popular culture has also contributed to make it ordinary: 'occulture is not occult culture, in the sense that it is not a milieu of the esoteric and the hidden […]; nor it is a site of the exotic and the forbidden […]. Rather, like culture […] it is ordinary and everyday' (Partridge, 2013, 132). Such emphasis on the ordinary is also relevant to Sandell's poetry (arguably not an example of popular culture), as it does not include a system of hidden, 'esoteric' references and signs aimed at the initiated, but makes use of occultural materials in order to develop lyrical themes or spiritual reflections; as such, his poetry is not a site of the forbidden or dangerous—as Dahl would claim—but an attempt to approach spiritual questions with the means of poetry.

Partridge's emphasis on popular culture should not lead one to think that occulture is not relevant for other forms of artistic expression. As Nina Kokkinen has pointed out, occulture has proved to be a useful analytical tool in the study of modern art, and I will argue that many of her points are applicable, with the necessary formal adjustments, to literary studies as well. By drawing upon Malory Nye's concept of 'religioning' (a form of practice in which religion loses its agency and becomes instead something that people do, each form with its own agency and strategies), Kokkinen proposes to study 'how artists categorize certain things (which may include their own art-making as well) as "sacred", "authentic", "spiritual" or "truthful" by means of their works and other practices' (Kokkinen, 2013, 22–24). Furthermore, by drawing upon Kocku von Stuckrad's definition of esotericism as a 'structural/discursive element in social-cultural processes', she re-conceptualizes occulture as

> an ever changing discursive field, produced and maintained by (socially-oriented) seekers who are keenly interested in finding or striving towards the higher knowledge/wisdom that would be personally known by them to be *the truth*—the master key for all the questions of life and death. In the midst of this process certain forms of art are often sacralised as 'spiritual', 'higher' or 'absolute' art. (Kokkinen, 2013, 31; emphasis in the original)

As it will hopefully become clear in the following sections, I find Kokkinen's definition of occulture a useful theoretical tool to understand Sandell's poetry. In fact, it can be considered as an example of occulture with its interest in different Western esoteric traditions, as well as it creates sites of 'the sacred', lyrical situations or atmospheres where the 'spiritual' is not only a theme but the very center of poetic expression. Also, his poetry does not incorporate occultural elements in a passive way, as mere topoi, but seems to use performance as a means of magical practice. In the following I will explain more in detail how these aspects come to light in Sandell's poems.

Retrogardism and Ancient Wisdom Narratives

Håkan Sandell's poetry is often understood as an example of 'retrogardism', a movement in Scandinavian contemporary poetry, art, architecture and the history of ideas that flourished roughly between 1995 and 2011. The retrogardist movement included a number of Norwegian and Swedish poets (such as Clemens Altgård, Carl Forsberg, Ronny Spaans, Bertrand Besigye and Eirik Lodén), of whom Håkan Sandell was arguably the most artistically gifted and the movement's most important ideologue. In the pamphlet *Om retrogardism* (*On retrogardism*, 1995), Sandell and Altgård offer a key to the movement's poetics and to its relationship to occulture. As Altgård explains in his disclaimer, 'the stage art has reached makes it necessary, without renouncing modernism's important achievements, and without denying postmodernism's critical stances, to try to reclaim a lost authenticity, revitalize art and poetry, reshape the marginalized role of the poet' (Altgård, 1995, 9).[1] Sandell's phrasing is more polemical: 'modernism and its later outputs have to my mind acted with an almost *colonial* attitude to world literature and literary history, with self-consciousness, hegemony and blindness' (Sandell, 1995, 46; emphasis in the original). With an evident pun on the term *avant-garde* and the prefix *retro*, the starting point of retrogardism is a criticism of modernism, especially that

of the Nordic countries, although—as Altgård's moderation proves—the aim is not to deny its role in literary history. The point is rather to focus on the aspects of literature and poetry that have suffered by the advent of modernism and resist its 'later outputs', for instance, the growing language poetry movement.[2] Retrogardism's artistic program aims at going back in time and recovering forms of poetry and art that have been set aside as a consequence of modernism's establishment as canon.

In retrogardism's retrospective method lies the first important occultural element I wish to stress. Since Antoine Faivre's theorization in *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Faivre, 1986), an 'ancient wisdom narrative' has been the object of attention of scholars of Western esotericism, who have documented its development from the Renaissance up to the contemporary period (Hanegraaff, 2012, 5–76; Hammer, 2001, 85–200; Asprem and Granholm, 2013, 33). Within the more specific framework of occulture, Partridge has stressed how 'there is broad occultural agreement that the key to vibrant, authentic contemporary spirituality is the resurgence of ancient traditions' and that 'there is a sense of continuity with the ancients' (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:77). Ancient wisdom is here understood as 'the uncorrupted wisdom of a humanity unrepressed by the external dogma, rationalism and authority of later institutionalized religion and culture' (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:77).

What strikes me in this narrative is the constant revolving upon *earlier* materials, upon ideas and doctrines that developed long before the seeker (she/he being a Renaissance esotericist or a modern occultist) attempts at collecting the materials in question and/or starts a spiritual search: briefly put, these materials belong to the past. Throughout history, the pattern is the same: there was an ancient wisdom first, and then something (most notably, the church's battle against heathendom and heresy) came and destroyed it, and now it is the seeker's task to rediscover it. The methodology is similar to that of retrogardism: to go back in time, before a deluge (in this case, literary and artistic modernism), in order to regain a lost, ancient poetic wisdom. This method is not unproblematic: Asprem and Granholm emphasize how the ancient wisdom narrative is an 'invented tradition' (Asprem and Granholm, 2013, 38–43), thus deprived of real historical value, but I am still convinced that it is crucial to understanding the retrogardistic *perception* of poetry. If we read Sandell's retrogardism as an example of occulture, poetic modernism, or, more precisely, its aftermath in the form of postmodernist and language poetry, is an expression of 'a regression rather than a progression of human understanding of the

nature of reality' which permeates the contemporary world (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:77). To this is added the necessity, on the part of the retrogardist, to 'reclaim a lost authenticity' (Altgård, 1995, 9) and the focus on spirituality that is to find in many retrogardist poets, Sandell *in primis*. In the next section, I will concentrate on the nature of such 'ancient wisdom narrative' in Sandell's poetry, namely, Celtic shamanism.

Retrogardism and Shamanism

In an essay entitled 'Poetry as Enchantment', the American poet and critic Dana Gioia argues for the recognition of a topic (namely, 'enchantment') 'so remote from contemporary literary studies that there is no respectable critical term for it' (Gioia, 2015). He points out that poetry, as the oldest form of literature and a universal human art, is intrinsically linked to a form of vocal music. This has fostered an idea or representation of the poet as a sacred or tribal singer, which originated in premodern societies and continued to be invoked throughout Western literature. As Gioia argues, 'poetry recognizes the mysterious relationship between dream and reality. In tribal societies, the shaman navigates the paths between the worlds of sleep and waking, and modern poetry still claims some power to connect the conscious and the unconscious minds' (Gioia, 2015). The key to this enchantment is rhythm, a fact that, as he says, has been 'confirmed by cognitive science about the impact of shamanistic chanting on the human mind and body' (Gioia, 2015).

What I find interesting in Gioia's advocacy of an ahistorical, perhaps even essentialist, view of poetry as enchantment is his emphasis on *memory* and *rhythm* and how they can help to assess the occultural elements in Sandell's poetry. In *On retrogardism*, Sandell and Altgård are concerned with memory, identified with the Greek goddess Mnemosyne, and its importance for the present and the future (not coincidentally, their early motto was *tillbaka till framtiden*—'back to the future'). Altgård claims that 'the poet fosters Memory, *Mnemosyne*, who is the repository of tradition and laws, a function which is as important as his role as *vates*, or seer. From ancient times, his role is double or Janus-like: a door (*janua*), open to both the past and the future' (Altgård, 1995, 12; emphasis in the original).

Sandell develops this train of thought by focusing on bardic poetry, on the role of the past within this tradition and on the importance of rhythm for the development of inspiration, a quality he finds lacking in most

modernist poetry: 'they gave up the fixed verse, soon they also gave up what they, for a period, called "free verse", and suddenly they lost contact with that creative privilege which rhythm always bears within: those metrical forms linked to pulse and breathing that can put aside the everyday experience of the poet and give access to sources that are still waiting for us' (Sandell, 1995, 45). According to Sandell, these sources are to be found in the bardic tradition in Wales and Ireland, where bards developed a form of poetry that conveyed memory and spirituality. The bard and shaman, as Sandell often identifies him, played a key role in these societies by incarnating both the transmission of traditions, which he developed through years of study of poems and ballads, and the power of looking into the future by means of divination. Form played a key role in his access to poetry, which was essentially oral. In order to remember hundreds of poems and ballads—foster memory, that is—bards needed a more or less regular form for their poetry. Sandell, though without advocating a return to a form of premodern society, seems to play the role of a modern bard, developing a poetic form that is partly inspired by bardic poetry and adapted to the contemporary period. The idea, as Altgård formulates it in *On retrogardism*, is to go back to the sources in order to speak to the present and the future.

In force of its status as 'ancient wisdom' and of its emphasis on memory and rhythm, shamanism 'occulturally' informs retrogardism. As Partridge has pointed out, paganism (of which shamanism arguably is a subcategory) is one of the most fruitful and influential occultural milieus: 'as for Paganism's contributions to occulture, these include, perhaps most significantly, the importance of traditional and indigenous beliefs and practices. For example, Paganism has stimulated great occultural interest in traditional methods of divination' (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:83). Insight in tradition and divination: exactly the tasks that Sandell inherits from shamanism. And the emphasis on concepts like 'tradition' and 'heritage' is particularly evident in contemporary Nordic shamanism, as Torunn Selberg (2015) has argued. Here the past is identified as a resource, an authority and a source of authenticity. By drawing upon the ideas of reincarnation and divination, modern practitioners of shamanism emphasize how their role is to connect this 'ancient wisdom' with modern times. Within an occultural context, Sandell's may thus be considered a 'shamanic' attempt at revitalizing an ancient past that does not find place in contemporary literary and cultural discourse.

Retrogardism's interest in shamanism does not stop at the 'ancient wisdom narrative' of shamans as keepers of poetic knowledge. We have seen that bardic poetry (which Sandell identifies as 'shamanic') developed within fixed metrical forms. As Thomas A. DuBois points out in relationship to shamanic practice, scholars of musical perception have investigated the way in which music can achieve emotional and psychological effects, demonstrating how music used in shamanic practice can cause altered states of consciousness; rhythm plays a key role here, as differently accented patterns are meant to provoke different effects during trance (DuBois, 2009, 157–160). Such an interest in rhythm as a 'spellbinding' tool can also be traced in Sandell's poetry. During the last decade, Sandell has developed a metrical form consisting of a mixture of blank verse (iambic pentameter), alexandrine (iambic hexameter) and *knittel*, a Nordic meter consisting of four stressed syllables per verse separated by a caesura and with otherwise free verse filling. Most of his poems can be read aloud with four or five main stresses, that is to say with the two metrical systems at the same time, alternated with the alexandrine; in addition, Sandell makes abundant use of assonance and alliteration. Although this form is no direct continuation of the bardic tradition, it inherits its occultural features, that is to say those related to shamanism's 'spellbinding' power. Sandell's metrical form, with an emphasis on a regular number of rhythmic pulses, often turns poems into litanies, capable—at least in theory—of bringing the listener into other states of mind: by using pulse and breathing, rhythm's 'creative privilege' is 'to put aside the everyday experience of the poet and give access to sources that are still waiting for us' (Sandell, 1995, 45). Such an 'incantatory' aspect of Sandell's poetry is especially evident in his reading style, as I will show in the sixth section.

Occultural Elements in Sandell's Poetry

It is, however, not only at a methodological and formal 'shamanic' level that Sandell's retrogardism takes on an occultural aspect. It can also be traced at a thematic level. This ties in with a development in Sandell's poetry, which took place after a phase that coincided with the publication of *On retrogardism* and his interest in shamanism. While collections like *Fröer och undergång* (*Seeds and Decadence*, 1994) and *Sjungande huvud* (*Singing Head*, 1996) showed a rather 'primitivistic' poetry inspired by premodern culture, with occasional references to shamanism, since the late 1990s Sandell's retrogardism has developed into a form of classicism

focused on the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and early Modern period. As a consequence, the occultural references in Sandell's poetry started to include elements borrowed from Western esoteric currents, although the figure of the bard/shaman continued to play a role.

The poem 'Jag följer inte Dante ner…' ('I do not follow Dante down…') from the collection *Gyllene dagar* (*Golden Days*, 2009) is a good example of how shamanic and Western esoteric elements blend in Sandell's occultural poetry. The complete poem in English translation can be found as appendix to this chapter; here only sections will be discussed. The poem opens with the poetic I's reflections in front of the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence: 'I do not follow Dante down, who's hung / nine days in tree-shade, a shaman, to the gates / of the underworld, but stay here in the sun / observing idly how the light gold-plates / my silver ring, on the table a vermouth'. The poem establishes a temporal dimension in which the contemporary period (announced by the glass of vermouth) is put side by side with the medieval time of Dante. The moment the I captures is one of perfection, symbolized by the marriage of the gold of the sun with the silver of the ring—the alchemical stage of conjunction. The glass of vermouth can, in addition, assume a symbolical meaning: is it a potion that the I has drunk in order to visualize Dante's journey to the underworld, reminiscent of the shamanistic drum journeys to other realities? The figure of Dante is quite complex too: he is identified as a shaman, but also as the Norse god Odin, by means of the allusion to the myth in which Odin hung from the world's tree, Yggdrasil, in order to acquire the 'ancient wisdom' of the runes. The reference to the runes is highly significant in an occultural context and ties in with the interest in paganism of which shamanism is a function: according to Partridge, 'Paganism has stimulated great occultural interest in traditional methods of divination. One of the best known […] is the use of runes. […] These are important because they are both ancient […] and also because they are understood to have been developed by "a people living in close harmony with the environment, the ancestors, the seasonal and stellar cycles and the deities"' (Partridge, 2004–2005, 1:83). Therefore, through references to alchemy, shamanism and the 'ancient wisdom' of the runes, 'I do not follow Dante down…' synthetizes successfully different occultural elements.

In addition, one notices that the first part of the poem is characterized by a solemn and reflexive tone. According to Kokkinen, occulture, as a theoretical tool for the study of art, focuses on how artists categorize and negotiate 'the sacred'. Occulture functions as a 'sacralizing' force: in

occultural art, the sacred 'loses its meaning as the transcendental absolute and becomes instead an ever-changing instrument' (Kokkinen, 2013, 25). Occultural art 'sacralizes' on its own premises. I would argue that the moment of perfection and the vision described by the poetic I in front of the church are examples of these sacralized situations, expressed through the revival of the past and the revelation of ancient wisdom. This sacralization, however, is abruptly interrupted with the last two lines of the poem: 'An American orates to his mobile phone / like the addict on the steps to an invisible friend' (Sandell, 2009, 35). The turning point, and the moment of desacralization, comes with the verb 'orate', which is etymologically linked to the sacred sphere but here used in a trivial context. The poem thus conveys successfully retrogardist poetics as a whole—modernity is not negative per se (it is in the 'here and now' that sacralization and the alchemical conjunction take place), but its spiritual decadence (symbolized by the desacralizing image of the American babbling on the telephone) has to be overcome through a recovery of an ancient wisdom. In this process, occulture (represented by the alchemical reference, shamanism and the journey to the underworld) echoes the ideas on poetry contained in *On retrogardism*: to recuperate an inspiration—represented by the runes and the figure of Dante—which premodernist poetry possessed and that has been lost in the passage of time.

Sandell also devoted a few poems to 'direct' occult experiences. An example is the poem 'Den onde' ('The Evil One'), published in the collection *Oslo-passionen* (*The Oslo Passion*, 2003), which describes the encounter between a poet and a supernatural creature: 'Little enough at first to come in through the keyhole, / as I learned later on, bee-sized, it nonetheless / retained a kind of graceful abnormality when, / full grown at one hand high, its wings spread in a show, / it introduced itself to me with a little nod' (Sandell, 2016, 23). At the beginning, the creature has not yet revealed its nature to the poet, who starts wondering: 'An elemental? A homunculus? A Nephilim? / I wondered from what ancient race he was descended' (Sandell, 2016, 23). In any case, the poet does not seem scared and slaps it in the face, in an act of self-defense or assertion of power. The uninvited guest starts whining and promising the poet great power, thus clearly identifying himself with Satan.

'The Evil One', apart from establishing a vague autobiographical framework (the poetic I is a poet), opens up an interesting performative interpretation. In fact, as the Devil says, '"You called on Us," he hissed, "you

called us with your poems, / their viper's beauty and their underground blue mysteries…" / […] / "Do you suppose," he went on, "you can simply stroll / as you see fit among Our ranks? Well, let me tell…"' (Sandell, 2016, 23). Here poetry has acquired a 'magical' means: what is described in the poems (the poetic I is not more precise as for which poems are concerned and what their content was) has effects in the real world—the apparition of the Devil is the ultimate proof of this power of poetry. I will return to this magical aspect later in the chapter.

As the poem proceeds, one notices that the relationship between the poet and the Devil does not turn into a dominance of the latter over the former, rather the other way around. Although the poet ignores him after the slapping episode, the Devil decides to stay at his home and help him with his poems, perhaps with a hope of convincing him to join his ranks. Yet, in the end he gives up, he stops eating and the poet has to feed him and accommodate him in an old shoe box. One morning the poet finds him dead: 'It was a shock; the loneliness came welling up, / then, and I wept for him on his descent to hell' (Sandell, 2016, 24). He decides to burn his corpse and bury it, but before this happens, he takes an apparently strange decision: 'But first, just out of curiosity, I measured / his corpse: twenty four centimeters end to end' (Sandell, 2016, 24).

So what is this poem about, and what does this epilogue represent? 'The Evil One' elaborates on the old motive of the Devil tempting mankind (be it represented by a scientist, as in the case of Faust, or a poet, as in the case here). The poetic I seems open to the fact that his poetry (perhaps with its recurrence of occultural elements) has ended up summoning evil forces, and by this he recalls the figure of the bard and his connection to the underworld. Furthermore, the poet shows a certain ambiguity toward the Devil—he constantly turns away his offers, but shows pity toward the wretched creature. When the Devil gives up his quest and slowly starves to death, the poet realizes that it 'still […] was company', and 'loneliness came welling up' (Sandell, 2016, 24). In addition, the Devil appears as immaterial when he enters the room through the keyhole and as material as a poor, mortal being, lying in the shoe box after its passing, openly questioning its status as 'The Evil One'. At the very end, the poet says that 'I wept for him on his descent to hell' (Sandell, 2016, 24); so who is this creature? Was it really the Devil or just a little creature of the underworld, subject to the laws of God as all of us? And why is the poet so sympathetic with this creature?

Gnostic Themes in Sandell's Poetry

The poem leaves these questions unanswered, but a possible interpretation can be found if one takes into account Sandell's interest in Gnosticism and its influence on his poems. As Bill Coyle points out, Sandell's work 'is often spiritual, sometimes explicitly so, though it is more often Gnostic […] than Christian in an orthodox sense. […] The struggle between two visions of the material world—on the one hand […] a symbol of a higher, spiritual reality, on the other a prison of the spirit—is present throughout the work' (Sandell, 2016, 8). Sandell's gnostic strain is therefore not dogmatic, pointing at a perfect divine realm, or *pleroma*, to which the soul of the Gnostic will return after having received the revelation (*gnosis*) and the subsequent salvation from the material world of the evil, lower god, the Demiurge. In contrast, the dualism of materiality and immateriality is balanced and cherished, in an acknowledgment of man's double nature as the repository of a spark of divine light, but also as an inhabitant of the material world. In 'The Evil One', this duality takes the form of a tension between refusal of the immaterial offers of the Devil (power, knowledge, etc.) and sympathy for the material, wretched creature: the final, unanswered question about its nature is thus functional to the dualism of spirit and matter that finds place in Sandell's poetry. In addition, such dualism also causes a strain of skepticism that permeates the whole episode. The fact that the poet measures the corpse and can report on its actual length is a token of its materiality, but also an ironical statement: the Devil's length—24 centimeters—is not motivated by any hidden numerological meaning, carrying a 'spiritual', 'immaterial' value. Looking at the Swedish original, the choice of the number *tjugofyra* is motivated only by the 'material' necessity of adding a syllable in order to complete an alexandrine (or by the even more material necessity of making the creature fit in the shoe box). The result is an ambiguous attitude toward the occult, a balancing of the material and immaterial.

In my reading, then, Sandell develops a peculiar view on Gnosticism, which stresses and perhaps seeks to overcome the gap between soul and matter. Another poem contained in *The Oslo Passion*, 'Själ efter döden' ('Soul after Death'), opens with the following vision: 'Now I see clearly that a warming sun / was my body to me and that the converse blackness / of light's abstractions has chilled me through. / I miss the body, and the warmth of blood' (Sandell, 2016, 36). In this poem, the experience of the soul of the deceased is not one of salvation, and the materiality of the

body, on which the poetic I insists throughout the poem, is cherished as a repository of life. Toward the end of the poem, the soul reflects upon the possibility of reincarnation:[3] 'If I nevertheless, one more time, / were permitted to step out of the abstract and enter / that flimsy shelter, I long to go back / like the angel Gabriel to Mary's sex, / to the old security of a point to hold fast to / when identity turns away, and in its absence / the empty space is flooded ecstatically' (Sandell, 2016, 37). The material world is thus a sacred space, a 'shelter' where one can go back and announce reincarnation, as Gabriel does with 'Mary's sex'. 'Identity' is to be found in the Demiurge's world and not in the 'abstract' beyond. To quote Kokkinen once more, the materiality of sex is 'sacralized' as repository of life, and Mary's body is cherished as something holy and sacred, the very key to enter the spiritual world.

The duality between the material and the spiritual world is expressed with even more intensity in the poem 'Bogomilerna' ('The Bogomiles') in the collection *Skisser till ett århundrade* (*Sketches for a Century*, 2006). The poem centers around Bogomilism, a heretical religious movement that originated in Bulgaria in the tenth century and was based on a rigid dualism between the material world, which was the work of the Devil, and the spiritual world, the realm of God. Influenced by Manicheism and Paulicianism, Bogomilism supported the original duality found in many gnostic texts (Bozoky, 2006, 192). The poem opens by describing the Bogomile's actions: 'The Bogomiles, followers of Bogomil, / snapped the metal in crucifixes, / the wood in them they broke, / fonts of holy water, the water, / all these belonging to Satan, / they overturned and laid waste to' (Sandell, 2016, 60). The poetic I presents Bogomilism as a radical, orthodox interpretation of Gnosticism—almost a menace, an obstacle to his path to *gnosis*. Yet, after this short introduction, the poem takes another contrasting direction: 'But I love the wood in the trees, / the roots, the branches, the leaves / that drink of light and rain. / [...] / [R]ejoice over the existence of minerals, / the lead, copper and quicksilver / in the oils of Turner and Rembrandt' (Sandell, 2016, 60).

In this somewhat unexpected, cheerful second part of the poem, the dualism between spirit and matter is experienced with a strain of joy, the poem becoming a hymn to the material world, a space that includes both the most primitive and untouched elements of nature (roots, branches, leaves, minerals) and the most refined products of human culture (such as the paintings of Turner and Rembrandt, made possible by said elements). Yet, the sacralizing image of the I—who 'take[s] it all in', spirit and matter,

good and evil, 'on the inbreath / of my animal lungs' (Sandell, 2016, 60)—is contrasted at the end of the poem, in a similar way as the American tourist does in 'I do not follow Dante down…': 'But shining in front of me nevertheless / stands Bogomil, who took the cross and from it / tore wood, metal and inscriptions / in his longing for the age of the Spirit' (Sandell, 2016, 61). The hieratic figure of Bogomil, who regards him, imperturbable, from his position as a keeper of the doctrine, makes the I realize that, for the Gnostic, the union of spirit and matter is impossible.

Through the repeated praises to natural as well as cultural elements, the poetic I makes it clear that he cannot leave the realm of matter. His is thus a declaration of defeat, from a strictly gnostic point of view: he cannot reach *gnosis* without rejecting the work of the Demiurge. He instead decides to embrace both, in a desperate but, ultimately, utterly human act of love for both worlds. And *love* becomes the fulcrum of 'The Bogomiles', the thematic element placed at the very core of the poem. After the 'erotic' declaration to the trees, branches, minerals and paintings, the central lines of the poem include an anaphoric repetition of the verb 'love', which is addressed equally to 'the soul in the infant returning' and to 'ice, fire, their union / in the humidity of a woman's sex' (Sandell, 2016, 60). This last image evokes both the reference to Mary in 'Soul after Death' and the myth of creation of Norse cosmology, where the world is created by the union of the fire of Muspelheim with the ice of Nifelheim. The sacralized feminine body becomes one of the most perfect elements of the material world, with its creative power to give life. The reference to the soul returning to the child, once more reminiscent of reincarnation as in 'Soul after Death', opens up to a joyful and positive outcome of the impasse. At least, the returning soul will give life, through the 'ice and fire' of the female body, to a new human being. 'The Bogomiles' is therefore a declaration of defeat for the gnostic apprentice but perhaps also a *victory* by defeat. By acknowledging the impossibility of reaching *gnosis* on a purely spiritual level, the poetic I can rejoice over what the material world has to offer him as a sacralized site.

Such hymns to a sacralized, material world and its consequences for spiritual questions come to their conclusion in 'Words to Justyna on her Departure for a Retreat in Tushita', one of Sandell's latest poems.[4] On the occasion of the departure of the beloved to a meditation retreat in India, the poetic I expresses his view on the duality of spirit and matter: 'This world that you see, Justyna, really exists. / A stone's a stone, even the thought behind / your temporal bone, while of a veil-like thinness, / is not

a dream or watery mirror image' (Sandell, 2016, 94). As the I continues, 'It's in the body the soul's become incarnate' (Sandell, 2016, 97), and when it comes to the body of the beloved, 'I am prepared to here bear witness / that you are entirely pure, your rosy limbs, / your sweat is clean to me, even your pee is, / each smoothly executed function annexed / by your personality, where every action / performed in this world is a sketch that hints / at life eternal, and not some thin illusion' (Sandell, 2016, 98).

In this poem, Eastern philosophy and meditation are criticized for their focus on an immaterial dimension that excludes matter. In contrast to this, love becomes once more the key to an appropriation of the material world. The body is the repository of the divine, in a way that echoes both the gnostic idea of the divine spark in man and the longing for materiality already mentioned in 'Soul after Death'. While 'The Bogomiles', with its hymn to matter, still was permeated by doubt and impasse (the concluding, hieratic figure of Bogomil), in 'Words to Justyna…', love allows the poetic I to assert that the body of the beloved, even in its utterly physical form (urine), is 'entirely pure'. The consequence for the poetic I's worldview is that 'every action performed in this world' is not some 'thin illusion' of the Demiurge but 'a sketch that hints at life eternal'. In this way, the poem achieves a synthesis of the realms of spirit and matter and resolves the gnostic impasse of the previous poems.

Performance and Magic

The emphasis on love as a means to achieve a synthesis between spirit and matter leads me to the last occultural element in Sandell's poetry I wish to discuss. To quote Gioia again, 'poetry speaks most effectively and inclusively […] when it recognizes its connection […] to its musical and ritualistic origin. No one watching a rock concert would claim that sung poetry makes nothing happen, though exactly what happens in the Dionysian exhilaration of the crowd remains more mysterious and various than often assumed' (Gioia, 2015). Here Gioia is referring to poetry's power of *making things happen*. Of course, we can read this statement in the simple context of the power of music and poetry to stir up feelings and emotions in the audience, but in an occultural context, such power assumes magical connotations.

Although different conceptualizations of magic have followed one after the other from antiquity to the Modern period, one can generally say that the post-Enlightenment world inherited three traditional views on magic:

(1) that of an 'ancient wisdom'—quite similar to the narrative sketched above, (2) that of a *magia naturalis*, a philosophy of nature based on the working of secondary causes, and (3) that of a craft based upon contact with intermediary beings (Hanegraaff, 2006, 739). Modern magicians had to face a problem that was unknown to their predecessors, namely, the scholarly rejection of all currents and form of thoughts that escaped a strictly religious or scientific categorization (Hanegraaff, 2006, 741; see also Hanegraaff, 2012). The increasing secularization in the twentieth century concluded this process, relegating magic outside the ranks of mainstream scientific discourse. This does not mean that magical practices have gone totally out of fashion, yet they have had to find a new way of legitimizing themselves, first and foremost in the eyes of the practitioners. According to Hanegraaff, 'crucial to modern and contemporary strategies for the legitimation of magic is the concept of a separate but connected "magical plane", seen as parallel to the mundane plane of every-day existence but existing on a different level of reality, and that can be accessed by means of the imagination. […] [M]agicians believe that by "working" on the level of the imagination, it is possible to influence events in the everyday world' (Hanegraaff, 2006, 740). Such 'psychologization of magic', as Hanegraaff has called it, has turned magic into a technique of self-development, which makes the magician live in two worlds, a public one ruled by canons of science and logic and a private one ruled by the very different logic of ritual and the imagination (see Hanegraaff, 2003). This does not mean that the two planes are hermetically sealed and that they do not communicate with each other: modern magicians still maintain that the planes can interact, and the heritage of the three traditional views on magic—especially those related to natural magic and contact with intermediary beings—does open up the possibility that magic, as a practice of imagination, can *make things happen* outside the magical plane.

All this is relevant for Sandell's poetry because of its *performative* aspect. As has been argued (Novak, 2011; Casas and Gräbner, 2011), the study of poetry in performance has been characterized by a focus on the auditive aspect of reading and on its ancillary status in relationship to the written word. Contemporary scholarship instead emphasizes that the performative aspect of poetry develops in a context of its own. It is in the 'here and now' of the performance that the poetical experience takes place, and this context consists not only of the vocal realization of the words on a page but also of a series of text-external and text-internal elements that influence one another. Where Sandell's poetry is concerned, the magical

plane is one of these text-external elements that have to be taken into account: as we have seen, in 'The Evil One', the poetic I wonders if his poems have resulted in the (involuntary?) conjuration of evil forces. In one way or another, his poetry has made something happen in the real world.

Furthermore, Sandell's insistence on pulse and rhythm as shamanic practices is a clear token of his interest in the oral and performative aspects of poetry. It is in the performative realization of a poem, reading it out loud, that poetry, as the rock concert mentioned by Gioia, *makes something happen*: rhythmic poetry can, as Sandell points out in *On retrogardism*, give the poet access to other dimensions (Sandell, 1995, 45). This performative, 'magical' aspect of Sandell's poetry is perhaps most fully expressed in the poem 'Till ett barn som gått två veckor över tiden' ('To a Child Two Weeks Overdue', from *The Oslo Passion*), where the poetic I tries to convince an unborn baby to come into the world. The poem opens as follows: 'I realize you may regard me as a meddler, / but if beauty, good will and love ever / wore a human face, it must be your mother's. / She looks so welcoming I have to wonder / if you're not being unnecessarily skeptical' (Sandell, 2016, 33).

Apparently, this poem originated from an unfortunate phrase Sandell had said to a pregnant friend who was about to give birth. In order to compensate for the offense, he wrote an 'incantation' that would help the baby exit her mother's belly (D'Amico, Sandell, and Spaans, 2014). Whether one takes this anecdote into consideration or not, 'To a Child…' is fully readable as a performative, 'magical' kind of poetry. As the poem continues, we see that the lines take the form of an invocation: 'Do you know the secret, just before you spring, / of the world that opens, are you able now, / in that inwardness where the red lips say nothing / to see that when your thin, silken hair / reaches the roughness of her golden brush / the sun and moon will be waiting for you there?' (Sandell, 2016, 34).

The poem seems thus to establish and operate on a poetic/magical plane, where the imaginative force of the poet tries to change reality through an invocation. From the point of view of performance poetry, we witness a mutual entanglement of text-internal elements (the written invocation) and text-external elements (the effect they are supposed to cause) that makes the oral realization of the poem the focal point of the poetic experience. Furthermore, the poem offers a number of occultural references. The moment of perfection—the alchemical conjunction of the sun and the moon—coincides with 'the world that opens', that is to say, with

birth: this sacralized perfection is life.[5] As the poem concludes: 'Come out, in any case, don't wait forever! / Come out in these years when your mother is young / and believes so hopefully in life's wonder / and that it still can transform everything' (Sandell, 2016, 35). 'Life's wonder', which is represented by the moment of birth perfection and love, is capable of 'transforming everything', of *making things happen* in the real world. The poetic/magical plane and reality intersect.

Concluding Remarks

I hope that the examples mentioned in the last three sections show how Sandell's poems can be considered as examples of occulture. In this chapter, I have tried to explain how occulture permeates Sandell's retrogardist poetry and how it elaborates on shamanic, alchemical, gnostic and magical elements. These elements are evident at a methodological level, as retrogardism shares an 'ancient wisdom narrative' with occulture, and come to a full realization at a thematic level, Sandell's poetry including a number of references to different Western esoteric traditions. Most notably, gnostic elements are used in order to reflect on the dualism between the material and the spiritual world and to try to develop a synthesis between these two spheres, centered on human love. In this way, Sandell's poetry creates sites of 'sacralizing', putting an emphasis on matter as a repository of the divine spark. Furthermore, his poems include another occultural element that ties in with retrogardism's interest in bardic poetry and shamanism: namely, the oral, performative aspect of poetry. In an occultural context, Sandell's rhythmic poetry acquires shamanic and magical connotations.

In conclusion, I hope that this case study can offer ideas for future research on literature and occulture. The joint study of literature and occultism is still in its infancy, and much discussion still circles around typological features, something which Henrik Johnsson summarizes in his book on August Strindberg and occultism (Johnsson, 2015, 13–35). I believe that Sandell's poetry is a good example not only of how occulture finds a place into contemporary literary discourse but also of how poetry, as a literary genre, opens up performative doors to a study of the mutual entanglements of literature and occulture. Some preliminary studies have been done on drama as a performative, 'occult' form of literature (see Lingan, 2014). A more thorough study of these entanglements is still to be done, and cases like Sandell point at the necessity of a new theoretical and methodological framework, which starts from the thematic level and

explores other directions, for instance, performance theory. I hope that my discussion of Sandell's poetry has shown how occulture, in its realization through poetics, methodology, topoi and performance, can be a fruitful starting point for such discussions.

Appendix

Håkan Sandell, 'I do not follow Dante down…'

'Jag följer inte Dante ner…', from the collection *Gyllene dagar*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 2009. Translation by Bill Coyle. First published in *Literary Matters* (http://www.literarymatters.org/), the newsletter of The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers.

> I do not follow Dante down, who's hung
> nine days in tree-shade, a shaman, to the gates
> of the underworld, but stay here in the sun
> observing idly how the light gold-plates
>
> my silver ring, on the table a vermouth.
> Before a shrouded Santa Maria Novella
> the plague has caught up with some tardy youths
> by the empty cathedral where, in the first twelve &
>
> a half pages of the Decameron,
> a little hope is kindled. That was then.
> An American orates to his mobile phone
> like the addict on the steps to an invisible friend.

Notes

1. Translations from Swedish prose texts are the author's. Translations of Sandell's poems are by Bill Coyle (Sandell, 2016).
2. In its early period, retrogardism opposed consecrated, late modernists like the Swede Tomas Tranströmer and praised the Danes Michael Strunge and Pia Tafdrup for their recovery of tradition. Over the following years, the polemic mounted and came to involve the growing Nordic language poetry movement, culminating in the so-called OEI-debate, in which retrogardists strongly criticized the literary journal OEI and its affiliated poets for their *språkmaterialism* ('language materialism').

3. Reincarnation is not an unusual element in Gnosticism. In some gnostic texts, the person who has not achieved salvation can be cast back to earth and reincarnated as a new human being, who will again attempt to reach gnosis (Filoramo, 1990, 129–130, 137).
4. To my knowledge, this poem has not yet appeared in Swedish and is only available in Coyle's translation. In addition, Sandell's latest collection, eloquently entitled *Ode till Demiurgen* (*Ode to the Demiurge*, 2013), addresses the duality of spirit and matter in a series of poems, most of which are not translated into English. The interested reader may refer to 'Sophögen' ('The Trash Pile'; Sandell, 2016, 87–89).
5. While in the previous poem silver and gold were mentioned, but only one planet was visible, here the mechanism is specular, with two planets and only one metal mentioned—perhaps in order not to make the alchemical reference too transparent.

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