

# OCCASIONAL PAPERS

ERIC-VOEGELIN-ARCHIV  
LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT  
MÜNCHEN

— VIII —

Thomas Hollweck

The Romance of the Soul  
The Gnostic Myth in Modern Literature



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OCCASIONAL PAPERS, VIII, Juli 1998

Thomas Hollweck,

The Romance of the Soul. The Gnostic Myth in Modern Literature,

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Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Redaktion: Marc Schattenmann, Christian Schwaabe

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ISSN 1430-6786

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For Rodney Gaitan

**I.**  
**Sloterdijk's Varieties of Gnostic Experience  
and the Nature of Modernity**

In 1991 two volumes appeared that bore the title *Weltrevolution der Seele. Ein Lese- und Arbeitsbuch der Gnosis*.<sup>1</sup> Edited by Peter Sloterdijk and Thomas Macho, this fascinating anthology invites the reader to embark on a journey through two thousand years of Gnostic thought, from the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Song of the Pearl*, and the texts of Valentinus, Basilides, and Origen in the ancient world to the Islamic and the Kabbalistic Lurianic Gnosis that stand at the threshold to the modern world.

But what gives the reader pause is the list of modern authors who either identify themselves as Gnostics or Gnostic sympathizers or who are identified as Gnostics, authors like Jung, Bataille, Hugo Ball and Borges, Pessoa and Cioran, to name only a few. It seems as though Hans Jonas' formula of „the hidden Gnosticism of the modern mind“ of 1973 is taking on a reality today that would have surprised its author. Indeed, it appears as though at the end of the century the modern mind, where it still reflects on itself, is more and more openly showing an interest and often outright sympathy with Gnostic thought.

In his introduction to the *Revolution der Weltseele* Peter Sloterdijk could still remark a few years ago that among the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sloterdijk / Thomas H. Macho, *Weltrevolution der Seele: Ein Lese- und Arbeitsbuch der Gnosis von der Spätantike bis zur Gegenwart*, 2 vols. Zurich: Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1991. A one-volume paperback edition appeared with the same publisher in 1993.

plethora of literature on Gnosticism only two works stand out that fill the „spirit“ of Gnosticism with life, citing Ferdinand Christian Baur’s *Die christliche Gnosis*, published in 1835, and of course Hans Jonas’ seminal *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* published one hundred years later. Today there are allusions to Gnostic literature everywhere. Baur and Jonas, according to Sloterdijk, found access to Gnostic spirituality through their two great contemporaries Hegel and Heidegger.

In both cases the insights into the essence of Gnostic thought were dependent on the two most influential philosophical self-interpretations of modernity instead of the „imposing“ philological discoveries represented in the Nag Hammadi texts.<sup>2</sup> While conceding that a few intelligent contributions have been made by authors such as Elaine Pagels, Harold Bloom, and Peter Koslowski, Sloterdijk has little sympathy for the one interpretation that could be called ground-breaking, even if it is controversial: Eric Voegelin’s assertion that Gnosticism is „the nature of modernity.“<sup>3</sup> According to Sloterdijk, „as far as Voegelin is concerned, familiarity with authentic Gnostic writing is barely detectable. It seems as though the 20th century triggered a general hysterical itch in this charismatic political scientist.“<sup>4</sup>

But there is in fact good reason to characterize modernity as fundamentally Gnostic, even if one is not prepared to buy into Sloterdijk’s own rather broad understanding of Gnosticism as

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<sup>2</sup> Sloterdijk, 20-22.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk, 23. (My translation).

it emerges from the *Weltrevolution der Seele*.<sup>5</sup> Whether modernity is Gnostic or not may not even have anything to do with how broad or how narrow a definition of Gnosticism we apply, whether we confine the meaning of the word to the definition of the 1966 Congress of Messina where the term „Gnosticism“ was basically limited to the Gnostic systems of the second century A.D., or whether we adopt the existential interpretation. For Gnosticism is ultimately the only myth surviving from antiquity, the myth of the soul’s fall into the cosmos, that is, into a world very different from its own substance or making. For the soul is the divine *pneuma*, and thus there is a human divinity or divine humanity not responsible for the evil or disorder in the world, yet entangled in it for reasons that have to do with the soul’s very divinity. The knowledge of this „fall in the divinity“ is what has, since antiquity, been called *gnosis*.

Reduced to this simple, yet fundamental definition, Gnosticism becomes a surprisingly distinct, recognizable millennial phenomenon which sometimes grows into a movement but has for the most time remained the esoteric „knowledge“ of individuals and small groups throughout the past two thousand years. Gnosticism, understood in this manner, is clearly different from Christianity and definitely distinct from the various modern ideologies that may or may not lay claim to be its intellectual descendants. If the nature of

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<sup>5</sup> As Peter Koslowki points out in *Gnosis und Theodizee: Eine Studie über den leidenden Gott des Gnostizismus*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1993, 21, n.8, Sloterdijk’s and Macho’s collection give the concept of „Gnosis“ an indefinite and literary meaning that stresses the notion of a 2000-year old, permanent revolution of the soul. True, the editors may have succeeded in arousing the interest of a wider public in the Gnostic phenomenon, but whether they have contributed to its understanding remains to be seen.

modernity is indeed Gnostic, modernity is either a throwback to antiquity or Gnosticism has always been „modern“ in a way that would have set even the ancient Gnostics apart from their contemporaries.

Is there perhaps a common key element to be found in one of Sloterdijk's own characterizations of Gnosticism which suggests that there is a Gnostic connection to the modern *Daseinshaltung*, to use Hans Jonas' fortuitous term? „With *gnosis* begins the translation of the life of the soul from nature into history“, Sloterdijk states, and he continues: „The variety of myths about the fall and ascent of the soul introduce something new into the physical time of the world with its natural cycles and its accidental ups and downs of empires: genuinely human historicity.“<sup>6</sup>

History, and there lies the fundamental paradox of all Gnostic thought, is, on the one hand, the visible form of the great psychodrama enacted by man following the call of the alien God in order to undo the original fall in the divinity and to return the divine pneuma, while, on the other hand, the true Gnostic has no other wish but to get out of history; for this history partakes in the time of the cosmos and thus can have no meaning. This is the paradox of the Gnostic *Daseinshaltung* in all its forms of expression, from the great systems of ancient *gnosis* to the modern philosophical systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the Faustian efforts of modern literature to break through into the open through casting away the conventional, traditional forms that imprisoned artistic creation. And thus, the Gnostic paradox of time and history must somehow be reflected in what one might

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<sup>6</sup> Sloterdijk, 40.

call the „deep structure“ of the Gnostic narrative, its plot and its drama. Time and history can have meaning only if they are the unfolding of the psychodrama, otherwise they are meaningless. But how does one distinguish?

No one sensed this problem more acutely than Thomas Mann whose beautifully ironic *Roman der Seele*, the Romance of the Soul, forms the centerpiece of the „Prelude“ to his masterpiece, the tetralogy *Joseph and his Brothers*. The soul's romance with dark and formless matter has a mitigating irony that can also be interpreted as a tragic fall, as for instance in the story of Adrian Leverkühn, the doomed hero of *Doctor Faustus*. Leverkühn's pact with the devil, the evil demiurge in the non-Christian Gnostic symbolism, is to ensure an „extravagant“ *Dasein* for him, a Nietzschean „magic of the extreme“ that culminates in the romantic Gnosis of Leverkühn's art.

„There is at bottom only one problem in the world, and this is its name. How does one break through? How does one get into the open? How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly? The whole situation is dominated by the question.“<sup>7</sup>

With these words, spoken to his friend Serenus Zeitblom, Leverkühn sums up the meaning of the modern artist's mission. It is an effort to transcend nature and creation and, in the process, to create or re-create the artist's, humanity's true Self through a return to a beginning that lies before the fall.

This is also, Leverkühn continues, the message of Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay on the Marionette Theater which deals with the loss of aesthetic grace and the question of how it could be regained. Kleist's artistic utopia, so often seen as

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, New York: Knopf, 1992, 314.

the quintessential formulation of the romantic project, became the model for the modern artist's self-understanding, a Self between the state of unconsciousness and infinite consciousness. Consciousness would have to go through infinity, Adam would have to eat from the Tree of Knowledge for a second time to find that unrehearsed gracefulness again that every artist seeks and that would be the state of innocence lost through the fall.

Whose fall? The fall of man or the fall of God? The answer to this question is made difficult because the romantic myth of the Marionette Theater obscures the problem that lies behind the question since it speaks the language of the German philosophy of „consciousness“ which fuses the divine and the human into an „absolute identity“ which in its turn obfuscates the Gnostic origin of its symbolism. But this is exactly the point where a philosophical discussion of the Gnostic nature of modernity in general and modern literature in particular must begin, with an attempt to bring some clarity to a field of symbols that is still a field of human experience.

## II.

### **Gnostic Hermeneutics: The Case of Harold Bloom**

I must begin by mentioning Harold Bloom, the author of *Agon. Toward a Theory of Revisionism* and the more recent *Omens of the Millennium*<sup>8</sup>, who makes no secret of his own Gnostic leanings when he writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982 and, by the same author, *Omens of the Millennium*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

„Gnosis is not rational knowledge, but like poetic knowledge (I suspect ‘like’ to be my evasion) Gnosis is more-than-rational knowledge.“<sup>9</sup>

But Bloom’s Gnostic witnesses, Blake, Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Wallace Stevens are primarily good Freudians; consequently, their Gnosis „affirms that fantasy must be primary in our belated condition, where every agon has been internalized, as it was by Urizen, and where the drive for freedom becomes also the death drive, where creativity and catastrophe become indistinguishable“<sup>10</sup>. The Freudian notion of the origins of consciousness as a catastrophe results in a „theory of the imagination-as-catastrophe, and of art as an achieved anxiety in the agonistic struggle both to repeat and to defer the repetition of the catastrophe of creative origins“.<sup>11</sup>

Bloom is the representative of a Gnostic-Kabbalistic theory of creativity that sees itself in a continuous line from the Gnostic Valentinus to the Kabbalist Isaac Luria and to the English romantic William Blake. The reason why Bloom is presently capturing the imagination of all those who do not have the stomach for Derridaean deconstruction is to be sought in his rather personal Gnosticism. What is at the heart of Bloom’s reading of literature he has stated unequivocally in Chapter I of *Agon*, entitled „Agon: Revisionism and Critical Personality“:

„Reading seems to me now not so much Nietzsche’s Will to Power over texts, as Schopenhauer’s power to will texts of the Sublime, which is to say, of the Abyss. Emerson, in his final phase, defined that Abyss: ‘There may be two or three or

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<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 4 f.

<sup>10</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 89.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 97.

four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are finally just two facts – I and the abyss.’ I interpret Emerson here as meaning the Abyss in its Gnostic sense: the forefather or foremother, before Creation, who was usurped by the Demiurge, that Demiurge being what Platonists, Jews and Christians call God the father. Loving poetry is a Gnostic passion not because the Abyss itself is loved, but because the lover longs to be yet another Demiurge.“<sup>12</sup>

Whether Bloom would still maintain this Demiurgic *Credo* over fifteen years after the publication of *Agon* is doubtful. As his most recent book reveals, his Gnosticism has become less poetic and more spiritual. „My own religious experience and conviction is a form of Gnosis“, he writes in *Omens of the Millennium*.<sup>13</sup> Bloom has discovered „the God within“ and in his search for this „God within“ he has relied, besides his extensive readings of Kabbalistic, Islamic, and Biblical sources, on Shakespeare so that he can now say: „Knowing myself, knowing Shakespeare, and knowing God are three separate but closely related quests.“<sup>14</sup> His literary criticism has become a search for the Self, no longer any Freudian Self but „Gnosis, or direct acquaintance of God within the self.“<sup>15</sup> The angel, the heavenly twin, Anthropos, the Man of Light (Man here understood as both female and male) have become the symbols of the direction of this search, and Bloom is by no means alone in his quest, if one may believe a recent collection of essays that appeared under the title *The Allure of Gnosticism*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Segal, ed., *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture*, Chicago: Open Court, 1995. The volume contains among contributions by Gilles Quispel, Elaine

While Bloom's critical *œuvre* is not one of my main concerns here, it is of interest to a discussion of Gnosticism and modernity because Bloom has always taken the position that literature and, to a similar extent, criticism are modes of knowledge, of *gnosis*, which unmake tradition and with it time and history. This has not escaped some of his critics. As Ioan Couliano suggests in his critique of modern nihilism as Gnostic nihilism, since his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom has maintained „that every act of creation is *ipso facto* an act of destruction toward tradition“ in the manner of the Gnostic Valentinus' rejection of the authorities of the Bible and Plato.<sup>17</sup> Quoting an essay by Richard Smith „The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism“<sup>18</sup>, Couliano writes: „And in *Agon* (1982) Bloom praises Gnosticism as ‘the inaugural and most powerful of Deconstructions because it undid all genealogies, scrambled all hierarchies, allegorized every microcosm / macrocosm relation, and rejected every representation of divinity as non-referential.’“<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this emphasis on the anti-traditionalist, the deconstructionist elements in Bloom's criticism is too one-

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Pagels, and Walter Sokel, an essay by Stephen McKnight that stresses the Renaissance elements contained in modern Gnosticism and is entitled „Eric Voegelin and the Changing Perspectives on the Gnostic Features of Modernity.“

<sup>17</sup> Ioan Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992. The book is a translation of the author's *Les gnosés dualistes d'occident*, Paris: Editions Plon, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Smith, „The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism“, in J.M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988, 532-549.

<sup>19</sup> Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 263.

sided. Bloom could either be chastized or commended for his strong reliance on Hans Jonas' existential interpretation of Gnosticism, but the point is that Bloom at the time of writing *Agon* was looking for a „negative theology“ in the other sacred canon of Western Civilization, conventionally called *literature*. And a negative theology could only be found in the kind of rebellious revisionism which is to Bloom the defining mark of any poetry worth that name. This he calls *strong poetry* and he introduced this voluntaristic, Nietzschean idea of poetry in the 1970s in such books as *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). The strong poet, „knowingly“ or „unknowingly“, but somehow deliberately, misreads his predecessors. Poetry is an agonistic, revisionist process, a fight against time, tradition, and ultimately against creation.

I may be overstating Bloom's point, but nothing could be more damaging to it than the opposite, to make it gentler than it is. For with Jonas, Bloom sees Gnosis as crisis, stresses the Gnostic hatred for time and the identity of Gnosis and a denial of the present. There is therefore more than an incidental similarity between Gnosis and what Bloom calls „belated poetry“, modern poetry. Following Jonas' ingenious understanding of the Neoplatonic-Gnostic myth of the Soul that generates time as a substitute for eternity and thus sets in motion the restless Gnostic psychodrama, Bloom envisages his own revisionist de(con)struction of any eternal divine present in the various Modernisms of the „poetry of belatedness“.<sup>20</sup>

Gnosticism for Bloom has its starting point in what he calls „lying against time“, the Valentinian reformulation of the

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<sup>20</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 65.

Platonic notion of time as the „moving image of eternity“. Where Plato's demiurge attempts to copy eternity in the image of time, the demiurge of the Gnostic Valentinus deliberately misreads and thus misrepresents eternity by creating time. Time as the lie about eternity becomes for Valentinus the reason why he in turn must lie *about* time or rather *against* time. Bloom's perceptiveness recognizes in this lie against time the Nietzschean will's resentment against the „it was“ of time. The demonic temporality, as Bloom calls it, which perhaps no one understood better than Shakespeare, thus is ultimately the mark of the Gnostic's negative theology that cannot have a God who works in history. The series time, catastrophe, belatedness, Gnosis, modernism is now established. As Bloom sums it up:

„What a Gnostic or strong poet knows is what only a strong reading of a belated poem or a lie against time teaches: a freedom compounded of three elements, and these are: negation, evasion, extravagance. It is the mutual audacity of belated religion or Gnosis, and of belated Poetry or Petrarch and after, to create a freedom out of and by catastrophe.“<sup>21</sup>

Bloom's own strong reading of Gnosticism brings to light what is missing in most of the readings that focus too exclusively on Gnosticism's redemptive claim. What makes Gnosticism interesting, even attractive to „intellectuals“ is neither its logical consistency nor the zealousness with which some Gnostics try to identify the labyrinthine mechanisms of the evil demiurge's cosmos. What makes it interesting is what might be called its *psychic potency*. This is what Bloom sees when he speaks of negation, evasion, and extravagance. Having once accounted for the *unde malum* that haunts the Christian, the Gnostic can throw himself into the dialectics of

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<sup>21</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 59.

the negation of time and creation. This Gnostic negative theology is not a gradual ascent and casting off of worldly things, it is instead a constant and radical negation of what is this world. This appears to be also what Bloom means when he writes:

„But Gnostic negative theology is yet more drastic [than Christian negative theology] because Gnostic transcendence really needs a word beyond transcendence to designate so hyperbolic a sense of being above the world, ‘that world,’ our mere universe of death. Gnostic metaphor depends therefore upon the most outrageous dualism that our traditions ever have known. In a Gnostic metaphor, the ‘inside’ term or *pneuma* and the ‘outside’ cosmic term are so separated that every such figuration becomes a catachresis, an extension or abuse of metaphor.“<sup>22</sup>

This dualism is so radical and certainly not to be compared to any of the well-known dualisms of other religions, because the Fall is *within* the Godhead and not just *from* it: catastrophe is built in, and evil is not something that happens as an afterthought. What this radical dualism means to language, analogy, and metaphor would require a separate study. To the literary critic Harold Bloom it first of all means a revision of the theory of poetic creation:

„What unites the three prophets [Valentinus, Luria, and Blake] is a catastrophe theory of Creation, and what urges me towards them is my growing conviction that any adequate theory of poetic creation also must be a catastrophe theory. What is called creation, in art, is both a creation *of* catastrophe and a creation *by* catastrophe, and Valentinus, Luria and Blake are all episodes in a history that transcends them, a catastrophic history and history of catastrophes.“<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 73.

Bloom's most acute insight into the essence of Gnosticism comes toward the end of his chapter „Lying Against Time.“ Gnosticism is a mode of belatedness, or the unwillingness to accept the Christian order of „a second chance“ or, as I would put it, redemption through Christ's death on the Cross. Gnosticism won't have anything to do with this second chance, it rather „insists upon the First Chance alone“. <sup>24</sup> He continues: „Hating time, Gnosticism insists upon evading time rather than fulfilling time in an apocalyptic climax, or living in time through substitution [i.e. the sacramental life in the community of the Church, as I would interpret what Bloom is saying here].“ <sup>25</sup>

If failed prophecy becomes apocalyptic, and failed apocalyptic becomes Gnosticism, as Bloom correctly argues, then the question must be raised: What does failed Gnosticism become? Bloom's logical answer is: Gnosticism never fails, because its fulfilment is by definition *beyond* the cosmos where there is no failure. Failure is, after all, only *within* the cosmos. The conclusion Bloom draws from these thoughts is as persuasive as it is seductive. By evading cosmic fate and denying the historicity of existence, in other words, by lying against time, Gnosticism was able to bring mythology back to monotheism. „Evasion“, as only a master of revisionism of Bloom's caliber could see it, „on the rhetorical level, is always misinterpretation or misreading, and in such revisionary hermeneutic, Gnosticism was the great innovator.“ <sup>26</sup>

Literature, or as Bloom would call it, poetry, then, has become

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<sup>24</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Bloom, *Agon*, 67.

the legitimate heir to ancient *gnosis* because what is it other than „a revisionary freedom of interpretation, one so free that it transgresses all limits and becomes its own creation.“<sup>27</sup> This comment on an obscure interpretation of Homer’s *Iliad* of the famous-infamous Simon Magus reveals in a flash what Gnostic writing, Gnostic thinking ultimately is beyond lying against time: it is the rebellious revision of symbols that were there before, the limitless freedom of interpretation that links ancient Gnostics such as Simon and Valentinus with their modern counterparts Nietzsche and Heidegger. To use the example of Valentinus one more time: as Plato’s Demiurge lies against eternity by creating „times, epochs and great numbers of years“ so the Gnostic lies against time by creating the image of catastrophe. The „fall into time“, as the dark Gnostic Cioran called it<sup>28</sup>, can only be negated by reinterpreting time, and that is the theme of much of the thought of our time.

### **III. The Gnostic Experience and the Philosophy of Consciousness**

The expanded size of my discussion of Bloom’s Gnostic hermeneutics in the preceding section is no accident but was by no means intended as an exhaustive critical appreciation of his work. Yet something absolutely fundamental to my own thinking on Gnosticism and modernity emerges from it,

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<sup>27</sup> Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, 12.

<sup>28</sup> E. Cioran, *La chute dans le temps*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

something that has not found sufficient attention in all of the more recent Gnostic revivals, and that is the agonistic, or shall I say, antagonistic power of Gnosticism. What Gregor Sebba noted already years ago in his masterful article „History, Modernity and Gnosticism“ was that Gnosticism was a dynamic force in history that was „flexible, adaptable, and capable of producing variant upon variant to bewilder the eye — yet still unmistakably identifiable by its spiritual root nature as the force that drives it to produce the fruits by which it will be known“<sup>29</sup>.

When we look at Gnosticism in this light, we come to appreciate that it is not a doctrine or set of doctrines about reality. It is not a knowledge, if by knowledge we mean knowledge about a certain state of affairs, just as Bloom had pointed out. Gnosticism could best be described as a continuous struggle against the world and its so-called knowledge in the name of something that the Gnostic places outside the world in order to endow it with a power, a force that could ultimately negate, destroy the cosmos.

In this context it is first of all helpful to remind oneself of some rather useful distinctions between Gnosticism and other forms of alienation made by Eric Voegelin in several places in his work. Most directly, Voegelin addressed the question of alienation and Gnosticism in the 1967 Ingersoll Lecture „Immortality: Experience and Symbol.“<sup>30</sup> Voegelin’s claim is

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<sup>29</sup> Gregor Sebba, „History, Modernity and Gnosticism“, in *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness and Politics*, ed. by Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, Stuttgart: Klett - Cotta, 240.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Voegelin, „Immortality: Experience and Symbol“, in *Published Essays 1966 - 1985*, Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1990. Vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*.

that alienation is universal and its symbolisms are the manifestation of a „mood of existence just as fundamental as anxiety“. It may be useful to quote Voegelin’s definition of alienation in its entirety because it is central to my subsequent argument:

„The symbol »alienation« is meant to express a feeling of estrangement from existence in time because it estranges us from the timeless: we are alienated from the world in which we live when we sense it to be the cause of our alienation from the world to which we truly belong; we become strangers in the world when it compels conformity to a deficient mode of existence that would estrange us from existence in truth. In further elaboration of the symbolism, existence in time can become an »alien world«, or a »foreign country«, or a »desert« in which the wanderer from another world has lost his way; or the man thrown into this alien environment may find his direction and engage in a »pilgrim’s progress«, or an »ascent from the cave«, or a prolonged »wandering in the desert« that will ultimately lead him to the »promised land«; or he may adapt himself to the ways of the strangers and find his home among them, so that the alien world becomes the true world and the true world an alien world – a problem that has occupied the Hellenic poets and philosophers from Hesiod to Plato. [...]

Alienation, it appears from the symbols, is a mood of existence just as fundamental as anxiety. For the symbols of alienation are recognizable as hypostases of the poles of existential tension. The »world« we discern in the perspective of our existence to partake of both time and the timeless is dissociated, under the pressure of the mood, into »this world« of existence in time and the »other world« of the timeless; and as we »exist« in neither the one nor the other of these worlds but in the tension between time and the timeless, the dissociation of the »world« transforms us into »strangers« to either one of the hypostatized worlds.“<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Voegelin, *Published Essays*, 83 f.

Once again we must speak about time, even when we go beyond the specific Gnostic experiences and turn to the mood of alienation. Voegelin's description of the „mood“ is based on a philosophy of consciousness that was actually formulated in opposition to the Gnostic forms of consciousness with their anti-cosmic „subjectivism“. If we follow Voegelin's description, then we don't live in this world of time but we exist in the tension of time and the timeless, just as in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, frequently quoted by Voegelin: „History is the intersection of the timeless and time.“ The Gnostic who wants to answer the „fall into time“ with the „fall out of time“ is only more radical in his experience of alienation than the countless others who experience the „mood“.

On the other hand, Voegelin's analyses of alienation in general and Gnosticism in particular are so poignant because the center of his philosophy of consciousness is the antithesis to the Gnostic experience.<sup>32</sup> I would go so far as to argue that without Hegel's Gnostic speculation and Voegelin's ever growing knowledge of the neoplatonic and Gnostic systems his own philosophy of consciousness might have remained confined to the phenomenological level that we find in many of his letters to Alfred Schütz. While there would be nothing wrong with this, it must be noted that the creation of a philosophy of consciousness that could be the *terra firma* from which to launch his attacks against the Gnostics, ancient and modern, became Voegelin's overriding concern. Just as the ancient Gnostics had in part created their mythologies in direct

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<sup>32</sup> It is no accident that Voegelin remarked, both in personal conversations as well as in his late essays, how dependent, as it were, Plato's philosophical terminology and his thought in general were on the surrounding Sophistic discourse. Philosophy, for Voegelin, does not occur in a vacuum but is directly tied to the surrounding or competing disorder and its languages.

antithesis to the the myth of the Jewish Creator God, so they themselves needed to be displaced by a philosophy that was prepared to counter all their arguments. The *agon* remains intrinsic to any debate about Gnosticism.

But to return to the main argument, the nature of modernity and Sloterdijk's polemics against Voegelin: is the nature of modernity Gnostic and how does this Gnosticism manifest itself? Voegelin's best-known statements about Gnosticism, those contained in *The New Science of Politics* (1952), *Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis* (1959), and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (1968) stirred up controversy precisely because there Voegelin aimed at the heart of the self-understanding of the modern intellectual and his politics. There, the theme is not alienation, not the Gnostic hatred of the cosmos, not the fall into time, but precisely the opposite: the Gnostic quest for certainty, for *gnosis*.

Gnosticism appeared as a millennial movement with its roots in antiquity and its modern development during the sectarian Middle Ages, until it entered the stage of history fully armed with the arsenals of modern science. Voegelin had accused the Gnostics of jettisoning the uncertainty of the *cognitio fidei* for the certainty of a decapitated reality and an immanentized meaning of existence. And while he acknowledged that not all Gnostics represented the same mental or psychological type, that there was an intellectual Gnosis, an emotional Gnosis, and finally a volitional, activist Gnosis, Voegelin wanted to make it clear that all three types were engaged in the same quest, the quest for „self-salvation“ through „civilizational activity“ understood in the sense of Pascal's *divertissement*, „a *divertissement* which demonically absorbed into itself the eternal destiny of man and substituted for the life of the

spirit.“<sup>33</sup> The Gnostic „exuberance“ was the result of the release of human forces that appeared unexpectedly in the process of building a civilization that restricted itself to „intramundane activity“. Voegelin speaks in this context of „the truly magnificent spectacle of Western progressive society“: „an apocalypse of civilization.“<sup>34</sup>

To sum up: self-salvation is a demonic enterprise that becomes possible when reality is reduced to the „intramundane“ and stripped of its transcendent meaning. In the process of working toward this self-salvation, hitherto unknown forces were released that led to the unprecedented civilizational feats in Western societies but also to the totalitarian systems of a Stalin or a Hitler. This is the nature of modernity.

Voegelin’s emphasis on the activist side of modern Gnosticism continued in his lectures on the subject delivered at the University of Munich in 1958 and published in English under the title *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. But the emphasis had shifted slightly, from the indictment of the modern mass-movements to the analysis of the thought-patterns, as it were, of the fathers of these movements, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. As he put it in the 1960 essay „Ersatzreligion“, Voegelin’s concern had shifted from the phenomenon to its „ontic roots“ and the reduction of the phenomenon to „ontological type concepts“.<sup>35</sup>

Whether the results of Voegelin’s analysis were either persuasive or productive is a question I do not want to answer

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<sup>33</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 129. Voegelin’s main argument against modern Gnosticism precedes this quote in Section 4 of Chapter IV.

<sup>34</sup> *New Science*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 114.

here. It can, however, be said that the analysis helped Voegelin to clarify further his own philosophical position, and thus perhaps the best passages deal with his own understanding of faith, philosophy, and reality. The reader senses that this is not Voegelin's last word on the subject of Gnosticism, exhaustive as the catalogue of Gnostic misconceptions of reality appears to be.

Without going into the details of this catalogue, I venture to say that Voegelin was letting polemics get into the way of philosophical depth in his characterization of the Gnostic project of salvation. Granted, his overriding interest at the time was a general theory that would comprehend the modern political and social activist and his attempts at totalizing human existence in the political systems of Communism, Facism, National Socialism, or what J. L. Talmon had called „totalitarian democracy“. With the stress on the activist aspect of Gnosticism, it was easy for Voegelin to characterize a modernity that is clearly marked by such activism as Gnostic.

But the question has been asked repeatedly whether Voegelin's strong emphasis on the activist element in Gnosticism does not open his critique of modernity up to just the kind of criticism that was launched by Sloterdijk? After all, a much better case could be made for the exact opposite, namely, that the Gnostic is by definition a quietist since his negation of the cosmos ultimately can be nothing less than a negation of action. Voegelin would have countered this argument by saying, as he did, that there is a specific new ingredient that helps alter the heretic Gnosticism that accompanies Christianity „from its very beginnings“. For the activist Gnosticism that Voegelin correlates to the rise of modernity is not the variant that necessarily had to become

dominant. The activist element could only come to the fore if it was prompted by another, simultaneous development, and that occurred in the form of the speculation on the meaning of history such as Joachim of Flora's speculation of the three realms. Joachim's speculation, in turn, accompanied the „civilizational expansiveness of Western society“ and this coming-of-age.

In the search for the redefinition of the meaning of Western society which could no longer be that of Saint Augustine's idea of the *saeculum senescens*, Gnosticism could play its seminal part. „Gnosis“, Voegelin acknowledges, „does not by inner necessity lead to the fallacious construction of history which characterizes modernity since Joachim.“<sup>36</sup> The Gnostic quest for certainty thus shifted from the transcendental certainty of the Alien God to a new immanent God, as it were, History, and the activist worshipped this new God in the form of *science*. Voegelin concludes:

„And, finally, with the prodigious advancement of science since the seventeenth century, the new instrument of cognition would become, one is inclined to say inevitably, the symbolic vehicle of the Gnostic truth. In the Gnostic speculation of scientism this particular variant reached its extreme when the positivist perfecter of science replaced the era of Christ by the era of Comte. Scientism has remained to this day one of the strongest Gnostic movements in Western society; and the immanentist pride in science is so strong that even the special sciences have each left a distinguishable sediment in the variants of salvation through physics, economics, sociology, biology, and psychology.“<sup>37</sup>

I consider this Voegelin's most succinct account of the reasons

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<sup>36</sup> *New Science*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> *New Science*, 127.

why the nature of modernity is in fact Gnostic, if one accepts the „knowledge aspect“ of Gnosticism, as the German preference for the original term *Gnosis* suggests. The fact that Voegelin later partially modified his thesis anyway, as his remarks at Notre Dame University on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *New Science* made clear to the audience present, should not detract from the main point of his insight into the nature of Gnosticism.

Much like Jonas, Voegelin not only emphasized the „knowledge aspect“ but also the adaptability and flexibility of Gnosticism, its occurrence in many variants and in different historical and cultural contexts, something that Gregor Sebba had mentioned in his essay.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Jonas' use of Spengler's idea of *pseudomorphosis* as his methodological tool for the separation of „Logos der Gnosis“<sup>39</sup> from its cultural and historical forms finds Voegelin's tacit agreement.

In his later work, Voegelin did return to those fundamental aspects of Gnosticism which Jonas had called „der Logos der Gnosis“ and which express themselves in its mythical symbolisms far more distinctly than in the activist ideologies of modern social engineers. And to those aspects we must return as well. For, as the long quote from the essay on immortality shows, the „mood of alienation“ is older and more basic than Gnosticism itself, but there are degrees of intensity. Gnosticism is clearly one of the most radical, most intense forms of this mood, but whether it is intrinsically different

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<sup>38</sup> See note 29.

<sup>39</sup> It is best to consult the original German edition of Jonas' opus magnum for this purpose, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Erster Teil: Die mythologische Gnosis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1964, 94 f.

from other forms of alienation remains to be seen.

More than fifteen years after the publication of *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin was working on a universal theory of history, and the symbols of humanity's experiences throughout time had become more important than the problem of modernity. Alienation symbols are universal, their Gnostic variants are not. In Voegelin's words:

„I conclude, therefore, that the appearance of alienation symbols does not mark any of the historical variants as Gnostic, even though in the Gnostic context they are remarkably elaborate. The problems of Gnosis lie elsewhere.“<sup>40</sup>

Where they exactly lie cannot be determined through the kind of studies that primarily account for what Voegelin calls the „variable part“ of the Gnostic systems and Jonas calls *pseudomorphosis*. Rather, they have to lie in an area of reality that is accessible only to the highly differentiated consciousness which emerges out of intense experiences of transcendence.

When I said earlier that Voegelin's own philosophy owes much to his study of ancient and modern Gnosticism from Valentinus to Hegel, I failed to add that there is as much affinity as there is opposition between Voegelin and the objects of his study, an affinity that has to do with the respective experiences of transcendence. But above all, it is a matter of how experiences of transcendence are symbolized. And here Voegelin's studies have yielded results that I consider absolutely essential not only to the understanding of Gnosticism but our understanding of the symbolizations of

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<sup>40</sup> *Published Essays*, 86.

transcendence in the various modes of alienation, as well as the languages of rebellion against transcendence. Literary scholarship has barely begun to make use of Voegelin's insights in these areas.

I believe that his central insight is most clearly expressed in a discussion of the Gospel of John contained in the introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*. There Voegelin set out to explain the problems resulting from the beginning of the gospel and the dense language of the opening sentences: „In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.“ Given the prominent position of the Gospel of John in all the great speculative efforts of modernity since Joachim of Flora, be they philosophical, theological, or literary, the meaning of the passage is also central to the present set of questions, those of literature and Gnosis. The underlying problem was formulated by Voegelin in a passage that I must cite in its entirety because the problem cannot be paraphrased.

„Though the divine reality is one, its presence is experienced in the two modes of the Beyond and the Beginning. The Beyond is present in the immediate experience of movements in the psyche; while the presence of the divine Beginning is mediated through the experience of the existence and intelligible structure of things in the cosmos. The two modes require two different types of language for their adequate expression. The immediate presence in the movements of the soul requires the revelatory language of consciousness. This is the language of seeking, searching, and questioning, of ignorance and knowledge concerning the divine ground, of futility, absurdity, anxiety, and alienation of consciousness, of being moved to seek and question, of being drawn toward the ground, of turning around, of return, illumination, and rebirth. The presence mediated by the existence and order of things in the cosmos requires the mythical language of the creator-god or Demiurge, of a divine force that creates, sustains, and

preserves the order of things.”<sup>41</sup>

The two languages and the correlative two modes of transcendence experienced as the presence of the Beyond on the one hand and the abysmal depth of the past of Genesis provide the matrix from which arise all possible responses to reality as such. This matrix does not separate the two modes and their responsive languages cleanly but more often than not presents a composite that may please the poet but leaves the philosopher less than satisfied. Yet the matrix is not the result of a logical incongruity but represents the ambiguity of existence itself. It represents a problem that is not about to go away at a time when we have become so unsure of the status of experiences of transcendence altogether.

Applied to the question of the Gnostic myth, however, the insight into the dual ways of symbolizing transcendence becomes crucial. For it provides us with the key to an understanding of the attraction of Gnosticism to the artist in general and the poet in particular. Since the artist’s language is the mythical language of creation – even today –, the alienated artist, the Gnostic poet, whose immediate experience of divine reality is in stark contrast to the equally strong absence of the divine from the world has to fall back on the language of the Beginning because the reality of immediate divine presence is in contradiction to the immanent world surrounding us.

The Gnostic, whether ancient or modern, exists in the cold reality of a world from which God is absent and which in fact is constructed in such a manner as to prevent man from uniting with the reality of the Beyond. Redemption becomes a matter

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<sup>41</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, Volume IV of *Order and History*, Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974, 17 f.

of time, time past or time future, but never time present. The Gnostic must abolish time because, as Voegelin also has seen very clearly, he operates with the „fallacy“ that the consciousness of the Beyond could be „expanded“ to the Beginning; and thus in one way or another, all Gnostic speculative systems must expand „the immediate experience of divine presence in the mode of the Beyond [...] to comprehend a knowledge of the Beginning that is accessible only in the mode of mediated experience“, that which we would call time, evolution, cosmology.<sup>42</sup>

The „precreational psychodrama“ of „before there was a cosmos“, as Voegelin has called the direction which Gnostic speculation must take, has become so familiar to us that we hardly recognize its Gnostic roots anymore. It appears in such questionable shapes as Freud’s or Jung’s „unconscious“, the Big Bang and the Black Holes of physics and, in its purest modes, in the great constructions of modern literature since Romanticism. What Bloom identified as the core of the Gnostic experience, the agonistic lying against time, is in my opinion even more adequately described and analyzed in Voegelin’s idea of the two modes and the corresponding two languages. The task of liberating the pneuma from its cosmic prison is the logical consequence of the impossibility of experiencing of the divine presence in the here and now. Thus, the Gnostic must resort to the rebellion against the creator-god from whom originates the evil of the cosmos. In order for the rebellion to become a successful operation, the Gnostic needs the symbolic knowledge of the Beginning in the form of the precreational psychodrama that characterizes so much of Gnostic thought and which we will later rediscover in Thomas

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<sup>42</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 19.

Mann's ironically refracted version of the „Romance of the Soul“. The Gnostic must return to a beginning that cannot be a cosmic beginning but must instead be „personal“ beginning, as Voegelin rightly stresses when he says:

„Society and the cosmos of which society is a part tend to be experienced as a sphere of disorder, so that the sphere of order in reality contracts to personal existence in tension toward the divine Beyond. The area of reality that can be experienced as divinely ordered thus suffers a severe diminution.“<sup>43</sup>

Voegelin's „contraction of divine order to personal existence“ is of course nothing else than the critical reformulation of what Sloterdijk had meant when he said: „With *gnosis* begins the translation of the life of the soul from nature into history.“

#### IV. The Syncretistic Character of the Gnostic Myth — Then and Now

The analysis of the Gnostic consciousness attempted in the previous section has yielded some results. Not only should it have become clear that there is a kind of timeless modernity about Gnostic thought that puts into question the very meaning of modernity itself, but there is now also a clearly definable Gnostic „logic“ that distinguishes Gnosticism from other forms of alienated consciousness. The Gnostic hermeneutic at which we had arrived at the end of the section on Bloom must now be discussed in terms of this logic.

The logic I am speaking of is that of a consciousness that

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<sup>43</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 22.

knows itself as part of the divine *pneuma* surrounded by a non-pneumatic world from which the divine is by definition absent. The appearance of the divine *pneuma* in the human *pneuma* in an otherwise non-divine world — that is the shocking fact that needs explanation. But since the explanation cannot be found *within* the world — for the Gnostic the world is not a process — it is neither evolutionary nor transparent for a divine Ground of Being, it can only be found in the recourse to the mythical beginning during which the forces of the psychodrama responsible for the current state were put in place. Gnosticism is a mythological hermeneutic, not incidentally but by necessity. *Gnosis*, the specifically Gnostic knowledge is anything but a contemplative vision; it is the true knowledge of the story of how the catastrophe came about that separated man's self from its divine origin.

Corroboration for this thesis can be found nearly everywhere, once one starts to look for it. As Hans Blumenberg put it in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*:

„The world is the labyrinth of the stray *pneuma*; as the cosmos it is the order of disaster, the system of a trap. Gnosticism is not in need of a theodicy, for the good God did not get involved in the world.“<sup>44</sup>

Small wonder then that Gnosticism never was much of a theology but a hermeneutic of the order of disaster.

Jacob Taubes gave this aspect of Gnosticism perhaps the most profound articulation when he spoke of the „dogmatic myth of Gnosticism“ in an essay by the same title. There he asked the

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<sup>44</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, 140. My translation. An English translation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition of 1976 appeared under the title *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. by Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983.

question that corresponds to Voegelin's idea of the Gnostic „psychodrama“ and Bloom's notion of Gnostic „revisionism“ or „misreading“. What Taubes means by „dogmatic myth“ is the problem that Gnosticism is nothing less than an original spiritual symbolism but a latecomer in a situation in which the spiritual field is already occupied by allegoresis, the medium of the demythologizing efforts of the Hellenistic Stoa on the one hand, and by the monotheistic religion of Judaism on the other.

Nature, according to Taubes, has ceased to be the stage where the mythical gods, men, and things play out the drama of the cosmos. The stage has become empty while the revealed monotheistic religion of Judaism transfers the encounter between the „true“ God and man to the stage of history. Gnosticism rejects both, nature as well as history, whereas the stage of Gnosticism is of course the inner man, the soul, the spirit, the *pneuma*. The drama is about the rebellion against the Jewish Creator-God and his creation, the language used to enact the drama is that of the Greek and Near-Eastern myth and the multitude of philosophical discourses of late antiquity. Syncretistically, Gnosticism, a belated spiritual form, as already Bloom noted, blends mythical and philosophical symbolisms into its uniquely Gnostic form, so that Taubes can even assert that Gnosticism is not just outwardly syncretistic but that syncretism is Gnosticism's inner character.

In Taubes' view, Gnosticism marks the crisis of the monotheistic revealed religion by reinterpreting, Bloom would say „revising“, the symbolism of the supramundane Creator-God. Gnosticism operates with the symbols of a monotheism that has become dogmatic and overlays these symbols with the spectrum of symbols that form the Pantheon of late antiquity.

But as the purpose of this Gnostic operation is not to replace the Jewish with the pagan symbolism but to assert its own truth, it is free to use both in the service of establishing its own, the Gnostic myth. And the Gnostic myth is, as Taubes convincingly argues in his discussion of the so-called „Naassene Preaching“, the myth of Anthropos as the highest being and the story of its embroilment in this world: „Man to an extent unknown to all of ancient myth becomes the center of mythology.“<sup>45</sup>

In order to tell this story the Gnostics were able to employ the whole array of mythical, dogmatic, and philosophical symbolisms late antiquity had to offer. One could argue, as Taubes does, that the Gnostic myth resumes the themes of the archaic myths, but it does not say what they say. It rather presupposes that an irreparable split between gods and men, God and world has already occurred which can only be overcome through an act of consciousness. The Gnostic myth is not really myth, it is not „naive“ but possesses its own special character not dissimilar to the romantic longing to close the abyss that separates God and His creation. *Gnosis* is not just any knowledge, it claims to be knowledge about the absolute Beginning and, as Taubes puts it, „in the Gnostic myth the idea of knowledge as a moment in the development of the mythical drama is already included. The act of knowing is being performed in the proclamation of the Gnostic myth itself.“<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jacob Taubes, „Der dogmatische Mythos der Gnosis“, in: *Vom Kult zur Kultur: Bausteine zu einer historischen Kritik der Vernunft*, ed. by Aleida and Jan Assmann, et.al., Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996, 103. My translation. The essay appeared first in *Terror und Spiel*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971, 145-156.

<sup>46</sup> Taubes, *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, 107.

Taubes' analysis seems to confirm our earlier claim that Gnosticism speaks the „language of the Beginning“. In doing so, it purports to be mythical without really being a mythical form of knowledge. It shares this characteristic with a great deal of modern „knowledge“, and certainly most expressly with the knowledge of modern poetry. It avails itself of the elements of ancient mythologies, but it does not need to take them seriously, for they serve only as pieces in its own doctrinal story of the errant *pneuma* and its embroilment in the worlds and eons created by the demiurge and his archons. Gnosticism is, to repeat the point made earlier, a syncretistic mythology not because it arose in the culture of late antiquity but because it is a direct reaction to the dogmatization of myth that characterizes not only Judaism and Christianity but to a considerable extent the late pagan culture itself.

It is in this sense that Taubes casts doubt on one of Jonas' fundamental tenets, that of the ahistorical, existential nature of the Gnostic myth. To Taubes, the Gnostic myth shares in the dogmatic tradition to which it owes its genesis. Thus, Taubes concludes, Gnosticism, despite its ahistorical demeanor, is more closely related to the apocalyptic tradition than is commonly believed; only it moves the site of the encounter between the „true“ God and man from the arena of history to the interior of man, his soul, his *pneuma*.

But here Taubes appears to be somewhat too Judaeocentric in his interpretation. Granted, he correctly identifies the difference between the apocalyptic and the Gnostic modes of thought, but he does not offer a satisfactory explanation for this difference. Thus, Voegelin's analysis of Gnosticism in the context of the ecumenic expansion of empires has to my mind far more explanatory value. „In pragmatic history“, Voegelin

remarks, „Gnosticism arises from six centuries of imperial expansion and and civilizational destruction“<sup>47</sup> and, as opposed to the societal and historical coherence that still makes apocalyptic sects possible, Gnosticism represents a further radicalization of the dissolution of the societies of the Ancient Near East. Voegelin makes the necessary distinction between the „phenotypically oriented conception“ of Gnosticism and the „genetic conception“. If we concentrate too much on the psychodramatic variables, we lose sight of the essential structure of Gnosticism.

Taubes' crisis of monotheistic religion, his idea of the dogmatic myth, all this has explanatory value, but it does not explain what makes Gnosticism so different and so constant a force in history. Voegelin comes as close to an explanation of this puzzle as one can at this point. He brings together the common experience of the disordering effect of imperial expansion after Alexander the Great, the resulting anti-cosmism in Israelite-Judaic history, the epiphany of Christ, and, last but not least, „the paradoxical desire, stemming from the noetic differentiation of philosophy, to bring the disorder of reality, as well as the salvation from it, into the form of a well-ordered, intelligible system“.<sup>48</sup>

None of this contradicts anything that has been said earlier; rather, it puts into perspective the common structure of the seemingly disparate elements that make up Gnosticism: its a-cosmism, its relation to Judaism and Christianity, its predilection for the systematic, and its continued adherence to the mythical story. But more importantly, Voegelin points out

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<sup>47</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 23.

something that is not sufficiently stressed by even the best interpreters of Gnosticism: the transformation undergone by the pre-ecumenic symbols used in the Gnostic psychodrama. The symbols of the cosmological societies of the Ancient Near East are being changed due to the pneumatic nature of the Gnostic experience which was not able to express itself in its own indigenous symbolic language. The „dogmatic myth“, as Taubes calls it, is in reality Gnosticism’s inability to find an „adequate pneumatic differentiation“, that is to say, Gnosticism’s difficulty of expressing „an anti-cosmic contraction with the pro-cosmic means of the cosmological gods“<sup>49</sup>.

And here it is Voegelin’s conclusion that goes to the heart of what I am trying to argue. If Gnosticism historically failed to develop its own symbolic language in which to express its pneumatic experiences, it is because the Gnostic experience of what Voegelin calls the „contraction of divine order to personal experience“ permits the use of all the symbols available in the surrounding societies for the purpose of articulating the personal experience of the fall and salvation of the *pneuma*. The very nature of Gnosticism is syncretistic or, as one might say facetiously, the Gnostic symbolic dramas prefigure those of the Hollywood dream-machine. The indiscriminate use of symbolism from any known culture is part of the Gnostic story. But as such it also is part of the Gnostic experience, as Voegelin argues persuasively, when he sums up the problem of Gnostic syncretism:

„If this syncretism is taken as much for granted as it is in the phenotypical convention, important experiential implications may be overlooked. For in the concrete case of the

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<sup>49</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 22.

precreational psychodrama, the symbols have separated from the function they had in the cultural context of their origin; the imagination of the Gnostic thinkers moves them freely in the game of liberating the pneuma from the cosmos. The divine figures are no longer the intracosmic gods of a society in cosmological form; though they still carry the same names, they are a new type of symbols created by the spiritual response of the experience of existential alienation in the ecumenical-imperial form.

Syncretistic spiritualism, I venture to suggest, must be recognized as a symbolic form *sui generis*. In the multicivilizational empire it arises from the cultural area of less-differentiated consciousness as the means of coping with the problem of universal humanity in resistance to an unsatisfactory ecumenic order.<sup>50</sup>

The imagination of the Gnostic thinkers, Voegelin saw correctly, produces a new type of imaginative thinking that is a free-floating play, unhampered, as it were, by earthbound restrictions such as culture and political society. The Gnostic, we begin to suspect, is the prototypical poet, what is more, the prototypical modern poet who lets his imagination roam freely through the gardens of images and symbols that were planted by others. The central role of the imagination is easy to understand when seen in the context of the Gnostic a-cosmism or rather its anti-cosmism. There are two distinct functions the Gnostic imagination fulfills.

On the one hand, the demonic cosmos and its evil creator must be depicted as the deterministic maze as which they are experienced, so as to distinguish them clearly from the Gnostic pneumatic Self. This is where the Gnostic myth employs the full arsenal of images available in the surrounding culture or cultures, and it did that in late antiquity just as successfully as

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<sup>50</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 24.

it does it again in its activist or literary revivals in the modern age. Let us call this aspect of the Gnostic imagination *syncretistic allegory*.

On the other hand, the point of origin of this Self, the utterly transcendent beyond of the alien God-Man, unutterably different, to be sure, must somehow be accessible to the *gnosis* that will rejoin the two parts of the pneumatic Self, the God-Self and the Man-Self. This is the mirror-world of Mannerist, Symbolist art and poetry, for the only symbolic way in which this union can be represented is that of the narcissistic Self.

One has to be very careful here not to confuse the Gnostic „Void“, the Emersonian „Abyss“ with the experiences of transcendence that gave rise to the *theologia negativa*, although the boundaries are often blurred, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Harold Bloom’s work. And there is, as Jacob Taubes noted in a conference paper entitled „Noten zum Surrealismus“, the modern „beyond“ of the Surrealist work of art, hermetically closed against the world. By emphasizing the Gnostic experiences over what could be called Gnostic *topoi* or *motifs*, Taubes’ analysis stays away from the kind of intellectual history that relativizes such experiences. For him the Gnostic and Hermetic motifs that have been handed down to our time are nothing but derivative products that are found in the rubble of tradition and that cannot form the basis for a unified structural interpretation.

What remains is the insight that „the nihilistic a-cosmism of the Surrealist experience ‘repeats’ the nihilistic a-cosmism of the Gnosticism of late antiquity in our modern world“. The „repetition“ occurs under seemingly changed conditions if one is to say that the ancient cosmos and the world of the modern

natural sciences could not possibly have anything to do with each other. The „beyond“ of the closed cosmos of antiquity could not be the „beyond“ of the modern universe. The boundary, the horizon of the ancient cosmos is gone, the „beyond“ of a transmundane God and the notion of transcendent, a-cosmic, hermetically different pneumatic core of man can hardly be the experience of modern poetry. But there precisely lies the problem, that is to say, we must get away from the symbolic grid and return to the engendering experience.

The modern poet since Baudelaire, Taubes argues, experiences the deterministic order of a world governed by iron-clad laws of nature as a tyrannical, anti-human, unimaginative order against which he protests with his imagination and in the name of the imagination. It does not matter to him that there can hardly be a „beyond“ of the modern universe as there was a „beyond“ of the ancient cosmos. In quoting Louis Aragon’s statement „Seule signification du mot Au-delà, tu es dans la poésie“, Taubes comes to the conclusion: „Poetry is the only Beyond, not because it forms an arch between „this world“ and the „Beyond“, between Above and Below; no, it *is* the Beyond itself.“<sup>51</sup>

Taubes thus confirms Bloom’s view that poetry is *gnosis*. The much-maligned subjectivity of modern literature is, therefore, not incidental but rather its premise. The subjective element finds its expression in the Romantic revaluation of the imagination and the simultaneous loss of the referential nature of the poetic symbol. I would add that Taubes’ observation of the loss of worldliness (*Welthaftigkeit*) that characterizes the

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Taubes, *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, 138 ff. My translation.

symbolism of Romantic allegory and makes it sort of noncommittal is perhaps the key to the problem of ancient and modern syncretism. Syncretism is ultimately *unverbindlich* because the experiences it symbolizes are those of consciousness disengaged from the concreteness of existence here and now.

Moreover, and that creates the new problem of the modern imagination, the metaphysical circle of the ancient cosmos has been burst and the Gnostic protest against it, the symbolism of its negation of the cosmos is no longer self-evident for us. Perhaps nobody saw this more clearly in our century than the young Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* which is above all the description of literature in a world from which God has withdrawn, Taubes notes.<sup>52</sup> Here, the elements of Taubes' critique blend with all the others I have discussed in this essay.

The modern protest is a negation of something that cannot be as easily localized as the ancient cosmos. It is a negation of the very referentiality of language, of the mimetic, and ultimately of the symbolic correspondence between subject and world. This is the message of all deconstructionist critical theories since Nietzsche and it also accounts for the obsessive attempts of modern writers from James Joyce to Samuel Beckett or Thomas Bernhard to create works of art to end all art. But how it came to that point needs to be examined in some greater detail, and there is perhaps no other literary work that sheds as much light on this question as the work of Thomas Mann.

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<sup>52</sup> I am summarizing Taubes' responses to his critics during the third session of a conference on modern poetry, reprinted in *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, pp.140-159.

## V.

### The Romance of the Soul

In turning to Thomas Mann and his work, we find that the protest did not have to take on the radical forms found in the authors just mentioned. In Mann's work rebellion is replaced by irony, and *mimesis* gives way to parody. But what Mann shares with other moderns is the fact that he, too, has to deal with the problem of the *unverbindliche* syncretism that resulted from the a-cosmic subjectivism of the Romantics. As Erich Heller put it:

„Time was when poets and artists merely improved upon the common mythology, giving it the subtlety and depth of their exact imaginative minds; yet in more recent times it has fallen to the lot of art and literature to engage in the paradoxical business of creating publically unrecognizable truths.“<sup>53</sup>

The 19th century experiences this as the rift between artist and bourgeois, still the main theme of Mann's early work. The artist *knows* that he is different from the bourgeois, that he is a stranger in the latter's world and thus condemned to make this estrangement the theme of his art. The times when a common mythology embraced both the artist and his audience are long gone and, one could add, some of the most heroic moments in modern art have been those quixotic ones when the artist wanted to restore the common mythology by artificial means, the theme of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and the spectacle of Wagner's musical drama. Thomas Mann always considered himself heir to both.

Small wonder then that Mann told the story of these moments

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<sup>53</sup> Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German*, Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961, 210 f.

of recapturing the common mythology through art over and over again, but it was twice in his life that he succeeded in telling it so well that the story could remind the audience of something that is also the stuff of which common mythology is made. I am referring to *Joseph and his Brothers* and *Doctor Faustus*. In the first instance Mann revisited mythical time itself, the time of the beginning and the origin of Joseph's individual consciousness, in the second he examined the artist's role as the creator of a new consciousness in the light of the one indigenous myth created in Europe on the threshold to its modern age, the myth of Faust.

These two myths are but two different versions of Mann's fundamental artistic concern, the slow differentiation of the Self, the I, from the matrix of the surrounding unconscious social and historical reality, in Freudian terms, the process of „ego-formation.“ In the language of Schopenhauer's philosophy Mann speaks of this differentiation in all his works, but unlike Freud he remains ambivalent regarding the Ego and its slow colonization of the surrounding unconscious reality of the *Es*. Here lies the source of Mann's highly personal form of irony. Schopenhauer's unique way of blending the German subject-object problem with Platonism and the philosophy of India led him to a kind of Gnosticism that gets away from the a-cosmism of the ancient Gnostics because his *pleroma* is in the here and now of the free contemplation of beauty. Beyond that, his blind will, the equivalent of the creation of the evil Demiurge, allows only one other form of freedom, freedom through death. Here, Thomas Mann's own experience sets him apart from the death-world of the Romantics, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and even Freud.

He is not prepared to see in the unconscious something ultimately opposed to the Ego or, better, the real Self. The opposition of Self and non-Self, the essential experience of Gnostics since antiquity, is ironically relativized in Mann's work, made into a story, a process both social and historical, a process with potentially many plots and outcomes. The opposition between Cartesian rationalism and the return to myth, beginning with Vico and flowering in romantic philosophy, became the modern version of the opposition between Self and non-Self. Mann believed that this opposition could not be overcome through a victory of either side, after a kind of Manichaean battle between light and darkness. But he also considered it a very real opposition, perhaps his own life's central problem, and this is what he explored in his work. „Myth and psychology“, as Mann phrased the manner in which the conflict between unconscious and consciousness became visible in our time, was to become the symbolic vocabulary with which he expressed his experience.

In this sense, from *Death in Venice* to *The Magic Mountain*, from *Joseph and his Brothers* to *Doctor Faustus* and *Felix Krull*, Mann's art is the art of belatedness, to use Harold Bloom's term, it is parody and irony. It parodies the romantic myth and at the same time it parodies its rational opposition. Thus it ironizes both, and where we learned from Bloom and Taubes that parody and irony are also elements of the ancient Gnostic myths in their fight against the Judaic Creator-God, we now find in Mann's parodies a different purpose. Mann's parody is genuine imitation; he plays the roles of his predecessors Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but also that of Goethe in order to formulate his humanism which was to come out of a reconciliation of the individualistic and the supra-individualistic. His language *reflects* the preceding myths in an

attempt to find true individuation through imitation, identification with the typical, supra-personal reality of the myth. In this sense, Mann's art is anything but Gnostic.<sup>54</sup>

What it ironizes and parodies is the modern *gnosis*, the myth of the modern artist, his tragic and sometimes comic narcissism, his inability to create something truly new, as perhaps no other narrative shows as clearly as *Death in Venice*. Mann's interest in myth is that of the poet of belatedness, the narrator of a past that is always in danger of becoming a dead past unless it brought back in the form of the periodic feast and its mythical recurrence. At last we recognize in this interest the Nietzschean fascination with eternal return and the resentment of the „it was“, Mann's own version of the „lying against time“.

But Mann's past, his „it was“ is different from Nietzsche's. Its Gnostic connection is more subtle than the Bloomian undoing of the prior myth through its Gnostic anti-myths, the „strong“ readings of modern poetry. The connection lies in the idea that narrative must show the presence of the beginning in the

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<sup>54</sup> The reader who is interested in the sources of Mann's thought on psychology and myth should refer to Manfred Dierks, *Studien zu Mythos und Psychologie bei Thomas Mann: An seinem Nachlaß orientierte Untersuchungen zum „Tod in Venedig“, zum „Zauberberg“ und zur „Joseph“-Tetralogie*, Bern and Munich: Francke Verlag, 1972. Carsten Colpe in his contribution to the Festschrift for Hans Jonas entitled „The Challenge of Gnostic Thought for Philosophy, Alchemy, and Literature“ speaks of Mann's myth-making in *Joseph* as „synthetic myth“, where demythologization produces irony, and theology and anthropology supplement each other. Cf. Barabara Aland, ed, *Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978. See esp, pp.50-54. One of Colpe's students, Klaus Borchers, examined problem of demythologization and irony in a full-length study *Mythos und Gnosis im Werk Thomas Manns: Eine religionswissenschaftliche Untersuchung*, Freiburg: HochschulVerlag, 1980.

„now“. In the final pages to the „Prelude“, Mann states what must be his essential understanding of the role of story-telling. The past is the story-teller’s element, but the story-teller’s past cannot be simply the „dead-and-gone world“ but must be something else.

„To die: that means actually to lose sight of time, to travel beyond it, to exchange for it eternity and presentness and therewith for the first time, life.“<sup>55</sup>

In the mythical eternal recurrence lies the secret of the soul.

„Let the folk be taught that the soul wanders. But the wise know that this teaching is only the garment of the eternal presentness of the soul, and that all life belongs to it, so soon as death shall have broken its solitary prison cell.“<sup>56</sup>

Mann’s myth is Nietzsche’s myth. It stands for the rejection of the „dead past“, for the liberation of the soul in the image of eternal recurrence. Is it another Gnostic myth?

The question permits no quick answer. For the structure of Mann’s novels, from *Buddenbrooks*, to *The Magic Mountain*, to *Joseph*, *Doctor Faustus*, and, yes, even the late high comedy of *Confessions of Felix Krull*, *Confidence-Man* is that of recurrence of an original beginning that is responsible for the present, perhaps most clearly visible in their use of the *leitmotif*. His novels all are constructed as narrative searches for the origins of a present that is experienced as either catastrophic or at least ambivalent, be it the great-grandparent generation of *Buddenbrooks*, the time preceding World War I in *The Magic Mountain*, or the „Descent into Hell“.

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<sup>55</sup> *Joseph*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> *Joseph*, 32 f.

When I argued earlier that the Gnostic myth is not really myth in the naive sense, I must now make a similar argument about Mann's narrative. It also speaks the „language of the beginning“, but it is a beginning that is always a „pre-creational fall“. In many of Mann's stories and all of his novels the question of origin, of ancestry is of the greatest importance as the symbolic expression of that fall, which says: something happened before which split the world into two. There are the mixed origins of Hanno Buddenbrook and Tonio Kröger with their fathers of old Lübeck ancestries and their exotic and artistic mothers, Hans Castorp's two almost mythical grandfathers, there are Joseph's mythical ancestry and the incestual union of the parents of Pope Gregory in *The Holy Sinner*, or the happy bourgeois origins of the charmingly narcissistic Krull. Mann's protagonists recognize themselves in the mirrors of their ancestry, in the mirror of the past and the beginning. Joseph and Felix Krull gaze into their mirrors with narcissistic self-love, others like Tonio Kröger and Hanno Buddenbrook with a recognition of their own estrangement from the world around them. This mythical *Wiedererkennen*, this recognition of one's Self in the past of one's origins, this is the pattern of Mann's stories, and it lends itself only too naturally to a mythical interpretation which Thomas Mann found when he began his greatest parody, that of the story of Joseph and the *Book of Genesis*.

Recognition, repetition, recurrence — these three structure Thomas Mann's novels. They are, at closer inspection, modes of consciousness in which identity and difference move from the instantaneous to the historical and the eternal. There must be a connection between the view the soul has of itself and its beginning, and the story will follow from this initial glance. As Thomas Mann's protagonists look into the mirrors of their

pre-individual stories, they find themselves reflected in them. Recognition, in the final analysis, is the *conscious* rejoining of what was originally separated in the fall. But this is not myth, it is knowledge, *gnosis*.<sup>57</sup> Mann's protagonists look into the mirror, and they see not just themselves but, rejoin, as it were, the precreational universal Self of the *pleroma*, they overcome Schopenhauer's *principium individuationis*.

Mann, ever aware of what he was doing, told the story of this *gnosis* in the „Prelude“ to *Joseph*, called the „Descent into Hell“. The descent into the bottomless well of the past leads past more and more apparent beginnings, but if the narrator expects to find the beginning of man there, the beginning of that Self that is the origin and goal of his search, he will be disappointed. The mythical time of the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, and the Garden of Eden is not where we should look for the origin of man, for all we find in that *real* time of earthly evolution is a nightmarish „Lemurian“ world, not the Garden of Eden but Hell. „Or rather, it was the first accursed state after the Fall.“ Man's true beginning is beyond the depth of the well; „the history of man is older than the material world which is the work of his will, older than life, which rests upon his will.“<sup>58</sup>

Again, there is a Nietzschean turn in this last sentence and at the same time a recognition of a transcendent beginning of man, a puzzling connection between the material creation and

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<sup>57</sup> The still unsurpassed treatment of the relationship between modern Gnosticism and narcissism is Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von den letzten Haltungen*, Salzburg-Leipzig: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1938, especially the chapter on narcissism in volume II.

<sup>58</sup> *Joseph*, 23.

the will that created it. A very important point, because in making it the narrator implicitly denies that man is himself part of the material world and thus at all in need of the kind of knowledge that comes from the forbidden fruit of the garden.

Instead, in the concluding three sections a different story is told, „a very ancient tradition of human thought, based upon man’s truest knowledge of himself“.<sup>59</sup> It is the pointedly syncretistic story of „the doctrines of the East“ of „Avesta, Islam, Manichaeism, Gnosticism and Hellenism“ and it „deals with the figure of the first or first completely human man, the Hebraic *Adam Qadmo*“.<sup>60</sup> In the myths of the „Man of Light“, the *Urmensch*, man’s status as either the God-Man or „son of man“, the prototype of the man of creation, is somewhat uncertain. As God’s champion in the struggle against evil in creation, he is eventually imprisoned by the forces of the evil demiurge, estranged from his origins, and rescued by a second divine emissary „who in some mysterious way was the same as himself, his own higher self“. But as the first man had been imprisoned by the demons of matter, thus the second man and son of God in his descent through the seven spheres partakes of the nature of each and finally, catching sight of his reflection in the waters of matter, he falls in love with his mirror image and thus also becomes entrapped by matter. „In this narcissistic picture, so full of tragic charm, the meaning of the tradition begins to clarify itself“, the narrator continues, concluding that man has now changed from a carrier of the divine will to a being that is moved by longing and is „by that token guilty“. The point of *gnosis* is right here. As much as the narrator later tries to absolve man from guilt, he has identified the narcissistic

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<sup>59</sup> *Joseph*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Joseph*, 23

self-longing as the instant of the fall.

The world is now being divided into the „three personal elements of matter, soul, and spirit“ and the „romance“ consists in the interplay between those three elements. I must resist the temptation to develop Mann’s highly ironic and equally autobiographical reflections on the interplay especially between spirit and soul where the spirit’s role is to persuade the „self-forgetful“ soul to return to its divine origins, a role the spirit plays with less than moderate success. This masterpiece of a „theology of irony“, to use Erich Heller’s term, must not be subjected to analytical dissection. What matters is that Thomas Mann’s careful blending of the symbols of ancient Gnostic myths represents in a sense the final culmination of romantic Gnosticism with its insistence on the primacy of the soul, its unconscious divinity, its formlessness, and its narcissistic entanglement in the realm of matter and form.

The narcissistic romanticism of Mann’s brilliantly charming story can also be read as the ironic equivalent of Schelling’s doctrine of the three potencies. Their unfolding is a three-stage process, from unconscious nature, the first potency (the *pleroma* of the Gnostic divinity), to articulated form and man, the second potency of „the savior and liberator“ (its equivalent being the narcissistic descent of the second emissary), and at last to the realm of freedom of the spirit in the third potency of the „world-soul.“

But there is more. With Schelling, the narrator of the „Prelude“ conceives of the descent into the past as a return of the soul to its divine origin. It is in fact none other than Voegelin who in his chapter on Schelling contained in the forthcoming Volume

VII of the *History of Political Ideas* quotes a passage from the *Weltalter*, where Schelling explains his *gnosis*:

„To man there must be conceded a principle outside and above the world; for how could he alone of all creatures trace the long way of evolutions from the present back to the deepest night of the past, how could he alone ascend to the beginning of the ages, unless there were a principle in him of the beginning of the ages.“

Voegelin, who at the time of writing the chapter on Schelling was not yet aware of the extent of Schelling's Gnostic disposition, goes on to comment: „The human soul has been drawn from the source of all things and is akin to it, and hence 'it has a co-knowledge (*Mitwisserschaft*) of creation.' The soul does not know, 'it rather is itself knowledge'. The historicity of man thus is introduced as a constituent element of speculation.“<sup>61</sup>

Thomas Mann, faithful pupil of Schopenhauer, need not even have been aware of his proximity to Schelling, for the archetypes of this romantic theogonic drama pervade the entire 19th and part of the early 20th century. Schelling's Gnosticism informed not only Schopenhauer but through him Wagner and Nietzsche, and thus a host of moderns who were their disciples. The soul's *Mitwisserschaft* is the center from which emanate the speculative systems and artistic masterworks of modernity, and Thomas Mann's awareness and ironic acceptance of what is at the heart of the self-understanding of modernity makes him its ideal spokesman. Thus it should not surprise us that the narrator of the „Prelude“ even denies any guilt on the part of the soul:

„We can, objectively considered, speak of a „Fall“ of the soul

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<sup>61</sup> I am quoting from the manuscript of „Last Orientation.“

of the primeval light-man, only by over-emphasizing the moral factor. The soul, certainly, has sinned against itself, frivolously sacrificing its original blissful and peaceful state — but not against God in the sense of offending any prohibition of His in its passional enterprise, for such a prohibition, at least according to the doctrine we have received, was not issued.<sup>62</sup>

Neither is it very likely, the narrator continues, that God issued the prohibition to man in the Garden of Eden not to eat from the „tree of knowledge of good and evil“, for why would God put to the test a being that had been „generated out of the knowledge of matter by the soul“ — should we say, the *gnosis* of matter by the soul? The spirit of contradiction who is the second emissary would deny that. Thomas Mann, ever the master of the languages of irony, leaves open the ending of the story. If spirit and soul once were one, does that mean that they are destined sometime to become one again? A Gnostic like Harold Bloom would say, yes, they become one in the poem. Thomas Mann, however attracted by this union he may have been, remained ambivalent, even outright skeptical of such a possibility of Gnostic harmony, as the fall of Adrian Leverkühn tragically illustrates.

## VI. Epilogue

„How does one break through? How does one get into the open?“, Adrian Leverkühn, the artist who fell from grace, asked. The „romance of the soul“ represents one of the most playful versions of the Gnostic myth, and even this myth has

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<sup>62</sup> *Joseph*, 27.

the capability of turning into a *gnosis* if it is not tempered by irony. The answer to Leverkühn's question would have little of the romantic *verve* that the question seems to call for.

Instead, as I have tried to show throughout this essay, „the open“ has to be what Voegelin calls the „horizon in reality“, and thus not a leap into the metacosmos but an understanding of the cosmos „as if one were part of it“, to turn the Gnostic phrase around. I have also meant to emphasize what others before me have demonstrated convincingly — that Gnosticism is not *one thing* but instead a multifaceted companion of our history. Intermittently it had its militant, activist phases, but for the most part the Gnostics have been the reflective ones, always wary of the simple answers.

Whether we can really speak with Sloterdijk and Macho of a „world-revolution of the soul“ with regard to Gnosticism is doubtful, although I do not want to deny that advent of the Platonic soul with its Orphic-Pythagorean origins may constitute such a world-revolution. With Sloterdijk I would say that the central characteristic of Gnostic thought and existence throughout history remains its resistance to simple definitions, even if we make Voegelin's careful distinctions between alienation in general and Gnosticism. With Taubes and Voegelin I argue that the Gnostic myth is essentially syncretistic and playful, and it bears pointing out that Voegelin in a letter to Alfred Schütz has given a very helpful explanation for this syncretism by pointing out that ancient Gnosticism comes out of cosmological cultures where the existence of evil most likely takes on the form of two opposing principles of light and darkness. It can avail itself of all kinds of the surrounding languages and their symbolisms in explaining man's knowledge concerning the existence of evil,

even go as far as unmasking Jehovah as the evil demiurge.

But by declaring the cosmos the place that is non-divine or even anti-divine, the Gnostic empties the world, „de-divinizes“ it in Voegelin’s words, and sets the stage for the epochal process of modernity, called „secularization“. The radical transcendence of the divine, emphasized by ancient Gnosticism, is difficult to maintain, though, for in the final analysis transcendence is not a state of being but a process. Here lie precisely the problems I have discussed at length in Section III of this essay which lead to the „redivinization“ of the secularized world which in Voegelin’s view constitutes the problem of modern Gnosticism. To quote Voegelin one more time:

„Secularization – the particular point you raise – is indeed redivinization (see the comments on Marx and Feuerbach in the book). The new gnosticism is not ancient, compact-cosmological gnosis *before* the differentiation of the transcendence complex; it is not a return to antiquity. Modern gnosticism suffers qualms of conscience from having behind it the standards of a historical reality of a two-thousand-year-old intellectual development, and this development cannot be simply erased, even though awareness of it can be impeded by taboos and by the erection of institutional obstacles. Hence redivinization cannot come forward openly as the appearance of new gods; the knowledge that men are not gods sits too deep for that; somewhere in the semiconsciousness there always lurks the knowledge that the gnostic is in revolt against God. (It is particularly strong in Nietzsche, whom I would call a frustrated mystic of the Pascal type.) The God-denying man knows perfectly well who God is, and that it is not he who is God.“<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Letter dated January 10, 1953, translated by Gregor Sebba and printed in the *Festschrift* for Voegelin *The Philosophy of Order*, edited by Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981, 460 f.

Voegelin's argument here is only possible if one accepts a fundamental premise of his understanding of symbolic knowledge, as I do. When we use the symbol „God“, for instance, we always know of what we speak, even if we are „atheists“. There are no symbolic expressions, Voegelin never tired of saying, which are not interpretations of genuine experiences. „If there are mythical symbols such as ‘gods’ or ‘God’, then there have to be experiences of ‘something’ that can meaningfully be called ‘gods’ or ‘God.’“<sup>64</sup> It is this understanding that guides my own reading of the Gnostic texts ancient or modern as well as the more strictly „literary“ occurrences of Gnostic symbolisms. Thus I have to take Harold Bloom seriously when he speaks of his strong fascination with the Gnostic „God within“ in *Omens of the Millennium*, because he understands the symbolic implications of what he says.

The Gnostic myth in all its sometimes strange flowerings is an intelligible symbolism that speaks with great seriousness and intensity of not being „of this world“. In this phrase everything that I would call Gnosticism is already contained. In the effort to answer the question how I know that I am not of this world, I will always retell, parody, and ironize the story of the „romance of the soul“ in order that others may hear it and understand the meaning of this phrase. *Gnosis* is, as Manfred Sommer says very well, „not a stock of mythical configurations, religious dogmas and philosophical doctrines, fixed once and for all, but a formation that is in itself rich in

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<sup>64</sup> The quote (in my translation) is from a letter to the physicist George Jaffé, dated April 1-3, 1961, located in the Hoover Institution Archives, box 20, file 8.

variants and capable of transformation.“<sup>65</sup>

The knowledge of the Gnostic is never very far from that of the philosopher and the poet, for all of them have learned to see what others call „truths“ as phantasms whose genesis always must be accounted for. Perhaps Gnostics and Skeptics are closer cousins than they would care to admit, and if they are also poets, then recounting the case of Nietzsche might have made my argument better than I may have succeeded in making it here.

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<sup>65</sup> Manfred Sommer, *Evidenz im Augenblick. Eine Phänomenologie der reinen Empfindung*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987, 50. My transl.



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