ENTER THE MAGUS: DISCOVERING ESOTERIC IDEAS IN MODERN FICTION

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This paper is a composite of several earlier publications of mine in which I interpreted literary works dealing with the figure of the magus and various concepts of magic, esotericism, and the occult (see Szőnyi 1998; 2006; 2007; 2013). The reasons I have decided to offer this essay to be included in the volume commemorating the first four Manitoba–Szeged partnership conferences are twofold. The third conference in Szeged (2011) highlighted the theme "Encountering the Unknown" on which occasion I spoke about the iconology of the fantastic. Literature about magic and the occult is obviously in close connection with the unknown and the concept of the fantastic. Furthermore, at the fifth conference, again in Szeged (2015) we explored various approaches to the theme "Discovering the Americas." Here, in my opening address I approached the topic from an autobiographical angle, relating how in America I discovered a new historical and theoretical approach to interpreting the European Renaissance, in particular Shakespeare. In the present paper I try to bring these various themes together and by including my reflections of a famous Canadian novel I also pay tribute to our partners from the other side of the Atlantic.[1]

I.

The Magus (or as some might call him, the Magician) is entering his laboratory. His retorts are full of boiling-bubbling liquids; his mind is on the boil too, nursing dreams, noble or mad ambitions of omniscience, omnipotence, eternal life, the ability to create gold or synthetic life—the famous homunculus. As the Great Work comes to a halt, some supernal help is needed. The Magus now turns to God, praying for more strength, or, resorting to illicit assistance, calls on Satan. Often he is confronted with other men, friends or adversaries, dilettante antiquarians or greedy princes, who look to him with expectation or awe, who try to stop him or urge him to further efforts—but certainly cannot follow him on his dangerous path towards the unknown, the forbidden... Almost invariably the end is failure. The Magus is punished for his arrogant self-conceit, or the *Opus Magnum* is disturbed by intruding bores—the retort blows up or the adept cannot endure the presence of the Devil—until finally the magician is paradigmatically killed among the flames of his laboratory.

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[1] I wrote the original version of this essay in 1987, while, enjoying a Fulbright grant, I worked at the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. At that time I received much—not to be forgotten—help from the staff of both libraries and from professors Frank Baron and Joscelyn Godwin.

The above sketched narrative pattern has roots as old as literature; the archetypal magician-story gained cosmic significance in the Renaissance, and has been popular ever since. Is this a pattern taken from life, or merely from the pressure of literary conventions, the demand of the reading public? Does it follow the logic of scientific investigation, mixing experimentation with the supernatural? Is this all allegory and parable, or does it have a more direct relevance? One might feel surprise that this literary framework has even passed into twentieth century fiction, virtually unshaken by the development of natural sciences and the disqualification of magic as a scientific discipline. Or should we rather see this literary phenomenon as a reaction against the self-assuredness of the natural sciences? Is there any way of reconciling the rational-scientific way of thinking and the magical-occult world view?

This question and many more may bother the reader who finds himself in the web of modern fiction focusing on the theme of the magus, such as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus,* Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Abyss,* Robertson Davies's *What's Bred in the Bone,* or Antal Szerb's *The Pendragon Legend.* Not to mention even more recent and wilder fantasies which paradigmatically address young adult audiences, such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, or Debora Harkness' *All Souls* triplet. Looking at these "novels of esoterica" we can clearly see the fascination of modern writers with the culture and world picture of the Renaissance, even if they place their fiction in a contemporary setting. Due to the lure of the sixteenth century these magus figures typically seem to be variations on the character of the historical-legendary Faust, perhaps the most famous black magician, or his contemporary, the white magus-scientist Paracelsus. It is the reincarnation of the Paracelsian type of magus in modern literature that primarily concerns my essay. A complementary aspect will be the study of the intellectual undercurrents which are responsible for the recurrence of this archetype, thus hoping to get nearer to understand the nature of esoteric discourse.

II.

Trying to map the place of magic in the complex of human culture, E.M. Butler said that she did not want to define it in any restrictive way such as "'pseudo-science', or 'pretended art', or 'debased religion'" (1980, 2). By treating magic as a self-contained discipline she did choose a good approach and at the same time pinpointed the areas in relation to which magic should be treated in its full complexity. One may usefully follow her typology and move from science to religion, finally to reach the domain of literature.

Since the scientific revolution "hard" science has traditionally been ignoring magic as something outdated and nonsensical. Even if art, including modern fiction, reconsidering the problem, has tried to express some doubts about the validity of this verdict, the existence of the duality of the two modes of thinking—scientific and esoteric-magical—has rarely been questioned since the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century Positivism and evolutionism interpreted the esoteric attitude as a kind of primitive phase in the development of mankind, which, in the course of intellectual progress, necessarily had to give way to logical thinking and the experimental sciences (see Tylor 1865 and Frazer 1890). On the other hand, already in the time of

the Enlightenment voices of discontent could be heard, enough to think of esoteric visionaries such as Emmanuel Swedenborg, or some trends among the Freemasons and revived Rosicrucians. This lead to the historiographical propositions to talk about "the shadowy side" of the Enlightenment (see Mali and Wokler ed. 2003; McMahon 2001; Thorne 2009).

Romanticism brought about very contrarious attitudes concerning Western esotericism. There were those—like William Blake—who condemned science and blamed progress for the loss of a spiritual and holistic experience of life. Others became fascinated by science and wanted to synthetize it with an occult wisdom (the Theosophists or Rudolf Steiner). Several writers exploited both the scientific and the esoteric paradigms in order to create Gothic horror, or show the dangers of a blind faith in science without religious humbleness (examples from English literature: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story,* Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). The polarized opinions can be demonstrated by the following two quotations:

> The improvements that have been effected in natural philosophy have by degrees convinced the enlightened part of mankind that the material universe is everywhere subject to laws, fixed in their weight, measure, and duration, capable of the most exact calculation, and which in no case admit of variation and exception. Beside this, mind, as well as matter, is subject to fixed laws; and thus every phenomenon and occurrence around us is rendered a topic for the speculation of sagacity and foresight. Such is the creed which science has universally prescribed to the judicious and reflecting among us. It was otherwise in the infancy and less mature state of human knowledge. The chain of causes and consequences was yet unrecognized; and events perpetually occurred, for which no sagacity that was then in being was able to assign an original. Hence men felt themselves habitually disposed to refer many of the appearances with which they were conversant to the agency of invisible intelligences. (Godwin 1834, 1–2)

At about the same time as William Godwin's above proclamation of scientism, a late alchemist and mystic, Mary Atwood, was already working on her esoteric philosophy, which was finally anonymously published in 1850. Due to a religious revelation and a moral panic, she later considered her book too dangerous for the general public and took great pains to suppress the edition. The text has fortunately survived and provides us with valuable insight into that mode of thinking which seems to have changed so remarkably little from Hermes Trismegistus through Paracelsus, Jakob Boehme, and Swedenborg to herself, Rudolf Steiner, Madame Blavatsky, and indeed to many of our own contemporaries. Speaking about alchemy, Atwood asserts its reality as follows:

> But many things have in like manner been considered impossible which increasing knowledge has proved true [...] and others which still to common sense appear fictitious were believed in former times, when faith was more enlightened and the sphere of vision open to surpassing effects. Daily observation even now warns us against setting limits to nature [...] The philosophy of modern times, more especially that of the present day, consists in experiment

> and such scientific researches as may tend to ameliorate our social condition, or be otherwise useful in contributing to the ease and indulgences of life; whereas in the original acceptation, philosophy had quite another sense: it signified the Love of Wisdom. (Atwood 1984, v-vii)

Relying on this principle, she did not see much use in employing a systematic historical approach when studying and explaining the Hermetic philosophy. Her standpoint is remarkable, and, considering the context of positivism, hardly reprehensible:

> Nothing, perhaps, is less worthy or more calculated to distract the mind from points of real importance than this very question of temporal origin, which, when we have taken all pains to satisfy and remember, leaves us no wiser in reality than we were before. (Ibid., 3)

The more the positivist enthusiasts of the scientific and industrial revolutions asserted the notion of linear progress and heralded man's victory over nature, the more the adepts and mystics became imbued with the search for forgotten, hermetic knowledge. In literature we find the followers of both camps. The writers of Naturalism considered themselves the custodians of the legacy of the Enlightenment, so they sided with the scientists; on the other hand the symbolist poets rejected the primacy of pure reason and looked for more mystical ways of knowledge. W.B. Yeats is just one example of many. The symbolist theories of language, expression, and poetic inspiration are very much in line with philosophical mysticism, amplified by the general mood and taste of the *fin de siècle*. A growing cult of the obscure, the exciting, the illicit, and the unknown as well as the rejection of academism by the decadents and the exponents of Art Nouveau likewise contributed to this interest.

One of the most notorious literary reflection of the occult revival was Huysmans' *Là-bas* (1891, modern edition 1972), in which a tale of nineteenth-century devil worshippers is interwoven with a life of the medieval Satanist Gilles de Rais. The main characters of the novel —Durtal, the biographer of de Rais, Des Hermies, a psychiatrist well versed in homeopathy and occult lore, the learned astrologer Gèvingey, and the pious bell-ringer—are all hermit-like figures who separate themselves from the stream of modern life and take pleasure in the cult of the Middle Ages. Durtal's inclination for things mystical and illicit is kindled by a strange woman, Mme. Chantelouve, who by day is an unsatisfied bourgeoisie but at night becomes a succubus and a participant in the Black Mass celebrated by the diabolic Canon Docre.

When finally Durtal gains access to the Satanic Mass himself, he finds it disappointing and disgusting, very little mystical, but all the more characterized by erotomaniacs. This experience leads him toward a new evaluation of faith which prefigures Huysmans' famous reconciliation with Catholicism: "Faith is the breakwater of the soul, affording the only haven in which dismasted man can glide along in peace" (1972, 279).

Especially significant for our present concern is the theme of the controversial relationship of the occult and the rationalistic sciences, as manifested by Durtal's and Des Hermies' mistrust of their period's positivistic scientism.

> What can be believed and what can be proved? The materialists have taken the trouble to revise the accounts of the sorcery trials of old. They have found in

> the possession-cases the symptoms of major hysteria [...] there remains this unanswerable question: is a woman possessed because she is hysterical, or is she hysterical because she is possessed? Only the Church can answer. Science not. (141)

But if science is weak and unable to see through appearance to the very essence of things, the Hermetic lore is imperfect, too. This is what Gèvingey has to say on spiritism, the sensation of the *fin de siècle:* "... proceeding at random without science, it has agitated good and bad spirits together. In Spiritism you will find a jumble of everything. It is the hash of mystery, if I may be permitted the expression" (132).

This vacillation between attraction and mistrust towards both science and the occult is a very characteristic feature of "neo-esoterism" in literature: this attitude has created characters such as the madman haunted by alchemical-esoteric dreams of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, who experiments with the most dubious practices; and the skeptical historian who is sympathetic towards Hermeticism but does not believe that the contacts with the supernatural still have much validity. He is then usually confronted with shocking phenomena that cannot be explained on the basis of discursive logic or experimental science. By the end of these novels the supernatural always manifests itself in one way or another, but there is always some mode of irony employed by the novelists, creating uncertainty as to whether the inevitable magical acts described are to be taken realistically, or as the product of mere mental processes, or indeed as a literary device, a form of allegory or parable.

Somerset Maugham's early novel, *The Magician* (1908, modern edition 1967), is a good example of this pattern. It was inevitably inspired by *Là-bas* as well as by the character and notoriety of Aleister Crowley, known to the English press as "the Wickedest Man in the World" (on Crowley: Bogdan ed. 2012; Churton 2012; Wilson 1987). The main characters of the book are Arthur Burdon, a practical-minded surgeon, absolutely skeptical about the occult. Margaret Dauncey, his fiancée, is an innocent, beautiful girl. There is Susie Boyd, Margaret's room-mate, less attractive but sensitive and intelligent. Dr. Porhoët is a real stock character, a doctor who takes some historical interest in Hermeticism, who has lived in the East and seen many a strange thing, even published a book on Paracelsus. And there is the magician, Oliver Haddo, an English magnate, totally imbued with magical practices, a strange mixture of charlatan and adept. His goal is to produce a homunculus, and his purposes are vile. Maugham's novel is well-constructed and elegantly written, but rather shallow, lacking any original insight into the problems of mysticism and esoteric knowledge. It is still interesting as a document of a continuing literary topos and a vogue so strongly infiltrating the early modernist movements.

Arthur's skepticism is strongly emphasized at the beginning of the story, in order to contrast with his later encounters with the supernatural; it is also necessary to create tension between him and Haddo, as this conflict brings about the catastrophe of the book: out of revenge, Oliver bewitches Margaret, seduces, then marries her, only to ruin Arthur's life and use the unfortunate woman for his experiments. Dr. Porhoët is the mouthpiece of those obligatory vacillating opinions which will not deny the reality of occult forces, but at the same time cannot take them entirely seriously. He always approaches the subject from the superior standpoint of the historian who

is outside the range of phenomena, who always knows the end of the story. The most powerful character is undoubtedly Oliver Haddo. He makes no concession to modern science and his ambitions recall that other great sinner, Goethe's Faust, his seduced victim likewise called Margaret. But Haddo's statements about the thirst for power that consumes the magician remind one even more of the crude and infinite passions of Marlowe's characters, Doctor Faustus and Tamburlaine:

> And what else is that men seek in life but power? If they want money, it is but for the power that attends it, and it is power again that they strive for in all the knowledge they acquire. Fools and sots aim at happiness, but men aim only at power. The magus, the sorcerer, the alchemist, are seized with fascination of the unknown: and they desire a greatness that is inaccessible to mankind. (Maugham, 76)

The case of Oliver Haddo introduces a new element to the typology of the Magus. While Huysmans drew a parallel between the modern black magicians and a medieval Satanist, Haddo is on the one hand contrasted with Faustus who represents the black magician, on the other with Paracelsus, who apparently never got under evil domination and whose aims were always pious. Dr. Porhoët vaguely makes this distinction, although the general drift of his opinion rather converges with that of the moralizing Chorus in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus:*

> It was a strange dream that these wizards cherished. [...] Above all, they sought to become greater than the common run of men and to wield the power of the gods. They hesitated at nothing to gain their ends. But Nature with difficulty allows her secrets to wrested from her. In vain they lit their furnaces, and in vain they studied their crabbed books, called up the dead, and conjured ghastly spirits. Their reward was disappointment and wretchedness, poverty, the scorn of men, torture, imprisonment, and shameful death. And yet, perhaps after all, there may be some particle of truth hidden away in these dark places. (Ibid., 151)

All the elements surveyed so far are uniquely blended and presented in an entertaining as well as a philosophic way in a Hungarian novel which, despite its translation into English, has been undeservedly neglected in the European literary scene. The writer, Antal Szerb, was an excellent literary historian, while his novels treated the important intellectual issues of his age, the period between the two World Wars. The hero of Szerb's *The Pendragon Legend* (1934, English translation: 2006), János Bátky, is a Hungarian scholar who, enjoying some inheritance, settles down in London, near the British Museum, and immerses himself in the most exciting (and least apparently practical) subjects. Dr. Bátky is like Des Hermies and Dr. Porhoët, but he is livelier. He has amusing and not at all innocent adventures with women and also likes to go to evening parties. This is how he meets the Earl of Gwynedd, who becomes the real hero of the story. Their first meeting is worth quoting at length, since it introduces the main topics of the book as well as showing Szerb's wry wit:

> "At the moment I'm working on the English mystics of the seventeenth century."
> "Are you, indeed?" the Earl exclaimed. "Then Lady Malmsbury-Croft has

made another of her miraculous blunders. She always does. If she gets two men to sit with each other thinking that they were together at Eton, you may be sure that one of them is German and the other Japanese, but both have a special interest in Liberian stamps."
"So My Lord is also a student of the subject?"
"That's a rather strong term to use, in this island of ours. *You* study something —*we* merely have hobbies. I dabble in the English mystics the way a retired general would set about exploring his family history. As it happens, those things are part of the family history. But tell me, Doctor—mysticism is a rather broad term—are you interested in it as a religious phenomenon?"
"Not really. I don't have much feeling for that aspect. What interests me within the general field is what popularly called 'mystic'—the esoteric fantasies and procedures through which people once sought to probe nature. The alchemists, the secrets of the homunculus, the universal panacea, the influence of minerals and amulets... Fludd's philosophy of nature whereby he proved the existence of God by means of a barometer."
"Fludd?" the Earl raised his head. "Fludd shouldn't be mentioned in the company of those idiots. Fludd, sir, wrote a lot of nonsense because he wished to explain things that couldn't be accounted for at the time. But essentially—I mean about the real essence of things—he knew much, much more than the scientists of today, who no longer even laugh at his theories. I don't know what your opinion is, but nowadays we know a great deal about the microscopic detail. Those people knew rather more about the whole—the great interconnectedness of things—which can't be weighed on scales and cut into slices like ham." (Szerb 2006, 10–11)

There are at least half a dozen layers in the novel, blended with elegant craftsmanship: the Earl is working on some mysterious biological experiments which are distinct reflections on the ambitions of the Paracelsians, to create an artificial man, homunculus. In the meantime he is entangled with a crime story: his ex-fiancée and her associates try to kill him in connection with an inheritance-case. Bátky is dropped in the whirl of events which develop from everyday mystery to mystical terror: it turns out that the old Pendragon castle on the neighboring hill hides the tomb of Christian Rosencreutz, the legendary founder of the Rosicrucians. This Brother Rosencreutz—in the novel Asaph Pendragon, a fifteenth-century Earl of Gwynedd—according to the inscription on his tomb, "POST ANNOS CXX PATEBO", is expected to rise from his grave in 120 years. The legend, well known from the early seventeenth-century Rosicrucian manifestos (English translation in Yates 1972, 235–60; on the Rosicrucians see Jennings 1879; McIntosh 1987), is retold by Szerb and transposed to Pendragon. The founder of the Brotherhood was Asaph, and, according to one of the subplots, in the eighteenth century another Earl, Bonaventure Pendragon, made great efforts in the company of Lenglet de Fresnoy and the Count St. Germain to contact him and get from him the Secret of the Adepts. The Rosicrucian Asaph Pendragon is finally awakened in the early twentieth century and saves the life of the present Earl from the murderers. But he also wants to accomplish the Great Work which has come to a halt. As he feels abandoned by the heavens, according to the obligatory pattern, he decides to turn to evil forces. He performs diabolic magic and sacrifices to Satan the wicked

ex-fiancée of the Earl. In a trance, Bátky witnesses the whole action, which concludes in a devastating appearance of the Devil. All this drives the Rosicrucian ghost to final desperation, and he kills himself. The last words of the Earl feed back to the opening conversation between him and the Hungarian philosopher:

> "They were waiting for a particular moment," he began: "a rare conjunction of the stars, or some other sign. [...] Well, it came ... long after the last Rosicrucians had vanished, and a once-mocking world had forgotten them. It coincided exactly with my own ordeal. The midnight rider, the deathless dispenser of justice, has saved the lives of his descendants once again, but the Great Work wasn't proceeding according to plan. Only black magic and conjuration of the Devil could help, and that required a sacrifice. [...] I left the woman to her fate, and it found her. But the Great Work failed after all... If it was as you describe it then the Devil did appear to him... but we can't be sure about any of that. Only that he died in total despair. Come, Doctor Bátky." (230)

What makes this novel really enjoyable is that the reader will never discover whether the author is serious or whether he is just making a literary-intellectual joke, a parody of the genre. Like the *Chimische Hochzeit* of Johann Valentin Andreae (see Willard 2016, forthcoming), *The Pendragon Legend* leaves its audience in the thrill, awe, and excitement of uncertainty.

While the novels reviewed up to this point emphasized the incompatibility of science and magic—usually at the expense of the former, we should also mention, however, that there have been efforts to bring together the two, and not only in the sphere of literature. Around the turn of the 20th century, the esoteric philosopher and founder of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner, proposed his system of epistemology that assumes a happy coexistence of the two. He considered himself a seer and claimed to have gained immense knowledge by intuition and revelation, but at the same time asserted that the natural sciences represent a necessary phase in the development of mankind and suggested that occult knowledge can be gained by rational practices and scientific exercises, too (see the summary in Saul Bellow's Introduction to Steiner 1983). However, it looks as if he did not succeed in bringing together magic and science, his works rather point at the deepening gap between the two modes of thinking. With this he makes us ponder the meaning of the dramatic dualism of the experimental-discursive and the intuitive-revelative types of knowledge: "With our concepts we have moved out to the surface, where we came into contact with nature. We have achieved clarity, but along the way we have lost man" (Bellow in Steiner 1983, 11).

Although this dualism has been known from mankind's earliest self-consciousness, until the seventeenth century science did not side irrevocably with either option. For the people of the Renaissance it was still not a decision to deal with "magic or science." Since all science was magic in a way, and vice versa, it was rather the intention of the magician-scientist that constituted the real watershed, by distinguishing white and black operations. Modern fiction seems to take this distinction as of secondary importance, and it is rather the universalism and bold endeavoring spirit of those Renaissance enthusiasts that is still so attractive for modern writers. This is why authors like Yourcenar situate their plots in the sixteenth century, and why the con-

temporary heroes resemble the famous Magi: in Oliver Haddo we see Paracelsus reflected, while the Earl of Pendragon recalls Robert Fludd.

Nevertheless, the modern novels mentioned so far all intended to portray the esoteric and the occult in a more or less realistic historical setting. Postmodern fiction has stepped beyond that and promoted a way of representation that could be called counterfactual, often bordering on science fiction and the fantastic. One should think of such authors and works as Lawrence Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary* (1991) or Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* (2004) that turn history upside down while luring the reader into the belief that it is all faithful representation of the past. On the other hand, Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007) or Philip Pullman's *His DarkMaterials* (1995–2000) opened up a window to pure fantasy, nevertheless, creating strong mimetic settings in those, similar to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. An even newer, and more radical tendency can be seen in Deborah Harkness' *All Souls* trilogy (2011–2014), which was written by a professional historian who revolted against the confines of history writing and let her fantasy loose by offering page turner, nevertheless often nonsensical fiction which is hard to classify. It seems that as time passes, generic and stylistic rules become less and less important, but if one is disturbed by this, it is worth remembering that esoteric fiction from its birth in the antiquity (e.g. Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*) has always been going against the grain and invented innovative sujets as well as narrative forms.

III

Let us turn now to the question of white and black magic, because this distinction is partly responsible for the extraordinary effort by which two modern disciplines—cultural history and the history of science—have taken the trouble to try to reintegrate magic into the realm of academic investigations. The nineteenth-century historians did not bother with this distinction, as we can observe in Godwin's already quoted work. He mostly spoke about witchcraft, only to muddle hopelessly the *Arabian Nights* with Thomas Aquinas, Luther with Faustus, Agrippa with Urban Grandier and the New England witches. But was he not right after all? Do we not find the same medley of ideas in the works of every occult tradition? In the first decades of the twentieth century, some historians of premodern culture, those who became disillusioned with self-assured judgements about the enlightened nature of the Renaissance, suggested a definite "no".

People like Johan Huizinga (1924), Max Dvořak (1922), and Aby Warburg (1920) emphasized the great importance of magic and mystical-esoterical systems in an age which previously had been chosen as the ideal opposite of the "Superstitious, Dark Ages". Not much later Lynn Thorndike (1923–58) devoted eight volumes to demonstrate how difficult it is to distinguish clearly between magic and the experimental sciences—at least up to the eighteenth century. These pioneers started a long evolution of cultural history: a neglected canon of texts—from the Hermetic writings to various cabalistic speculations and magical incantations—has been recovered, and a generation of great Renaissance scholars such as A.J. Festugière, P.O. Kristeller, E. Garin, F. Secret, D.P. Walker and others have established the framework within which to study the intriguing crosscurrents of Renaissance philosophical thought.

In this atmosphere, in the nineteen-sixties, Frances A. Yates (1964; 1967) boldly proposed a thesis with the following paradigm: 1) the Hermetic texts of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. offered such an ontology and a creation myth which for the philosophers of the Renaissance could appear as a legitimate variant to the Mosaic Adam. This Hermetic man of the "Pimander" has a lot in common with Adam of the Genesis. 2) The Florentine Neoplatonists, primarily Ficino and Pico della Mirandola—inspired by the magical passages of the *Hermetica*—set up a new philosophy, in which the "dignity of man" was strongly connected to a program of turning man into a powerful, creative magus. Yates asserted that these thinkers "emerge not primarily as 'humanists', not even primarily as philosophers, but as magi" (1967, 258). 3) The magical exultation of the first Renaissance Magi soon gave way to social concerns as they started dreaming about the general reformation of the world, a great instauration of sciences, and various forms of charitable work for mankind. It is easy to recognize the program of the Rosicrucians in this description, who, because of the stiffening atmosphere of the new orthodoxies (both Catholic and Protestant) at the beginning of the seventeenth century, had to remain in seclusion. But their aims and ideals affected the methods of new investigations of the scientific revolution as well as the formation of the early scientific societies and academies. 4) This is how we can see the change from magic to science as a more or less linear development: "If the Renaissance magus was the immediate ancestor of the seventeenth-century scientist, than it is true that 'Neo-platonism' as interpreted by Ficino and Pico was [...] the body of thought which, intervening between the Middle Ages and the 17th century, prepared the way for the emergence of science" (ibid., 258; for a full explication of her concepts see her monographs, 1964 and 1972).

The "Yates theses" stirred up a huge and long debate among historians of science and culture. (The details see in my book, 2004, 9–11 and 304n6.) Yates represented a traditional evolutionist view told in a neat "grand narrative," however, her content was radically new and refreshing. This compromise at first was received with enthusiastic applause but by the nineteen-nineties she was written off from serious scholarship and it is only now in the twenty-first century that her work is reassessed and a balanced reintegration has begun (Daston 2012, 496–99; Denham 2015, 237–52; Hanegraaff 2001; Jones 2008; Wilder 2010). Needless to say, that the "struggle" with Yates and the Warburgian legacy has ever since been fertilising the study of Western Esotericism which by now expanded to religious studies and psychology and finally has become an independent field of study (Faivre 1994; Godwin 2007; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Hanegraaff 2012, 2013; von Stuckrad 2013; Versluis 1986, 2007).

No matter of Yates's changing fortunes in scholarship, her academic enthusiasm for early modern magic has greatly inspired contemporary fiction. Looking at the magus-novels of the middle- and late-twentieth century we can easily discover the kind of apologetic cultural-anthropological approach to magic which has been so characteristic of the Warburgian history of ideas. Let us illustrate this with two novels, a historical one set in the time of Paracelsus and another one in which the contemporary setting evokes the spirit of Paracelsus himself.

Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Abyss* (1968; English translation: 1976) offers in the story of Zeno a complex analysis of human existence. The hero (an amalgam of Para-

celsus, Giordano Bruno, Michael Servet and others) represents the Renaissance thinker who pursues "magia naturalis," a subject defined by the seventeenth-century antiquarian Elias Ashmole as follows:

> It enables Man to understand the Language of the Creatures, as the chirping of birds, lowing of beasts, &c. To convey a spirit into an image, which by observing the influence of heavenly bodies, shall become a true oracle; and yet this is not any wayes Necromanticall, or Devilish; but easy, wonderous easy, Naturall and Honest. (1652, B1v)

The history of Zeno does not center on a major theme such as the hunt for gold or the passion for omnipotence. The hero represents the genuine searching spirit who is thrown into the crosscurrents of scientific ideas and superstitions and tries to find his way in the intellectual labyrinth of his age. And this would not be so hopelessly difficult if he were not also caught in the dire network of political forces, religious convictions, and social prejudices. This is how the young ambitious scientist becomes a disillusioned, burnt-out existential philosopher, determined to end on the stake of the Inquisition. As the author explains:

> On a purely intellectual level, the Zeno of this novel, still marked by scholasticism, though reacting against it, stands halfway between the subversive dynamism of the alchemists and the mechanistic philosophy which is to prevail in the immediate future, between hermetic beliefs which postulate a God immanent in all things and an atheism barely avowed, between the somewhat visionary imagination of the student of cabalists and the materialistic empiricism of the physician. (Author's note, 355)

The role of Renaissance magic as presented in Yourcenar's novel corresponds to the verdict of Yatesian cultural historians. Paracelsus' magical medicine, for example, is seen as a precursor of modern science, a kind of groping towards the progressively better lit areas of logical thinking and experimental investigation, albeit still dimmed by false concepts which themselves can be useful catalysts of scientific progress. Zeno himself proposes such an opinion:

> "Do not attribute more worth than I do to those mechanical feats," Zeno said disdainfully. "In themselves they are neither good nor bad. They are like certain discoveries of the alchemist who lusts only for gold, findings which distract him from pure science, but which sometimes serve to advance or to enrich our thinking. *Non cogitat qui non experitur.*" (334)

Another contemporary novel, Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981) approaches the Paracelsian philosophy from a more mystically oriented viewpoint, and his plot, set in a modern university, turns "the groves of academe" into the site of a supernatural combat between Satanic diabolism and pious white magic. The demonic forces are evoked by desires and high ambition, as is paradigmatic in all magus-stories. We also have the obligatory pattern of the sceptic scientist who in the course of events will have to reevaluate his concepts radically; the mild believer; the diabolic Satanist; and here also the white magician, this time a biologist-genius who tries on Paracelsian principles to turn science back from "slicing the ham" to the questions of the big, mysterious wholeness.

The object of desire is a gifted, beautiful student, Maria Theotoky, who is enchanted by Renaissance mysticism and who also enchants everybody. There are two men, however, who feel even stronger passions than the gusto for an attractive female: an unpublished Rabelais manuscript, representing a temptation, which arouses the beast and warrior in the otherwise harmless men of letters. Urquhart McVarish, the Renaissance historian (also a perverted narcissist) and Clement Hollier, the distinguished medieval scholar, a paleo-psychologist (Maria's idol) struggle for this rare document. The fight becomes fiercer until McVarish resorts to theft, while the sober, skeptical medievalist turns to Maria's Hungarian-Gypsy mother, asking her to use magic to destroy the illicit possessor of the Rabelais letters.

This is no place to analyze the complexities of Davies's many-layered ironies, nor his magic command of language that so evokes the thrills of the mysterious in the reader—all the faculties which make this novel one of the outstanding achievements of contemporary fiction. We must concentrate on its carefully developed contrast between the dark torments of passion overtaking the protagonists who finally abuse science, and the representatives of a superior, purified striving for real wisdom. Maria is inclined to develop in the direction of a spiritual science, while Professor Ozias Froats is the champion of experimental verification; as he says, "Doubt, doubt, and still more doubt, until you're deadly sure. That's the only way" (248) —but their disparate convictions seem to meet in the syncretic philosophy of Paracelsus. Froats smiles at the definition of the scientist-magus suggested by Paracelsus (248), but his work, his scientific achievement confirms Maria's romantic description: "Surely, Ozias Froats works under the protection of the Thrice-Divine Hermes. Anyway I hope so..." (213).

To add one more example, similar to the tone and writerly wisdom of Davies is John Crowley's *AEgypt* tetralogy (1987–2007). The work of this excellent writer is part of my "discovering the Americas." The series was published over twenty years, comprising *The Solitudes* (originally published as *AEgypt* in 1987); *Love and Sleep* (1995); *Daemonomania* (2000), and *Endless Things—A Part of AEgypt* (2007). An attentive reader, Jed Hartman (2002), has compared these novels to an *ars memoriae* building in which the main character—drop-out college professor of history, Pierce Moffett—stores his personal and cultural memories, and in the course of the work invites the reader to visit the endless and intricate labyrinth of the rooms and passages.

Moffett, abandoned by his father, brought up in rural Kentucky and Indiana, and struggling vainly for a settled life and a fulfilled love in New York, has a growing conviction that history is not simply the one we are familiar with. The more he reads scholarship about the esoteric-hermetic tradition—among them the books of Frances Yates—the more he is convinced that there must be an alternative, phantom history he calls "AEgypt."

> Once the world was not as it has since become. Once it worked in a way different from the way it works now: its very flesh and bones, the physical laws that governed it, were ever so slightly different from the ones we know. It had a different history, too, from the history we know the world to have had, a history that implied a different future from the one that has actually come to be, our present. [...] The world is as we know it now to be, and always has

> been: everyone forgets that it could be, or ever was, other than the way it is now. If it were so - if it were really so - would you be able to tell? [...] What evidence or proof could you ever adduce? (Crowley 1995, 9–11)

A publisher becomes interested in this idea and offers a contract for a book – just at the point when Moffett feels he must leave his college. Abandoning his New York City existence, he moves to a small town in upstate New York, rents a ruinous house and starts working on his book. Encountering small-town life and its rural community brings more surprises than he (and also the reader) would have expected. Greatest of them all is his getting acquainted with the literary bequest of a recently deceased historical novelist, Fellowes Kraft. Pierce receives a commission from the estate of Kraft to tidy up his remaining papers, among which he finds an unfinished novel, called nothing else but *AEgypt*.

From now on the experiences of Moffett and Kraft get hopelessly entangled with the fictions of Kraft and the scholarly readings of Pierce. He starts studying Kraft's main literary heroes who are exciting historical characters: Giordano Bruno (one of the practitioners of the ars memoriae) and John Dee (the researcher of alternative history through the angelic conversations). The volumes of *AEgypt* become a labyrinth of metafiction. The reader is navigating among texts supposed to have been written by Kraft and then revised by Moffett, who is trying to rewrite or complete Kraft's unfinished novel. At some points, quite naturally, we are also reminded that the whole discourse is created by Crowley, the author of the tetralogy. (The paragraphs referring to Crowley's *Aegypt* I borrow from Szőnyi–Wymer 2011, 195–6.)

IV

The "Yates theses" were very influential for a time, but when its tenets were put to the trial of detailed testing, it was rejected by most historians of science in the course of a series of learned debates in the nineteen-seventies. It was acknowledged to have been important in calling attention to a series of neglected phenomena, but its underlying assumption that magic and science are reconcilable has failed to gain credit, just as Rudolf Steiner's calls for esoteric and exoteric synthesis have remained isolated and rejected from both sides.

Paolo Rossi, who himself wrote a study of Francis Bacon, calling him a man "from magic to science," formulated the essential theoretical criticism against Yates's views: "As years go by I am more and more convinced that to explain the genesis—which is not only complicated but often confused—of some modern ideas is quite different from believing that one can offer a complete explanation of these ideas by describing their genesis" (1975, 257). Others, concerned with the details, successively questioned many of her concrete arguments, too (see especially Westman 1977 and Vickers 1984).

Who is the magician, then? Seen from the outside he is the representative of an alternative way of thinking and cultivates a mode of perception and interpretation which works with analogies rather than arguments based on observations of causes and effects. For this reason he seems to be of no value in the context of scientific investigations: "The Neoplatonists, like all occultists, were never interested in matter for its own sake or in general terms. Nature had value to them either as a symbolic system, as in hierarchies of descent from the godhead or in degrees of purity..."

(Vickers 1984, 6).[2] With these words Brian Vickers seems to have done away with the illusions to achieve the kind of synthesis hypothesized by Frances Yates's interpretation of Renaissance science. And to the question raised by Yates and her followers, namely what to do with the double intellectual profile of the early scientists, with the curious blend of superstition and scientific reasoning in their works, Vickers offered the traditional answer of the historians of science: let us reconcile ourselves to the fact that those thinkers, just as many of their descendants nowadays, were able to live in divided and distinguished worlds. Parallel with the slowly developing affinity for observation, experimentation, and discursive logic, man has retained the fossils of an alternative way of thinking which should not become the subject of the history of science, rather of cultural anthropology. In Vickers' interpretation the alchemist's mind is more akin with the primitive tribal magician than the simplest philosopher. Magic becomes a variant of a religious system in this approach, and has to be treated in terms of the study of beliefs. As well remembered, Keith Thomas in his famous monograph, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1972) made also extensive use of the methods and achievements of cultural anthropology (Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, etc.) while discussing 16th and 17th century magic and religion in England.

It seems, that the developing study of Western Esotericism has gone in this direction, becoming a closer relative of religious studies than the history of science (see the groundbreaking studies of Faivre; Godwin; Goodrich-Clarke; Hanegraaff, etc., mentioned above). Surely this is not the final stage in the evolution of this field of research, in the meantime one can argue that important complementary subfields can be the study of art and literature in order to see how these cultural representations have been inspired by the esoteric visions of Western civilization.

The complicated love-hate relationship of magic and religion, not mentioning their structural and functional parallels, cannot be treated here, one quotation might well illustrate though the awareness about this aspect. The authority to be quoted, Arthur Versluis, is a contemporary theoretician of the occult, and one can easily see that he ascribes importance to the esoteric modes of thinking in a radically different way from the historians of science or the students of social anthropology, or even a modern theologian. Already in 1986, in his *Philosophy of Magic* he considered religion and magic two descendants of the same primordial revelation:

> A distinct historical pattern of division (di-vision) can be traced in the West, a splitting into two camps as it were; on the one hand, one has the orthodox religious form which tended to ignore the necessity of individual spiritual transmutation, and on the other, the solitary magus or alchemist, who often tended to ignore the necessity of traditional religious form. As a result, both diverged into materialistic or egoistic paths. (3)

The association of magic with literature likewise implies a love-hate relationship. The idea goes back to the teachings of Plato who supposed the working of a mystical madness, the *furor poeticus,* in the inspired poets which make them perceptive for the

[2] Vickers further elaborated this thesis in his essay in the same volume: "Analogy Versus Identity: the Rejection Occult Symbolism, 1580–1680". In Brian Vickers (ed.). *Occult and Scientific Mentalities...,* 95–165.

higher reality which is not accessible to ordinary people who possess only the ability of rational thinking, discursive logic. This intuitive-revelatory knowledge became a powerful tool for the theoreticians of the Renaissance as they spoke about the poet as creator who can make something out of nothing, as if in a supernatural act.

Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* reasserted the old gnostic thesis that the human intellect was the reflection of the divine *mens,* and though now corrupted, through different operations it can elevate itself again to this highest level. Art and magic appeared as two expressions of the same procedure by both sharing the quality of divine creativity. It is very characteristic that their contemporaries already called famous artists such as Leonardo or Michelangelo "divine," and that relying on the magical-neoplatonic philosophy of Ficino or Pico, artists could claim for a status equal to that of the magus. Among others, Sir Philip Sidney straightforwardly claimed that poets are like gods and that the quality of their creation surpasses the perfection of Nature:

> [Man is to give] right honor to the heavenly maker of that maker, who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature; which is nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth... (Section 11, Sidney 1962, 413)

E.H. Gombrich while explaining the nature of Renaissance symbolic images, has argued that that Botticelli's *Primavera* is not simply a painting with classical motives but a great magical allegory, a not too distant relative of Ficino's talismanic magic (cf. his essays dating from 1949 to 1972 published in Gombrich 1985, especially "Icones Symbolicae..."). We find the same inspiration of Neoplatonism and magic in much of sixteenth-century European literature, in Michelangelo's mystical sonnets, in Ronsard's nature hymns, in some motifs of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene.* The analogy with magic offered new arguments in the age-old debate about the ontology of art: whether it was a conscious act of imitation of already existing nature or rather an exulted, inspired state of "divine madness." We can recognize in this dichotomy the Aristotelian and Platonic principles of artistic creation.

By the second half of the sixteenth century the Neoplatonic concepts returned. Francesco Patrizi's poetics is very characteristic for the period. He hailed the unlimited fantasy of the artist and considered *il mirabile,* the wonderful, as the real essence of a good work of art. Reality was of little account to him, and this can be understood if we think of the general intellectual climate of the age: it was the end of the Renaissance, the beginning of a great intellectual crisis, one of the many "fin de siècles," a world of "sad people" as Lucien Fèbvre called them. Similarly to Giordano Bruno, who proposed a return to the sacred and ancient Egyptian religion in order to find the path of true knowledge, Patrizi also turned back and looked for the lost wisdom in the works of Zoroaster, the Hermetic philosophers, and the magi. For him "poesia" becomes the act of making the marvelous, and the poet who creates this would share the qualities of God, Nature, and an artificer – to put it simply, he should become a magus himself (on Patrizi see Weinberg 1961, 2:772–5; on the aesthetics of Mannerism Hauser 1965 and Klaniczai 1977, passim).

Up to the time of the Renaissance the idea of magic was strongly interlinked with religion as well as with art (Fletcher 1986, 181–220).[3] With the proclamation of a dualism between the mechanistic universe and the still surviving animistic world picture, this original syncretism became more and more suppressed. The Romantic poets had visions of an animistic cosmos, but they did not consider themselves messengers of an outer, higher reality; rather they believed that it was themselves, their ego, which comprised this higher reality. This egotistical approach is condemned by today's theorists of magic, although we should also notice that this attitude was by no means the invention of Romanticism. The crystallization of this archetype, the Faustian magus, dates back to the Renaissance, and we even have examples of it from the classical period, such as the Biblical figure of Simon Magus. The "Faust-problem," its history and its intricate influence on Western thought is so complex and huge a topic in itself that I have deliberately omitted any extensive references to it in this essay.

It is true that the literature of Romanticism proclaimed a new type of magic, and that this program developed well into the modern era. There seems to be an enormous step from Wordsworth's animated Nature to Nerval's alchemy, Rimbaud's verbal magic, W.B. Yeat's esoterica, Joyce's "epiphany" and Wallace Stevens's Hermeticism. Their vision of the cosmos and man's place within it, however, show a strong continuity of tradition, too. We find the same phenomena in modern painting, from the rather external, motivic fascination of the Art Nouveau to the most abstract, conceptual experiments of Kandinsky and Mondrian. This individualized magic, through which the magician "exalts himself" instead of exalting all things, is not approved by modern traditionalists. A writer like Versluis characterizes the magical ambitions of artists as follows:

> The Romantic poets, then, stand as it were midway between two worlds: behind them is the unified traditional realm, represented by the Hermetic teachings, while ahead of them is the modern era, the underlying 'aim' of which can also be personified in the form of the magus—albeit in this case, rather than uniting the realms, each seeks to be a sole creator, sole manipulator, to usurp the place of the Divine rather than to fulfill it, and so in the end must meet with inevitable dissolution. (1986, 5)

A mingling of magic and art troubles not only the modern occultist, but also the modern philosopher and critic. Jacques Maritain in confronting this question, expressed most cautious views about the poet who tries to become a magician:

> ...the thought of the poet (at least his subconscious thought) resembles somewhat the mental activity of the primitive man, and the ways of magic in the large sense of this word. [...] It is easy to slip from magic in the large sense to magic in the strict sense, and from the intentional or spiritual union to the material or substantial one. I think that poetry escapes the temptation of magic only if it renounces any will to power, even and first of all in relation to the

[3] Fletcher's argument in Ch. IV, "Allegorical Causation: Magic and Ritual Forms" (181–220) runs counter to traditional definitions of allegory, which describe it as didactic and definitely non-mystical; his evidence justifies his thesis, however.

> evoking of inspiration, and if there is no fissure in the poet's fidelity to the essential disinterestedness of poetic creation. (1953, 232)

Should we end our look at modern magic and art with the same negative conclusion as in the case of magic and science? Would that mean that there is no perspective for synthesis in the fatal dualism of human modes of thinking? We should make an important caveat at this point. Our emphasis on the mentioned dualism should not induce a nostalgic idealized image of the past. In fact, there were a great number of Renaissance philosophers who ridiculed belief in astrology, alchemy, and the other mystical sciences, and they, too, continued a tradition which had been present in European thinking since early Antiquity.

The writers of the 16th century were even more cautious. Few of them questioned the reality of the supernatural, but we find practically no work presenting a real magus fully achieving his goal. Perhaps because—as Georg Lukács used to say—poets are always partisans who point out the phenomena which nurse tension, conflict, or crisis in an age, the literary treatment of the false magician such as Doctor Faustus is more characteristic even for the Renaissance than the posture of Prospero. And even this archetype of the white magus is treated ambiguously by Shakespeare. Although seemingly Prospero is victorious by means of his high magic, and carries out all what he had planned, when he realizes the "baseless fabric" of his vision, and "of the great globe itself shall dissolve," he resignedly gives up his magic, breaks his staff, and drowns his books (see 4.1.151ff and 5.1.50–7).

While the literary criticism of the greater part of the twentieth century was enchanted by the idea of a "harmonious Renaissance," and critics traced the literary distillations of a great, magical-universalist world picture following in the footsteps of Hardin Craig, E.M.W. Tillyard, and C.S. Lewis, most recent literary historians seem to be contented with the idea of the poet as partisan. Deconstructionism has developed the cult of the evasive, and the New Historicists and feminists devote themselves to the recovery of the latent scars of casualties and the remains of cataclysms, even in the most harmonious looking works such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (for a review of this trend of criticism see Szőnyi 2000, passim). From this approach, the magician and his magic take on a new character: the features of his daydreaming, his alternative politics, and his special system of representation are emphasized and treated as an element in the interplay between power and culture. The Magus, no longer the custodian of an eternal wisdom, becomes a key figure as somebody who reflects on—and tries to manipulate in a different way—the tensions and clashes of social and intellectual power games.

It seems obvious that magic and in a broader sense, the occult, has been, and is going to be, an alternative way of looking at the world. And as a coherent system (no matter if false or true), it is ready to fertilize the arts. In fact, it is the arts which still have the potential of establishing between the more and more distinctly separating epistemological systems. The archetype of the magus is still a vital and active inspiration for modern works, consequently it can justly become the subject of thematic studies.

This paper, at the time of its original publication in 1988, indicated only the beginning of a long way of investigation which I have been carrying on ever since,

studying the meaning and significance of esoteric ideas in modern fiction. Since then the scholarly appreciation of magic has changed a lot and now we have an infinitely more refined picture than at the time of Frances Yates's bold propositions. On the other hand, esotericism-inspired fiction has proliferated during the past decades and their topics as well as generic characteristics have greatly changed, as I have briefly pointed out above. Consequently the study, interpretation, and comparison has to go on, inspired also by the themes of the Manitoba–Szeged conferences, urging to "encounter the unknown" and arriving at new discoveries.

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