# Book Review: Ludwig Klages and His Quest for the Pandaemonic All

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*Chthonic Gnosis: Ludwig Klages and His Quest for the Pandaemonic All.* By Gunnar Alksnis. Munich: Theion Publishing, 2015. 208 pp. (limited edition of 720 copies).

*Reviewed by Connell Monette*

The figure of Ludwig Klages is something of a mystery in contemporary esoteric studies in that he is remembered in Germany as a prominent mystic and philosopher yet remains virtually unknown and ignored outside his native country. Klages (1872—1956) was possessed of a keen mind and intellectual gifts, which were the envy of many of his contemporaries, and he authored fourteen books and sixty essays. While he was at first a graphologist by profession, and indeed helped articulate the development of that field, he is remembered instead for his pioneering work in the fields of existential philosophy and cosmology. A recent study examining this role, *Chthonic Gnosis,* is adapted from the 1970 doctoral dissertation of the late Gunnar Alksnis. The author asserts in the introduction that the intention of the study is to examine "the formative influences on the thought of Klages, especially in the three crucial areas of irrationalism, primitivism, and the subconscious," "to evaluate his possible role in the developments to Germany," and finally, "to conclude with a comparison of reactions to Klages as a man and a thinker, attempting to present as many diverse points of view as possible" (57). These goals are well-considered, and Alksnis is wise in his approach of intending to assess the impact of Klages rather than attempting to summarize or assess the value or validity of his views, which would otherwise prove a difficult task.

To accomplish his stated purpose, Alksnis divides the book into eight chapters, which chart the early life and rise of Klages, providing an overview of his life, education, and social interactions—namely, his formative friendships and rivalries, both of which Alksnis demonstrates that Klages had in good supply. The first two chapters, the "Introduction" and "The Poetic Years," provide considerable biographical detail, and while the purpose of the book is not to serve as a biography, the author assumes that the reader is not familiar with the work of Klages and introduces his subject such that one has a sense of his formative years and early adulthood. Chapters 2 through 5 explore the philosophy and cosmology proposed by Klages, while chapters 6 through 8 examine the range of reactions to the work of Klages, including a nuanced consideration of claims that he was involved with or affected by the Nazi regime that he lived through. The book concludes with a reexamination of the original thesis statement.

Alksnis shows that Klages had a great appreciation and nostalgia for the distant past, shrouded in the mists of time and hinted at only obliquely in the idea of the "Pelasgian," which Klages himself described as "the prehistoric ancestors of the European cultural nations whose character we can discover in the images of their gods, their cults, symbols, mysteries, and myths, but which character also survives in quite a few historically proven facts of (promethic) antiquity, consequently viewed in terms of soul to some of its features belonging to prehistory" (103). To a certain extent, Klages's thinking was not very different from that of the celebrated French philologist Dumézil

(1898—1986), who was his near-contemporary, in that they shared the idea of an ancient pre-European past that could be detected through the common European myths and symbols that survived past antiquity and into the classical and medieval period in some altered forms. What Dumézil perceived through his knowledge of philology and comparative linguistics, Klages seemed to grasp through his powers of raw intuition. Alksnis also shows that Klages articulated interesting views on the symbol-as-object, which he demonstrated through his conceptualization on the purpose of sacrifice in world religions (113—15). Here, one detects the Pelasgian theme of Klages's thinking, in that he viewed the ritual of sacrifice in Greek and even early Christian culture as an ancient practice in which the sacrifice of the symbol of the deity was essentially no different from the sacrifice of the deity itself, to which simultaneously the sacrifice is being offered. This Pelasgian mystery indicates that death itself is the real intended victim, and that sacrifice ultimately hints at a belief in attaining immortality (115).

Nevertheless, Alksnis argues that the "Pelasgian" aspect of Klages's work is part of his greater theory of biocentrism. In short, Klages proposed a gnostic cosmology where the cosmos itself is alive, and where the human is composed of three basic parts: (a) a physical body; (b) a soul, which is an extension of the cosmic Eros (or life essence); and (c) a spirit, which is essentially a parasitic element injected by the demiurgic Being that masquerades as the creator-god of the Abrahamic religious traditions. Alksnis adroitly demonstrates the hostility that Klages felt, like the classical Gnostics, toward the Christian deity, which Klages held responsible for the worst atrocities of colonialism as well as for what he perceived to be the general spiritual and psychological decay of Western culture (90—101). This aspect of Klages's work resonated with several of his contemporaries but also manifests in the work of the current day (German-based) Ecclesia Gnostica Aeterna, a gnostic order that celebrates the mystery of biocentrism.

While overall the work is an excellent introduction to Klages, chapter 6 merits rethinking, in that Alksnis purposes to evaluate the relationship of Klages to the National Socialism movement, to Nazi ideology, and to anti-Semitism in general. This is a difficult topic to address, and while Alksnis does not say it so bluntly, one cannot help but feel that Klages, like other intellectuals of his day, may be subject to unfair scrutiny by having lived through the time period itself, much as the Indo-European model of Dumézil has at times been unfairly treated because of the political era in which he wrote. Alksnis takes some pains to consider especially the potential charges of anti-Semitism, of which some have accused Klages, and Alksnis appears to intend to offer a defense of Klages as having been misunderstood or misrepresented (124—27). Specifically, Alksnis argues that Klages was not an anti-Semite but then later shows that he was against miscegenation and was a misanthrope in general (130—31). On the whole, this entire chapter has very valuable insights, but these could have been stated more clearly.

This valuable work is enhanced by a foreword by Dr. Paul Bishop, the leading academic expert on Ludwig Klages in the English-speaking world, and an appendix by Dr. Volker Zotz, the *Mandalacarya* (International Head) of the Arya Maitreya Mandala Or-

der of Tantric Buddhism. The foreword itself assists the volume by expertly introducing the reader to the biography and person of Klages himself while the appendix examines the influence on German mystic Lama Anagarika Govinda (Hoffman), demonstrating how Klages's thought was something of a bridge, appealing not only to the European mind, but to Dharmic thinking as well, fhis is no surprise, given Klages's view of the biocentric nature of the cosmos.

In summation, Alksnis has provided a valuable service to the field of modern esoteric studies. In keeping with his original thesis statement, he demonstrates the significance of Klages and his work on the philosophy and intellectual culture of early twentieth-century Germany. It is unfortunate that Klages has remained such a marginal figure in the larger European and international understanding of the mystic movements of the period, but this valuable contribution by Alksnis serves admirably to make the English-speaking audience better aware of this significant historical person. Illis book will be especially useful for courses dealing with mysticism in the twentieth century.

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