

Afterword

THE MODERN RELEVANCE OF GNOSTICISM

by

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"The Gnostics," Edward Gibbon informed the late eighteenth century, "were distinguished as the most polite, the most learned, and the most wealthy of the Christian name." Why would Gibbon have told such a mischievous lie? There is nothing in the primary sources available to him on which to base his claim. Gibbon, nevertheless, in that notorious fifteenth chapter of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, avoids the old hostilities. In his witty, malicious – today we might add revisionist – style, Gibbon portrays the Gnostics with such impartiality that his chapter becomes, if not an advertisement for heresy, then at least a subversion of orthodoxy. His catty remarks on the early Christian church were later bowdlerized, yet the most unkind words he has for the Gnostics is to describe their "vain science" as "sublime but obscure." Hardly the rascals of tradition, we can imagine Gibbon's Gnostics gracing one of Mme Geoffrin's salons.

Other *philosophes* might have welcomed their presence as well, for, as part of the Enlightenment attack on Christianity, the ancient dualist heretics of the early church found their cause promoted. The method, or perhaps the battle order (Gibbon's *Memoirs* speak of shooting the shaft and sounding the alarm), was revealed by Gibbon when he fondly praised that patron saint of the Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle. Bayle "balances the false religions in his sceptical scales, til the opposite quantities annihilate each other." Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* had no entry on Gnostics or Gnosticism (a brand new word in his day), but gathered all of the old dualists together under the heading of Manichaeans. The Manichaean movement had been the final flourish of Gnosticism, and had survived through various geographical wanderings until its flare up in southern France in the Middle Ages when it was eliminated by a crusade. Until the eighteenth century revived an interest in the older sects now called gnostic, the term Manichaean was used for all dualist heresies.

For Voltaire, another of Bayle's devotees, the catchword was also Manichaean. *Candide* depicts the adventures of a few silly optimists in a wicked world; a world in which Christian priests are among the most villainous troublemakers. Peter Gay has even described the book as "a declaration of war on Christianity." Yet in the midst of all the chaos Voltaire includes one sympathetic character; a wandering scholar named Martin who introduces himself to Candide as "a Manichaean." When Candide protests that there are no more Manichaeans in the world, Martin simply says, "I cannot think any other way. I think that God has abandoned this globe, or rather this globule, to some maleficent being." The events of the novel confirm Martin's assessment. Bayle had said that the gnostic belief in several eternal beings, some good, some bad, in perpetual conflict, "is not so unlikely" to "men who think and reason." Voltaire says, in his own *Philosophical Dictionary* discussing the Gnostics and Manichaeans, "to have imagined two all-powerful beings fighting each other" is not a "trivial" notion. He slyly describes Basilides' myth of "the creation of the world by god's lowest angels, and that these, not being skillful, arranged matters as we see them." In his story, *Plato's Dream*, Voltaire tells a nightmarish version of creation by an incompetent genie called Demogorgon. Dualist stories seem to have appealed to Voltaire's own sense of conflict. There is in his writings, as Roland Barthes puts it, "a kind of Manichaean struggle between stupidity and intelligence." Or, as David Hume summed up the opposition in one breath, "Stupidity, Christianity, and Ignorance."

The Enlightenment writers created a sympathetic picture of the Gnostics because heterodoxy suited their anti-orthodoxy. They emphasized the dualist critique of the world, but ignored the dualist promise of transcendent escape. The *philosophes* thus created a version of the Gnostics that was, like themselves, secular. It is because we are still the heirs of that secular agenda that an assessment of any modern relevance of Gnosticism properly begins in the eighteenth century. There was, certainly, an interest in unorthodox, esoteric, and even occult matters in earlier centuries. In the Renaissance, for example, there was something of the spirit of exploration and conquest in such studies. Disparate traditions, hermetic and cabalistic, were appropriated and harmonized with Christianity. Ficino, Agrippa, Dee, and Bruno all considered themselves Christians. They were not at all, moreover, interested in the ancient Gnostics. The eighteenth-century *philosophes* regarded Gnosticism as a counter-tradition and wielded it as a weapon in their outflanking tactics to overthrow the received tradition.

That the "candid but rational inquiry" (the words with which Gibbon opens his chapter on Christianity) was often a relativist pose was mostly lost on following generations. The irony was ignored and Reason itself was regarded as absolutist and a threat to the human imagination. William Blake named the enemy in his poem *Milton*:

... this Newtonian Phantasm
 This Voltaire & Rousseau: this Hume & Gibbon
 ... the Reasoning Power in Man
 This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit; a Selfhood,
 which must be put off & annihilated away ...
 I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration
 To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour
 To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration
 To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering
 To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination

This is a new use of dualist language. For Blake, salvation was the free expression of his own visionary imagination. Only a few months before his death, he wrote to a friend that he was "very near the gates of death ... but not in spirit and life, not in the real man, the imagination, which liveth for ever. In that I am stronger and stronger, as this foolish body decays." Throughout his life, Blake expressed this vision in poetic myths with a strong gnostic character. The evil demiurge of these poems he calls Urizen, a polysemous figure who suggests so much more than the creator of the physical world, Jehovah. He is also, as "prince of Light," Satan and the "Enlightenment" as his name (your Reason) signifies. He is evil for Blake because his creation limits (Horizen, his name implies, too) and his primary symbol is "the golden compasses." Like the bearded figure in Blake's famous print "The Ancient of Days," Urizen leans out of eternity and reaches down into the dark void with his compasses to measure, to divide, and to imprison. In *The Four Zoas* Blake describes the creation in images that echo and parody, like some gnostic texts, both Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus*:

... First the Architect divine his plan
 Unfolds, The wondrous scaffold reard all round the infinite
 Quadrangular the building rose the heavens squared by a line ...
 A wondrous golden Building; many a window many a door
 And many a division let in & out into the vast unknown
 Cubed in window square immoveable, within its walls & cielings
 The heavens were closed and spirits mournd their bondage night and day

When he finishes his creation Urizen, like Yaldabaoth, claims, "Am I not God. Who is Equal to me."

Then he began to sow the seed he girded round his loins
 With a bright girdle & his skirt filld with immortal souls
 Howling & Wailing fly the souls from Urizen's strong hand

This evil creator depicted by Blake in his later poems helps remove some of the ambiguity from the question he had posed in "The Tyger": "What immortal hand or eye, / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" Where William Blake read or heard about the Gnostics is not exactly clear, but some of his views certainly echo them consciously. With the Gnostics he separates the true God from nature, and regards the creator of the natural universe as evil. Crabb Robinson, a friend of Wordsworth, talked with Blake and kept a diary. Discussing Wordsworth's "eloquent descriptions of Nature," Blake told Robinson that Wordsworth didn't believe in God, "For Nature is the work of the Devil." When Robinson pointed out the creation of the earth by God in Genesis, Blake "repeated the doctrine of the Gnostics with sufficient consistency" that his interviewer was silenced.

Harold Bloom, a contemporary interpreter of the Romantic tradition, compares Blake's Tyger with Melville's *Moby Dick*. Both beasts represent nature, and "nature is death." Nature "painted like a harlot," Melville wrote, "God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature." The material universe is, for Ahab, "but a mask," a cosmetic behind which lies death, like a white shroud, like the albino whale. In a short poem he called "Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem," Melville wrote "Matter in end will never abate / His ancient brutal claim." Two years before the publication of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville purchased a copy of Piere Bayle's old *Dictionary*. What he read there (and elsewhere) found its way into the novel, and whether Ahab shakes his angry harpoon at a monstrous creature or a malicious gnostic creator is not distinct. "An inscrutable malice," Ahab says, "is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man." Ishmael, attempting to explain this fury, compares Ahab's feelings to those of a sect of ancient Gnostics. These were the Ophites, a group that today's scholarship calls the Sethians, associated with several of our Nag Hammadi texts. Ahab, says Ishmael, deliriously transferred the idea of "that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning ... which the ancient Ophites of the east revered ... to the abhorred white whale." In the final pages of the book Ahab flings an accusation at the creator that conjures Yaldabaoth's ignorance of his own mother.

Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten: certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent. There is some unsoftening thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical.

In these passages from Blake and Melville, the physical world is a barrier. Romantic writers regard that barrier with feelings from discomfort to open hostility. The present collection of texts from Nag Hammadi shows us that what we call Gnosticism can range between a hierarchical monism to strict dualism. In a similar manner texts from the Romantic tradition depict, with varying degrees of conflict, a drama of separation and reintegration. The "fall into Division," Blake wrote, "and Resurrection to Unity." Salvation consists in what Harold Bloom describes as "the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime." "The power of the mind," as Coleridge had put it, "over the universe of death." Scholars have found examples of "Gnosticism" in the writings of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, the early Flaubert (in *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, a book much inspired by his reading of Pierre Bayle), the French Symbolists, the German Idealists, the American Transcendentalists, Carlyle, and so on. "Indeed," writes Bloom, "it could be argued that a form of Gnosticism is endemic in Romantic tradition." His primary example of this gnostic tendency is W.B. Yeats. Yeats's lyrics internalize the dualism and dramatize a conflict between various aspects of the self. In such poems as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," the two speakers, Bloom argues, "are precisely the *pneuma* and the *psyche* of Gnostic formulation. The place of the Gnostic alien or transmundane true God in Yeats is taken by the imagination, which in Yeats is closer to Gnostic transcendence than it is to the Romantic Sublime."

If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

This internalized antithetical conflict is more boldly stated in "Sailing to Byzantium":

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.
Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing.

Yeats's strange and famous poem "The Second Coming" historicizes this antithesis and envisions the approach of a world spirit signaling a new, post-Christian age.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight . . .
. . . but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

How are we to read these difficult images? Is Yeats afraid, or simply struck with wonder? Have the twenty Christian centuries been a nightmare? And how much can we make of the antithesis between "know" and "sleep"? A lot. The rough beast's slumber recalls "Urizen laid in a stony sleep." Yeats, after all, had edited Blake's poems for publication. The turning of the ages was recorded by Yeats, acting as amanuensis to his wife who was in mediumistic trance, and published as *A Vision*. The anti-Christian tone is not unrelated to his involvement in various occult groups while he lived in London and to his membership in The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which enthusiastically circulated exotic religious writings including gnostic texts.

What Yeats and the Golden Dawn read as "gnostic" were often greco-roman magical texts. He also read gnostic sources in the books published by his long time acquaintance G.R.S. Mead. Mead devoted his life to publishing English translations of the gnostic sources available at the turn of the century. In books like *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* he promoted an interest in the subject among nonscholarly readers. Mead and Yeats had met as members of the esoteric section of the Theosophical Society, which gathered at the London flat of H.P. Blavatsky in the 1880s.

It was Madame Blavatsky who first claimed the Gnostics as precursors for the occult movement. In her program to divide speculative learning into esoteric and exoteric, truth and religion, the Gnostics were an obvious opposition to what she called "Churchianity." She absorbed the Gnostics, in her universal free-associative style, into a great occult synthesis:

Ialdabaoth, the creator of the material world, was made to inhabit the planet Saturn according to the Ophites. From Ialdabaoth emanate six spirits who respectively dwell with their father in the seven planets. . . . These seven planets are identical with the Hindu *Sapta-lokas*, the seven places or spheres, or the superior and inferior worlds; for they represent the kabalistic seven spheres. With the Ophites they belong to the lower spheres. The monograms of these Gnostic planets are also Buddhistic, the latter differing, albeit slightly, from those of the usual astrological "houses."

This, from *Isis Unveiled*, is a typical sample of Blavatsky's treatment of the Gnostics. There is an esoteric tradition, Blavatsky felt, within every religion teaching her "secret doctrine." "The Gnosis, or traditional *secret* knowledge, was never without its representatives in any age or country," she writes. The esoteric tradition within Christianity is represented by the Gnostics, but "it is the intense and cruel desire to crush out the last vestige of the old philosophies by perverting their meaning, for fear that their own dogmas should not be rightly fathered on them, which impels the Catholic Church to carry on such a systematic persecution in regard to Gnostics. Alas, alas!"

H.P. Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society wrote the book on secret traditions. Most esoteric movements ever since have found it almost impossible to step outside of her (sometimes unconscious) influence. A few recent groups calling themselves gnostic have appealed to an underground yet pervasive "gnosis" rather than to the ancient historical gnostic sects. This is true of La Asociacion Gnostica which is widespread throughout Latin America, as well as the Los Angeles based Ecclesia Gnostica.

Indeed, in our century there have been several appropriations of gnostic motifs. The psychologist, C.G. Jung, continually refers to the Gnostics in his writings and was often photographed "wearing his gnostic ring." His lifelong interest in the subject was rewarded in 1952 when the Jung Institute in Zurich purchased and presented to him on his birthday a recently discovered gnostic papyrus manuscript. This "Jung Codex" is now our Nag Hammadi Codex I. Jung wrote so much about the Gnostics simply because he liked them. In *Psychological Types* he writes of "the vastly superior [compared to that of the Church] intellectual content of gnosis, which in the light of our present mental development has not lost but has considerably gained in value." He goes on to praise its "Promethean and creative spirit . . . we find in Gnosticism what was lacking in the centuries that followed: a belief in the efficacy of individual revelation and individual knowledge. This belief was rooted in

the proud feeling of man's affinity with the gods, subject to no human law, and so overmastering that it may even subdue the gods by the sheer power of gnosis."

In 1916, before he wrote his major works, during a period when he believed his house to be filled with parapsychological phenomena, Jung wrote a visionary piece called *The Seven Sermons to the Dead* and ascribed it pseudonymously to Basilides, the second-century Alexandrian Gnostic:

In the night the dead stood along the wall and cried:
We would have knowledge of god. Where is god?
Is god dead?
God is not dead. Now, as ever, he liveth.
This is a god whom ye know not, for mankind forgot it.
We name it by its name ABRAXAS.
Abraxas standeth above the sun and above the devil.
It is improbable probability, unreal reality.
Had the pleroma a being, Abraxas would be its manifestation.
The dead now raised a great tumult for they were Christians.

But Jung's Basilides preaches on:

Abraxas begetteth truth and lying, good and evil, light and darkness, in the same word and in the same act.
Wherefore is Abraxas terrible.
It is love and love's murder.
It is the saint and his betrayer.
It is the brightest light of day and the darkest night of madness.

In the early 1950s Dr. Jung defended himself against an attack by Martin Buber. Under discussion was the entire body of Jung's work, but Buber pointed a particularly snide finger at "his little Abraxas opus." The criticism was that Jung had overstepped the boundaries of psychology into religion, and had located God in the unconscious (rather than in Buber's transcendent "Thou"). This god of the self was, he complained, "the Gnostic god who unites good and evil in himself." Jung took all of this seriously. "Why is so much attention devoted to the question of whether I am a Gnostic?" He apologized for "once having perpetrated a poem, a sin of my [41-year-old] youth . . . I am a psychiatrist," he responded, "whose prime concern is to record and interpret his empirical material, to investigate facts and make them more generally comprehensible." Jung's "empirical" defense was later to be complicated by the description in his autobiography of his composition of the *Septem Sermones*. "All my works, all my creative activity, has come from those in-

ital fantasies . . . Everything that I accomplished in later life was already contained in them, although at first only in the form of emotions and images."

The paradoxical Abraxas of the early poem thus prefigures "the self" which Jung discussed over the next four decades as "a *complexio oppositorum*." Self-knowledge is achieved through the conscious assimilation of the contents of the unconscious, including its dark "shadow" side, towards a goal of "wholeness." Jung, therefore, was deeply interested in the gnostic insistence on evil as an active principle as opposed to the incomplete Christian view of evil as the *privatio boni*, the absence of good. "The Gnostics," he writes with approval, "exhaustively discussed the problem of evil," and he quotes the famous question of Basilides, "Whence comes evil?" Their answer was to oppose "the good, perfect, spiritual God by an imperfect, vain, ignorant and incompetent demiurge." In his book *Aion*, Jung performs a telling psychoanalytic turn on this myth. "The ignorant demiurge who imagined he was the highest divinity illustrates the perplexity of the ego when it can no longer hide from itself the knowledge that it has been dethroned by a supra-ordinate authority . . . that indescribable whole consisting of the sum of conscious and unconscious processes, the antithesis of the subjective ego-psyche, what I have called the self." Jung pushes this interpretation to claim that "for the Gnostics – and this is their real secret – the psyche existed as a source of knowledge . . . that many of the Gnostics were nothing other than psychologists." C.G. Jung, indeed, saw his own work as "a link in the *Aurea Catena*" (the Golden Chain) from Gnosticism through philosophical alchemy to the modern psychology of the unconscious. The chain had been broken by the Enlightenment with its "devilish developments, anti-christianity and rationalistic hybris." The tradition was then revived "by Freud, who had introduced the classical Gnostic motifs of sexuality and the wicked paternal authority." Freud, however, left out "that other essential aspect of Gnosticism: the primordial image of the spirit as another, higher god who gave mankind the vessel of spiritual transformation, a feminine principle." Jung compensates by reintegrating these motifs and thus creating a version of psychic unity that not only paralleled his reading of Gnosticism, but was inspired by it. Jung's psychology portrays a version of the self that is fragmented, as do many gnostic texts, and like them finds an image of divinity among these fragments. Unlike gnostic texts, however, Jungian psychology does not see salvation as a separation of that divine fragment from the mundane, and its removal to the divine. Rather, Jung takes the

entire dualist myth and locates it within the psyche. The result, as his own judgment states, is "that my leanings are therefore towards the very reverse of dualism."

Many of our century's fiction writers have portrayed versions of this psychologized Gnosticism. Herman Hesse's *Demian*, published in 1925, was written right after Hesse had undergone Jungian analysis. The characters and events of the novel constitute an allegory of the Jungian archetypes. The strongest character, Demian, appears to blur all distinctions of age, gender, or ethics. He is "unimaginably different." Demian tells the hero "dismaying" gnostic revisions of scripture to point out that the "people with character tend to receive the short end of the stick in biblical stories." Like a (Jungian) Gnostic also, Demian pushes the hero to transcend his limited view of reality. "Who would be born must first destroy a world," he says, and fly to God, a God whose "name is Abraxas, uniting the godly and devilish elements." That Demian represents an aspect of the hero's own self is clarified as the novel ends by blurring the distinction between the "other" and the "inner." In a mystical, homoerotic vision, the two characters merge into one. Hesse's next novel, *Steppenwolf*, portrays a character dwelling in "this alien world . . . the homeless Steppenwolf, the solitary." Steppenwolf, with an allusion to ancient Gnosticism's most stunning image, sees "the whole of human life as a violent and ill-fated abortion of the primal mother, a savage and dismal catastrophe of nature." At conflict with "nature" (Hesse identifies this with "bourgeois convention") is "the spirit . . . driven to God." In the course of the novel Steppenwolf is to discover that the conflict is more complicated, that there are not two but a thousand souls clamoring with him, "a chaos of potentialities and impulses." In answer to his striving, Steppenwolf is given a very psychologizing, very modern message. "You have a longing to forsake this world and to penetrate to a world beyond time. You know, of course, where this other world lies hidden. Only within yourself exists that other reality . . ."

These novels of Hermann Hesse are early versions of a genre that has been important throughout this century: stories of conflict between the outer world and the inner reality discovered by journeying through psychological realms. It is not surprising that some of these writings are read as "gnostic." Some, such as Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, are devastating in their criticism of normal life. Rather than promoting any integration towards a total personality, her novel valorizes the hero's dissociated psychic fantasies at the expense of his mental "health." His inner journey takes the hero to mythological lands,

to outer space, and back to earth – his “descent into hell” – as a messenger of the gods. The character’s struggle to hold on to this reality, against the drugs and shock therapy of his psychiatrists, is described with the classical gnostic metaphors (and with the typically gnostic reversal) of sleeping and waking, forgetting and remembering.

Although they vary in the radicalness of their dualism, all of these psychological writings agree that meaning is not to be discovered in the manifest world. By situating meaning within the human psyche, and implicitly ignoring any transcendent location for meaning, these works are definitely modern. Other types of “immanent” salvation have also been described as “modern Gnosticism.” A vast description of modern Gnosticism – including psychology in its scope – was the predominate theme of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin. Beginning in 1952 with *The New Science of Politics* and in many further books such as *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Voegelin identifies “the essence of modernity as the growth of gnosticism.” He understands Gnosticism to be “the experience of the world as an alien place . . . a horror of existence and a desire to escape from it.” Rather than the ancient Gnostic achronic salvation from above, however, Voegelin sees modern Gnosticism promising salvation in the future, by means of the historical process. For this radically immanent salvation, without transcendental irruptions, he faults the eighteenth century, and has some harsh words especially for Condorcet and Voltaire. Voegelin proceeds, like some unhinged biblical prophet, to trace and decry the course of modern Gnosticism: Comte, “the first high priest of a new religion, positivism”; Hegelianism (although as early as 1835 Ferdinand Christian Baur had argued for the similarity between German idealism and Gnosticism, calling it “the philosophy of religion, the Godhead’s evolving self-knowledge through man”); Marxism, “the self-salvation of man, an intellectual swindle”; Communism, “left-wing gnosticism”; National Socialism, “right-wing gnosticism”; totalitarianism, “the end of the Gnostic search for a civil theology”; progressivism, “scientism and the immanentist pride in the variants of salvation through physics, economics, sociology, biology, and psychology.” All, all of this, Eric Voegelin calls Gnosticism. He appeals for “repressing Gnostic corruption and restoring the forces of civilization,” and concludes, “fate is in the balance.”

Voegelin’s writings could be regarded as silly were it not for their strong impact within and beyond his own field of political science. Academicians from various disciplines have gathered at conferences such as “Gnosticism and Modernity,” where they discussed such topics as

“The Gnosticism of Lincoln’s Political Rhetoric.” The literary critic, Cleanth Brooks, having absorbed Voegelin’s version of Gnosticism, described Walker Percy’s novel *Lancelot* as “modern Gnosticism.” The main character of this book, Lancelot Lamar, is confronted by his wife’s and daughter’s ongoing orgy with a group of sex and drug enthusiasts from Hollywood. In a fury of crazed self-righteousness, Lancelot decides to take matters into his own hands (immanent salvation) and burns down his house with everyone in it. It would appear that Voegelin’s influence has removed the distinction between “Gnosticism” and what we call “apocalypticism.”

Voegelin portrays Gnosticism as an attempt to solve the ills and evils of this world by the promise of a revolutionary new realm. An ironic complement to this portrait, and a tribute to the complexity and contradictions of the ancient sects, is that the rejection of this world and disentanglement from it is only one gnostic attitude. An ascetic withdrawal is one ethical response to anti-cosmic dualism, and one which characterizes most of the Nag Hammadi texts (“The World Haters,” *Time* magazine headlined its report on the present translation project). An opposite stance is to immerse oneself in worldly sins and pleasures, these being, after all, alien and uncorrupting things. This attitude, not found in our texts but attested in ancient descriptions of the gnostic sects, has inspired several recent novels of Lawrence Durrell. His four novels that make up *The Alexandria Quartet* depict a gnostic “cabal” led by a “homosexual goat” named Balthazar. “Indulge but refine” is Balthazar’s doctrine, which he claims to be uniquely Alexandrian, “a town of sects and gospels. And for every ascetic she has always thrown up one religious libertine – Carpocrates [the second-century gnostic], Anthony [the Christian monk] – who was prepared to founder in the senses as deeply and truly as any desert father in the mind It is the national peculiarity of the Alexandrians to seek a reconciliation (between extreme sensuality and intellectual asceticism). That is why we are hysterics and extremists. That is why we are the incomparable lovers we are.” One character, Justine, plays out on this earth the drama of the gnostic Wisdom goddess, “bending over the dirty sink with the foetus in it [like] poor Sophia of Valentinus.” Are we, she wonders, “the work of an inferior deity, a Demiurge, who wrongly believed himself to be God? Heavens, how probable it seems.” Justine quotes Balthazar, who in turn quotes E.M. Forster. Forster’s book *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* was the main source of Durrell’s understanding of Gnosticism, with its tragic combination of physical love and theology. Here is Forster’s lovely

retelling of the creation myth of Valentinus: "He imagines a primal God, the centre of a divine harmony, who sent out manifestations of himself in pairs of male and female. Each pair was inferior to its predecessor, and Sophia the female of the thirtieth pair, least perfect of all. She showed her imperfection not, like Lucifer, by rebelling from God, but by desiring too ardently to be united to him. She fell through love . . . and the universe is formed out of her agony and remorse." Durrell went on in later novels like *Monsieur* to describe yet another modern sect of Egyptian Gnostics. In *Monsieur* the amorous interplay of genders and geometries is complex enough to rival any ancient gnostic cosmogony. "I am amazed," wrote Durrell's long time friend, that modern apostle of experience, Henry Miller, "that there has been no revival of this sect." Forster had attempted an answer: "it was pessimistic, imaginative, esoteric — three great obstacles to success."

One interpretation of ancient Gnosticism, combined with an assessment of its modern relevance, has won the favor of many scholarly specialists in gnostic studies. In the 1920s Hans Jonas was a student of both the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. He was thus in a unique position to participate, as a Bultmannian, in this century's investigation of ancient gnostic sources and, as a Heideggerian, in the philosophy of existentialism. Throughout his long career, Jonas has played these two themes against each other. The link between the two is provided by dualism. "Gnosticism," he claims "has been the most radical embodiment of dualism ever to have appeared on the stage of history. It is a split between self and world, men's alienation from nature, the metaphysical devaluation of nature, the cosmic solitude of the spirit and the nihilism of mundane norms." It is "a lasting paradigm of the human condition." Likewise, "the essence of existentialism is a certain dualism, an estrangement between man and the world." Existentialism also contains a "depreciation of the concept of nature." Gnosticism, therefore, has "an analogical modernity." In his book *The Gnostic Religion*, Jonas focuses on one specific image that is used by both the ancients and the moderns to describe "the self-experience of existence," the image of "having been thrown." Here is Heidegger in *Being and Time*: "This characteristic of Dasein's Being . . . we call it the 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*). This downward plunge into and within the groundlessness of the inauthentic Being, is characterized by temptation, tranquillizing, alienation . . ." Jonas compares this to the famous ancient Valentinian formula that freedom is the knowledge of, among other things, "wherein we have been thrown." He made

this comparison before the availability of the Nag Hammadi translations, which describe how Yaldabaoth and the archons "threw" mankind into matter and distraction. Jonas expertly draws attention to the dissimilarities as well: "Gnostic man is thrown into an antagonistic, anti-divine, and therefore anti-human nature, modern man into an indifferent one." The modern version is more nihilistic, "a dualism without metaphysics." Thrownness is, in both systems, however, "an existential mode of the past," nor is there, he argues, a mode of genuine existence in the future. Genuine existence, freedom, dwells "only in the crisis between past and future, the razor's edge of decision, the existential present of the moment."

Hans Jonas presents a compelling argument, and the similarities between ancient Gnosticism and modern existentialism do seem at least "analogical." We should keep in mind, however, the surprising condemnation of Gnosticism made by Albert Camus. Gnosticism, he claims in *The Rebel*, is conciliatory. It alters the course of metaphysical rebellion by developing the theory of a wicked, inferior god against whom to direct its attack, and exalts a superior god. "The vast number of aeons invented by Valentinus," for instance, "are the equivalent of the intermediary truths to be found in Hellenism. Their aim is to diminish the absurdity of an intimate relationship between suffering humanity and an implacable god."

Existentialist alienation and modern versions of visionary romanticism have combined to give Gnosticism a powerful literary expression. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, fellow students at Columbia University in the 1940's, were introduced to Gnosticism by their professor Raymond Weaver. John Tytell, an historian of "the Beat Generation," has shown that an interest in gnostic themes voiced itself in Kerouac's 1959 novel *Doctor Sax*. This mythic reverie of a book ("Memory and dream are intermixed in this mad universe") describes Doctor Sax, "the King of Anti Evil," and his attempts to save the world from "the Great World Snake of evil" with its "moo mouth maw of death." The snake, with its "scaly ululating back," is "an unforgettable flow of evil and wrath and of Satan"; and Doctor Sax, in "his slouched hat" (like Ahab's — Kerouac's professor had been a Melville scholar), searches the world "for herbs that he knew someday he would perfect into an alchemic-almost poison art . . . that would make the Snake drop dead." The novel climaxes in a grand nightmare that seems to draw in every stock character from both sides of the conflict between good and evil. Allen Ginsberg also employs gnostic imagery to voice his hatred of evil in the world. In his

nuclear protest poem "Plutonian Ode," written in 1978 after reading Jonas's book on Gnosticism, he confronts our "Radioactive Nemesis . . . named for Death's planet." Ginsberg's poem, in the form of an exorcistic chant, evokes the planetary archons of the Gnostics:

I salute your dreadful presence lasting majestic as the Gods,
Sabaot, Jehova, Astapheus, Adonaeus, Elohim, Iao, Ialdabaoth, Aeon
from Aeon born ignorant in an Abyss of Light,
Sophia's reflections glittering thoughtful galaxies, whirlpools of star-spume
silver-thin as hairs of Einstein!

Gnostic motifs have been identified in that most visionary of our modern literary genres, science fiction. Historian William Irwin Thompson sees the gnostic myth in Nicholas Roeg's film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and in Zena Henderson's novel *Pilgrimage*. Both of these stories are about characters whose sojourn on this planet is a tragic separation from their true home. Painfully alienated, they struggle through memory to regain identification with their higher origins. Superman, too, although he is not homesick, is an alien battling against the forces of evil. Good and evil in "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco has written, are "clearly divided into zones of Manichaen incontrovertibility." It is, however, in the science fiction novels of the prolific writer Philip K. Dick that Gnosticism is most consciously employed. In *Valis*, published in 1981, a year before Dick's death, the main character has an encounter with the divine which "fires information into his head by a beam of pink light." The divine is "Mind," but Mind divided against itself, as two contending principles, like the schizophrenic main character of the novel. "From loss and grief the Mind has become deranged," he says. "Therefore we, as parts of the universe, the Brain, are partly deranged." This character, called Horselover Fat, has the following conversation with his therapist:

"Do you believe man is created in God's image?"

"Yes," Fat said, "but the creator deity, not the true God."

"What?"

Fat said, "That's Yaldabaoth. Sometimes called Samael, the blind god. He's deranged."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Fat is talking about *On the Origin of the World* from the first edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library* published in 1977, which Dick quotes elsewhere in the novel. "A lunatic blind creator and his screwed-up world" explained, for Dick, the "irrational, whacked out, psychotic" universe.

In the course of the novel, Fat attempts to recapture, beyond the irrational god (and beyond his own schizophrenia), the true God. This science fiction novel and its sequel, *The Divine Invasion*, tell a cosmic story where mental psychoses play out a drama of madness and intelligence, where fragments of divinity lose and remember themselves in human minds. It might be supposed that the Nag Hammadi texts inspired these novels, but Gnosticism, it seems, is never so simple. "Horselover Fat" is a multilingual pun for the author's own name, and Philip K. Dick claimed that *Valis* was autobiographical, that he, like his character, had an encounter with a beam of divine pink light in 1974. The publication of the Nag Hammadi translations only confirmed his revelation.

A quite self-conscious incorporation of Nag Hammadi texts into a science fiction novel appeared in Harold Bloom's 1979 novel *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. In it the reincarnated Valentinus and his companions fly to a planet called Lucifer. Quoting our gnostic texts, the heroes wage a violent battle against Saklas, the Demiurge who is worshipped in his "Saklaseum." Bloom, more successful as an interpreter of literature, later confessed that *The Flight to Lucifer* reads as though Walter Pater were writing *Star Wars*. But, then, so does much ancient gnostic writing.

Harold Bloom's strongest appropriation of Gnosticism is in his theoretical books of literary criticism. He describes his "mode of interpreting literary texts as a Valentinian approach," that is, "an antithetical and revisionist way of reading." In a series of books beginning with *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973 he studies "the anxiety that blocks creativeness" when a writer faces his great precursors. "In Yeats," for instance, the precursor is "the Spectre of Blake." Bloom's argument is that literary influence always proceeds by "a deliberately perverse misreading . . . an act of creative correction, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism whose purpose is to clear away the precursor so as to open a space for oneself." A text is therefore "a psychic battlefield" where influence fights to move *backwards*. Bloom's model for this is "Gnosticism, the religion of belatedness." "Valentinus," he argues, "is troping upon and indeed against his precursor authorities, to reverse his relationship to the Bible and to Plato, by joining himself to an asserted earlier truth that they supposedly have distorted." In 1982, in *Agon*, Bloom "misread" his gnostic precursors and claimed them for the latest school of literary criticism: "Gnosticism was 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." Bloom's willfulness and enthusiasm bowl the reader over. "Abandon Heidegger for Valentinus," he calls out. If his creative misprision is successful, it will be measured by our inability to read these old texts without feeling Harold Bloom's influence upon them.

By turning reading into an activity upon the text, or rather, by his situating of meaning within the intertextual relationship between texts, Bloom has shifted the discussion of Gnosticism away from the modern into the postmodern situation. Ihab Hassan's 1987 book *The Postmodern Turn* draws on Bloom and many other theorists to discuss a "New Gnosticism" characterized by the dematerialization of existence. The "New Gnosticism does not revert directly to the ancient cults," yet it was "prefigured by the ancient Gnostics, authors of a passionate subjectivity." Contemporary philosophy and literary criticism are on "a gnostic journey into subjectivity, that leaves texts behind and vanishes into consciousness." Our own mental constructs, he claims, are our knowledge. Human beings are becoming "gnostic creatures constituting themselves, determining their universe by symbols of their own making," and he indicates science fiction and fantasy literature as examples. As with the ancient Gnostics, the traditional codes no longer determine our meaning. The traditional canon of texts no longer has authority. Hassan sees "a vast, revisionary will" at work in our culture, unsettling and heterogeneous, and he quotes Jean-François Lyotard's now famous clarion call of postmodernism: "Let us wage a war on totality."

This postmodern appreciation of Gnosticism seems indeed to have an affinity with ancient sectarianism and revisionary mythologizing. Ihab Hassan considers "immanence" to be one of the main characteristics of the "New Gnosticism," a quality of both modern and postmodern theory. Thus, as Charles Jencks describes postmodern art and architecture, we have personal invented mythology and metaphors with no shared metaphysical substance. Anatole France (himself a writer who never made it into modernism) wrote an eloquent version of immanent gnostic salvation in his 1914 novel *The Revolt of the Angels*:

The God of old is dispossessed of His terrestrial empire, and every thinking being on this globe disdains Him or knows Him not. But what matter that men should be no longer submissive to Ialdabaoth if the spirit of Ialdabaoth is still in them; if they, like Him, are jealous, violent, quarrelsome, and greedy, and the foes of the arts and of beauty? What matter that they have rejected the ferocious demiurge? It is in ourselves and in ourselves alone that we must attack and destroy Ialdabaoth.

How much do these attempts to see modern, or even postmodern, relevance in Gnosticism help us to understand our ancient texts? or do they misuse the evidence? The evidence, in any case, is conflicting, as James M. Robinson declares in the opening sentences of the introduction to this book. It has also been pointed out that none of the Nag Hammadi texts use "gnostic" as a term of self-designation. Other ancient sources tell us that "gnostic" was used by some sects as a self-designation, but certainly not by all of the various sects that came to be called Gnosticism. We might also notice that the only mention of the famous gnostic hierarchs in this library (in *The Testimony of Truth*) is as opponents, and "they" are attacked as heretics! With the publication of the Nag Hammadi library the study of ancient Gnosticism has become increasingly problematic, so likewise its relevance. The frequently attempted etymological definition (gnostic comes from the Greek word for know) is frustratingly inadequate. We do better to avoid generalizations and to marvel at the variety of the sources. The variety was brought about more by the mundane issues of time and space, than by theological debates. The first issue was the authority of tradition against revealed interpretations; the other was hierarchical unification against sectarianism. By taking the wrongheaded side of both these issues, the sects and our texts were excluded, and "Gnosticism" became a symbol of heresy. Interpretive appropriations of Gnosticism have all used this element of otherness: the Gnostics as anti-Christians, as visionaries, as esotericists, as symbolists of the psyche, as alienated, and as violent misinterpreters and revisers.

The recent availability of this large number of primary texts has opened up new ways of discussing, new relevances for, the ancient sects we call gnostic. By their skewed readings, by animating the relationship between tradition and imagination, these texts capture our attention. If cultures define themselves not at their calm centers, but at their peripheral conflicts of inclusion and exclusion, then Gnosticism, whatever we mean by it, is more than an antiquarian curiosity. It stands as a continuing testament to difference in the face of our cultural tendencies toward closed homogeneity.