



LUDWIG KLAGES AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

A VITALIST TOOLKIT

Paul Bishop



Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life

This book provides a unique overview of and introduction to the work of the German psychologist and philosopher Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), an astonishing figure in the history of German ideas. Central to intellectual life in turn-of-the-century Munich, he went on to establish a reputation for himself as an original and provocative thinker. Nowadays he is often overlooked, partly because of the absence of an accessible and authoritative introduction to his thought; this volume offers just such a point of entry. With an emphasis on applicability and utility, Paul Bishop reinvigorates the discourse surrounding Klages, providing a neutral and compact account of his intellectual development and his impact on psychology and philosophy.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of Klages's life, visiting the major stations of his intellectual development. Chapter 2 examines in turn nine major conceptual 'tools' found in Klages's extensive writings, aiming to clarify Klages's terminology, to demystify his discourse, and to sift through Klages's credentials as a psychological thinker. Chapter 3 consists of extracts from Klages's writings, thematically oriented; these showcase the aphoristic and lyrical, as well as psychological and philosophical, qualities of Klages's writing, including his interest in aesthetics. Taken together, all three chapters constitute a vitalist 'toolkit' – to build a fuller, richer life.

Drawing on previous studies of Klages that have only been available in German, *Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life* provides a non-polemical account of Klages's life and work, with explanations and commentaries to guide the reader through extracts from his writings. The book accessibly explains the most important ideas and concepts found in Klages's work, including soul, spirit, character, expression, will, and consciousness, and it reveals Klages to be a serious figure whose thought remains relevant to many disciplines today. It will stimulate interest in his work and create a new readership for his remarkable worldview.

Paul Bishop is William Jacks Chair in Modern Languages at the University of Glasgow and a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists. His previous publications include *On the Blissful Islands with Nietzsche and Jung*, *Analytical Psychology and German Classical Aesthetics* (2 vols), and, as editor, *The Archaic: The Past in the Present* and *Jung in Contexts: A Reader* (all Routledge).



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In memoriam
Dietrich Jäger (1928–2010)

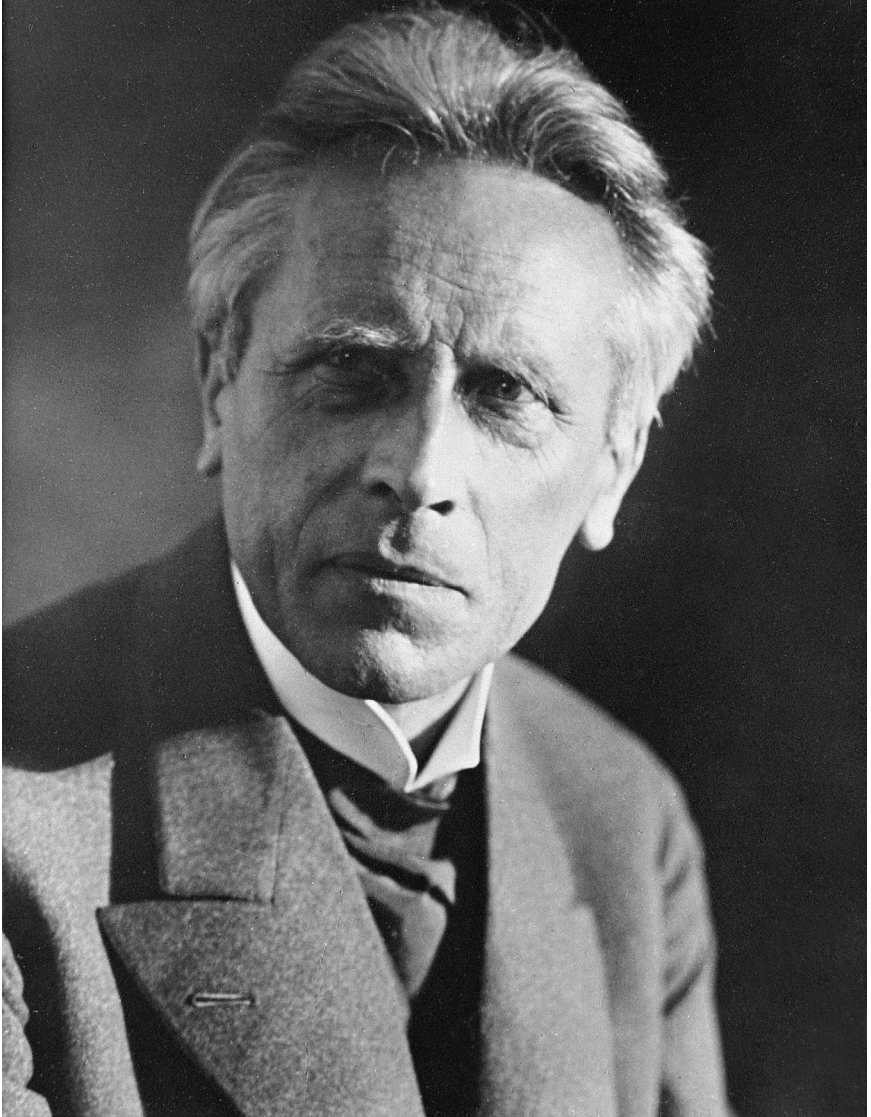


Figure 1 Ludwig Klages.

The point of life is life.

(Goethe, letter to J. J. Meyer, 8 February 1796)

O humankind, become essential!

(Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, book 2, §30)

Go beyond 'you' and 'me'! Experience cosmically!

(Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 9, 11[7], 443)



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Preface

In *Hopscotch (Rayuela)*, 1963), a novel set in Paris and Buenos Aires by the Argentinian novelist and essayist, Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), one of the founders of the so-called Latin American Boom, we find an exchange between Horacio Oliveira, a disgruntled intellectual, and Ossip Gregorovius, a fellow-member of the Serpent Club (a meeting-place for artists and thinkers). Oliveira declares that it is imperative humans keep looking for ‘the beyond’, lamenting the way in which culture has led modern humankind into a ‘blind alley’ and into ‘scientific barbarism’. To which Gregorovius replies with the lapidary observation that Klages had already said all that.¹

Who is Klages, the man who has said it all? And what is it exactly that Klages has already said? These two questions will serve as the guiding-thread for our journey into the labyrinth of Klages’s psychological and philosophical thought, allowing us to penetrate to its core – and to find our way back to the world again. According to the ancient Greek myth, the labyrinth harbours a monster in its centre. Sometimes, it can seem as if there is something monstrous about Klages, given the way he is often talked about, if he is talked about at all. But we should remember that the claim about the monster is only a myth ... yet it was not always this way, and one does not have to look far to find numerous plaudits and expressions of appreciation for Klages’s work.

In 1924, the German novelist Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) offered the following generous praise of a work by Klages that had appeared a couple of years earlier, describing Klages as ‘renowned as the brilliant creator of a doctrine of expression and a graphology found on real intellectual depth’. Klages’s new book, *Of Cosmogonic Eros (Vom kosmogonischen Eros)*, had ‘such psychological depth and rich, fruitful atmosphere’ that it had moved Hesse ‘more deeply [...] than the writings of a Spengler or a Keyserling’, thus placing Klages *above* such contemporary figures as the Baltic German philosophers Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) and Hermann Graf Keyserling (1880–1946). For, so Hesse wrote, in some pages of this book, *Of Cosmogonic Eros*, ‘something almost inexpressible has found the right words’.²

In 1927, the German philosopher Karl Löwith (1897–1973), a former student of Heidegger, declared that, ‘in the narrow context of philosophical works written on Nietzsche, the work by Klages’ – he means Klages’s monograph of

1926, *The Psychological Achievements of Nietzsche (Die psychologischen Errungenschaften Nietzsches)* – ‘can be ascribed without any hesitation an outstanding significance’.³ And in 1928, Max Scheler (1874–1928) observed in *The Human Place in the Cosmos (Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos)* that Klages was

the one who provided a philosophical foundation in Germany for the *pan-Romantic* way of thinking about the nature of the human being, representatives of which we can find today among many researchers in different disciplines, for example, [the palaeontologist] Edgar Dacqué [1878–1945], [the ethnologist and archaeologist] Leo Frobenius [1873–1938], [the Swiss analytical psychologist] C.G. Jung [1897–1961], [the psychiatrist and art historian] Hans Prinzhorn [1886–1933], [the philosopher] Theodor Lessing [1872–1933], and, to a certain extent, Oswald Spengler.⁴

In a letter to the scholar Gershom Scholem of 15 August 1930, the German philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was able to write that Klages’s ‘major work’, *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul (Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele)* (1929–1932), ‘is without doubt a great philosophical work’ – even if he felt obliged immediately to add, ‘regardless of the context in which the author may be and remain suspect’.⁵ In a letter to Wolf Goetze of 16 January 1930, the German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler – the author of *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) to whom Hesse had compared Klages – remarked that ‘in the field of scientific psychology, Klages towers over all of his contemporaries, including even the academic world’s most renowned authorities’,⁶ even if on other occasions Spengler sought to distance himself from Klages.⁷ In short, all these writers would have agreed with the assessment of the Austrian artist Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) in 1926: ‘Klages is a fascinating phenomenon, a scientist of the highest rank, whom I regard as the most important psychologist of our time’.⁸

Nor was this assessment limited to the German-speaking world. In the seventy-fifth of his *Cantos* (composed between 1915 and 1962), the American-born Modernist poet, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), declared:

Out of Phlegethon!
out of Phlegethon,
Gerhart
art thou come forth out of Phlegethon?
with Buxtehude and Klages in your satchel, with the
Ständebuch of Sachs in yr/luggage
– not of one bird of many⁹

– referring in these lines to the flaming fire in Hades, Phlegethon; to the contemporary Dresden pianist and composer, Gerhart Münch; to the Danish-German Baroque composer and organist, Dieterich Buxtehude; to a collection of illustrations

to the songs of the medieval German *Meistersänger*, Hans Sachs; and, of course, to Ludwig Klages.¹⁰

True, academic critics and reviewers in the English-speaking world more often found it hard to assess the importance of Klages; not surprisingly, since so little of his work was translated and published in English. The only one of Klages's works to be translated into English was *Die Grundlagen der Charakterkunde*, published in 1929 as *The Science of Character*. Writing in *Mind* in 1929, the British philosopher and psychologist, W. J. H. Sprott (1897–1971), began his review of this work by confessing that 'Prof. Klages is difficult to place', and he continued: 'He is a mixture of scientist and philosopher, and he is a philosopher according to the common acceptation of the term', i.e. he is 'involved in his subject' and has 'strong feelings about it', he 'does not stand aloof like a pure scientist and describe and hypothesize', and he 'has some kind of message' – one which has, in Klages's own words, "'aroused such enthusiastic echoes in the souls of the young that we should hesitate to omit" an extract from a previous work "although it does not fully agree with our present view"'.¹¹

And writing in the *Psychological Bulletin* in 1933, the American psychologist Gordon W. Allport (1897–1967) noted that 'American students of personality' had given 'scant attention' to the writings of Klages, 'which at first sight seem so neologistic and strange, and from the academic point of view, so unpleasantly heterodox'; nevertheless, Allport added that 'it must be confessed [...] that many of the most original contributions to the study of personality have come through "irregular" channels', and Klages 'ranks high among the provocative and influential non-academic writers of Europe'.¹² Rightly, Allport emphasized that graphology 'plays a relatively small part in [Klages's] doctrine of characterology', and he categorized Klages's approach to psychology as 'explicitly personalistic': 'The problems of individuality, [Klages] holds, are much greater, richer, and more manifold than can be treated with the meager and discordant formulas of the traditional school of psychology'. For this reason, Allport concluded, if Klages's indictment of psychology seemed 'unnecessarily harsh and malapropos' and 'an anachronism', this was only because psychologists had 'spontaneously adopted some of the problems which for many years Klages has been calling to their attention', and had 'even commenced in a tentative way to admit some of his principles into their horizon'.¹³

And in a critical survey of different kinds of literary criticism, first given as a paper at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association held in Philadelphia in 1934, Martin Schütze (1867–1950), a Germanist at the University of Chicago, considered the role of letters and the arts in a philosophy of culture in relation to what he termed a 'modern humanism'. Taking the thesis of 'rationality-irrationality' as his starting-point, Schütze considered three figures: the German historian and hermeneutic philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911); the Swiss psychoanalyst, C. G. Jung (1875–1961); and Ludwig Klages. In the case of Dilthey, this rational-irrational dualism becomes extended to the dualism of *Erlebnis* (i.e. experience) and *Dichtung* (i.e. poetry), or to the

event of an actual experience and the poetic expression of it; in the case of Jung, a psychology of the unconscious turns into ‘a mystical doctrine – [...] almost a religion’ – of the unconscious, centred around ‘the “Urvision” or absolutely primary, unanalyzable, indefinable vision of an ultimate reality’, serving as a ‘real symbol’ in which ‘the limitation of temporal, individual consciousness finds a ‘needed compensation’; and in the case of Klages?¹⁴ Schütze describes the doctrine founded by Klages, and subsequently adopted by Ernst Bertram (1884–1957) and by Hans Prinzhorn, as the doctrine of ‘Bios-Eros-Soul’ as the antagonist of ‘Logos-Reason (*Geist*)’, and he went on to argue:

This is a deliberately irrationalistic, biological-mystical doctrine which has appropriated many of Nietzsche’s antirationalistic theories. It rests on the old dialectic antithesis of reason and feeling (logos and soul) and of spontaneity and mechanism, and is therefore, after all, in spite of its strange terminology, only another variant of minus-rationalism.¹⁵

As an example of how Klages’s ideas might work in literary-critical practice, Schütze cited the analysis of Schiller’s poetry and philosophy offered by one of Klages’s followers, Werner Deubel (1894–1949), in an article first published in the *Goethe-Jahrbuch* in 1934.¹⁶ On Deubel’s account of Schiller’s famous poem, ‘Ode to Joy’ (as summarized by Schütze), ‘enthusiasm becomes “orgiasm”’; “joy[,] ecstasy”, and the expansive vision of a rapturous Olympian fervor is sensationalized into a Dionysian fury’.

Yet if the reception of Klages in the fields of psychology and literary criticism in the English-speaking world was limited, his influence in the world of German-speaking psychology was much greater. Some of these psychologists who found themselves, to a greater or less extent, in agreement with Klages were discussed by Frederic Wertham (1895–1981), the German-born American psychiatrist (and critic of mass media), in one of a series of articles published in 1930 on ‘Progress in Psychiatry’ in *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*.¹⁷ (The other articles in the series examined ‘industrial psychiatry’, the ‘active work therapy’ of Hermann Simon [1867–1947], experimental type psychology, and eidetic phenomena and psychopathology; the entire series provides a useful insight into vanished traditions of research in the field of psychology in the early twentieth century.) Wertham noted that, ‘in recent years’, the psychology of Klages had ‘exerted an apparent increasing influence on German psychiatry’, and he cited the work of the German neurologist and psychiatrist Ferdinand Adalbert Kehrler (1883–1966), *The Predisposition to Psychological Disturbances (Die Veranlagung zu seelischen Störungen)* (1924), co-written with the psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964), as an example of how Klages’s outline of the personality could be made ‘the basis of the study of major and minor personality disorders’.

Other thinkers who, on Wertham’s account, had taken on board Klages’s ideas to a lesser degree included the German-Jewish psychiatrist, Arthur Kronfeld (1886–1941); the psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Johannes Heinrich

Schultz (1884–1970) (the founder of a system for self-hypnosis called autogenic training); the psychiatrist, Kurt Schneider (1887–1967) (known for his work on schizophrenia and on personality disorders), who accepted Klages's distinction and characterization of the three zones of the personality or the character; the German psychiatrist and neurologist, Hermann Hoffmann (1891–1944) (known for his work – now controversial – on genetic biology), who drew on Klages in his study of the problems of character formation (*Das Problem des Charakteraufbaus*, 1926); the psychiatrist and neurologist, Gottfried Ewald (1888–1963), whose *Temperament and Character* (1924) had been influenced by Klages's discussion of temperament; the psychiatrist, neurologist, and researcher into *Kriminalbiologie*, Johannes Lange (1891–1938), who used Klages's scheme of personality traits to diagnose paranoid psychoses; the paediatric psychologist, August Homburger (1873–1930), and the child psychologist, Else Voigtländer (b. 1882), who applied this scheme to children with behaviour disorders; and the German psychologist and psychiatrist, Eugen Kahn (1887–1973), who drew on Klages's understanding of hysteria as a condition characterized by a diminished capacity for expression accompanied with a strong impulse to expression.

Indeed, in his *General Psychopathology* (¹1913; ²1919; ³1922; ⁴1942; ⁷1959), the German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), paid tribute to Klages for having made 'the most effective attempt to bring some order into personality-structure'; Klages's study of personality, Jaspers believed, 'outstrips all previous efforts'.¹⁸ And as far as the historical study of symbols is concerned, Jaspers compared Klages to Jung in this respect:

Nowadays it is Klages and Jung who have become known as the interpreters of symbols. What Burckhardt termed 'archaic images' ('urtümliche Bilder'), Klages termed 'images' and Jung 'archetypes'. But there are certain essential differences between Klages and Jung. Klages's interpretation has a fascinating vividness. His presentation of the symbols of poetry and art remains as perhaps the really lasting contribution in all his great work, in which he brings forward rather doubtful evidence for the development of a strange, precritical philosophy through a synthesis of rationalism and gnosticism.

In fact, Jaspers goes so far as to regard Klages's work on symbolism as superior to Jung's –

Jung on the contrary lacks the impressive vividness of Klages and his work has nothing like the same weight. He is the deft master of all the means of interpretation but the inspiration is missing. Klages has inspiration, in as much as he is the true successor of Bachofen, whose work he rediscovered. Jung's expositions become tiring and irritating because of the many undialectical contradictions. As the reader emerges from many of Klages's pages, he is struck by a winged quality which is lacking from the work of Jung who favours a worldly scepticism.

– even if Jaspers ultimately remained unconvinced by both men’s efforts:

The present day is poor in symbols and both these men are anxious to discover primary reality. Jung’s efforts strike me as a fruitless new start through the exploitation of what is old, while Klages’s attempt, as he appears to have felt himself, seems a rather hopeless recollection of the lost depths of history.¹⁹

This positive view of Klages’s contribution, at least on a theoretical level, was matched on the therapeutic level by the German psychiatrist and art historian, Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1833), who turned Klages’s teaching into the basis for a presentation of psychotherapy in his book, *Psychotherapy: Presuppositions, Essence, Limits (Psychotherapie: Voraussetzungen, Wesen, Grenzen)* (1929), and his article entitled ‘The Founding of a Pure Characterology by Ludwig Klages’ (1927).²⁰ For the German psychiatrist Martin Reichardt (1874–1966), the director of Würzburg Mental Hospital who conducted research into the importance of the brain stem for psychiatry, the distinctions made by Klages between instincts, strivings, and volitional tendencies offered an important basis for understanding somatopsychic (i.e. mental-physiological) relations.²¹ And when Albrecht Langelüddeke (1889–1977), a pioneer of forensic psychiatry, wrote his groundbreaking article on rhythmic expression in both healthy and mentally diseased patients, he made use in part of Klages’s theory of expression.²²

Klages played a role, in other words, in the history of clinical research; its exact extent is undetermined, a study of the reception of Klages’s ideas in the fields of psychology and psychiatry being a major desideratum of Klagesian research. And his wider contribution to the history of ideas was still being recognized towards the end of his life. According to the German philosophical anthropologist, Erich Rothacker (1888–1965), writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1954, ‘*The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul* by Ludwig Klages ranks with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Hartmann’s *The Foundation of Ontology* as one of the three greatest philosophical achievements of the modern epoch’,²³ thus placing Klages in the same philosophical league as the German existential phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who is still very famous, and the Baltic German existentialist philosopher, Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950), who is in the meantime considerably less so, arguably being even more forgotten than Klages himself.

In 1956, shortly after Klages’s death, the German philosopher and member of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929), published an obituary in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* with the title, ‘Ludwig Klages – outdated or untimely?’, expressed admiration for the way in which Klages had tapped into ‘the foreign experiences of that underground German philosophy, which flowed over Jakob Böhme, the Swabian Pietists, and Romanticism into the worldview conditions of the Historical School’. And Habermas noted that he himself had, thanks to his philosophical teacher, Erich Rothacker, learned to see how Klages

unfolded [...] a myriad of observations that should not be obscured by the veil of an anti-intellectual metaphysics and an apocalyptic philosophy of history: above all, anthropological and speech-philosophical observations that are perhaps untimely, but then in Nietzsche's sense – not superseded, but rather need to be realized [*einzuholen*].²⁴

There was civic recognition of his services to some extent as well. In 1932, Klages was awarded the Goethe Medal for Art and Science; in his lifetime, he was the recipient of not just one *Festschrift*, but two, on the occasion of his sixtieth and seventy-fifth birthdays in 1932 and 1947 respectively; and in 1952, he was sent congratulations on his eightieth birthday by the German Bundespräsident, Theodor Heuss. In this year, the German weekly paper *Die Zeit* devoted an article to his life and work, picking up on a passage where Klages once described himself as 'the most plundered author of the present age'.²⁵ Nevertheless, perhaps the greatest honour bestowed on him was the formal edict placed on his biocentric approach by the National Socialist German Workers' Party – i.e. the Nazis.

Yet it is clear that, in the meantime, something strange has happened to Ludwig Klages. For he has disappeared. Even though his work was hailed by numerous contemporary thinkers as a landmark in twentieth-century thought; even though he earned the highest of praise, not just from such philosophers as Karl Löwith and Max Scheler, but from such literary figures as Hermann Hesse and Alfred Kubin; and even though his main work, *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul*, was ranked alongside Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Nicolai Hartmann's *The Foundation of Ontology* as 'one of the three greatest philosophical achievements of our time', Klages has completely disappeared from cultural scene in general and the philosophical scene in particular.

Yet even Erich Rothacker's statement manages, in its way, to say it all. For, after all, who today remembers Nicolai Hartmann and his work, *The Foundation of Ontology*? And Heidegger, while advancing to a remarkable prominence, thanks not least to the analysis of his work by the French postmodernist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), has become tainted with a sulphurous reputation in some quarters, thanks to Heidegger's membership of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party). And the recent publication of Heidegger's *Black Books* (*Schwarze Hefte*) has only damaged his reputation further. Indeed, Klages – if he is mentioned at all – is usually only ever named in order to be swiftly dismissed for his alleged right-wing (and, more specifically, anti-Semitic) views. For instance, in July 2006 an article published in the UK left-of-centre political magazine, *New Statesman*, described Klages as a 'German ideologue' and an 'anti-Semitic crank',²⁶ and in 2008 an article in the popular US conservative new magazine, *National Review*, referred to him as a 'proto-Nazi philosopher (and rabid anti-Semite)'.²⁷ In an article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 1 August 2012, Alexander Grau rehearsed an argument presented in a recent journal article on Thomas Mann's novel *Joseph and His Brothers* to the effect that the figure of Joseph embodied a literary protest against Klages's claim

that ‘Christianity was the cause of modern logocentrism and intellectualism’, dismissing Klages as a proponent of ‘*irrationalistische Geistfeindlichkeit*’.²⁸ And on 5 September 2016 Berthold Neff gleefully reported in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of how efforts had been frustrated to place a commemorative plaque on Leopoldstraße 53, where Klages – ‘an ardent anti-Semite’ – had lived in Munich.²⁹

Within the academy, the rush to condemnation is equally in evidence. Such is the case with the British Germanist, Ritchie Robertson, for example, who in a review of a biography of Stefan George describes Klages as belonging to the ‘weirdest cultists’ who believed that ‘the irrational forces of the blood should conquer the arid intellectuality of the spirit’.³⁰ Then again, in his study of the reception of Bachofen, another UK-based Germanist, Peter Davies, claims that Klages’s system ‘provides an intellectual justification for anti-Semitism’.³¹ Most recently, and in more detail than previous critics, the US intellectual historian Nitzan Lebovic has presented the case for viewing Klages as an ‘anti-Semite’ and as the promoter of a ‘Nazi biopolitics’.³²

Of course, none of this is new. Such critics are doing no more than repeating the line of attack opened up earlier by such Marxist critics of Klages as Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) and Georg Lukács (1855–1928), both of whom unhesitatingly assigned to Klages a position on the extreme of the political Right. That said, the sheer contempt of Bloch’s attack – his dismissal, along with C. G. Jung as ‘the fascistically frothing psychoanalyst’ and the ‘imperialist’ Alfred Adler, of such ‘sentimental penis poets’ as D. H. Lawrence and such ‘complete Tarzan philosophers’ as Ludwig Klages – might signal that a certain caution is required before aligning oneself with his views; after all, is it really the case that ‘there is nothing new in the Freudian unconscious’?³³ And the huge bulk of Lukács’s *The Destruction of Reason* suggests that almost anyone could be read as paving the way to Fascism. Even Klages is by no means singled out for special discussion in a separate chapter, but considered – along with the novelist, Ernst Jünger (1895–1998); the philosopher and pedagogue, Alfred Baeumler (1887–1968); the philosopher, Franz Josef Boehm (1903–1946); the writer and pedagogue, Ernst Krieck (1882–1947); and the National Socialist ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg (1892–1946) – as an exponent of ‘pre-Fascist and Fascist vitalism’.³⁴ Yet the Left could also be more nuanced in its approach to Klages: in *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), for instance, Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) provides a detailed critique of pragmatism, and only touches on reactionary cultural conservatism, on the revival of pagan mythology in Germany, and on *Lebensphilosophie* as sources of that ‘eclipse’.³⁵

It has certainly not helped that some of Klages’s friends come from an end of the political spectrum with which I, for one, have no sympathy. Such is the case with the website ‘The Biocentric Metaphysics of Ludwig Klages’, containing translations of Klages by Joe Pryce, on a website that promotes the work of the extreme conservative American professor, Revilo P. Oliver (1908–1994); or with the selections of Klages’s texts, again translated by Pryce, that have been published by the Arktos publishing-house in London.³⁶ (Presumably named after Arktos, a centaur who fought against the spearmen of the Lapith tribe, this

publishing-house describes itself as aiming to be the principal publisher in English of the writings of the European ‘New Right’ school of political thought, whose exponents include Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, and Pierre Krebs; at the same time, its catalogue includes works by such Traditionalist thinkers as René Guénon, Julius Evola, and Frithjof Schuon.) And when the original German text of Klages’s main work, *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul* (*Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*), is made available on the website of the right-wing ‘cultural association’, Thule Italia, at www.thulia-italia.net, I can understand why people become suspicious. Why should one waste one’s time on a thinker associated with occultism, Nazi-ism, or any number of combinations of both?

So Klages is, it seems, a thinker whom it would be safer for one to avoid (and, in terms of career development in modern academia, one would be doubtless wise to do so!). He seems to be a thinker whom one should read, if at all, wearing protective gloves – or reading with one hand, while the other is used to hold one’s nose. One gets the impression that he is a thinker who is, in the phrase used by Lady Caroline Lamb to describe Lord Byron, ‘mad, bad, and dangerous to know’. It’s an open-and-shut-case: never mind ‘forget Foucault’ (as Baudrillard combatively titled his study of the French sociologist), ‘forget Klages’! Or is it really so open-and-shut? And should we really forget him?

In this short introductory study, the first of its kind in English, I shall try and present an alternative view to the prevailing consensus that Klages has nothing to say to us. I shall do so, because I believe that Klages is *not* a fundamentally anti-Semitic thinker, *not* a right-wing philosopher, and *not* a Nazi. This is not to say I agree with everything that Klages wrote, said, or thought; it does not mean I subscribe to every one (or even most) of his philosophical tenets; and it does not mean that I may not be entirely wrong about Klages’s outlook, its significance, and its implications. But it strikes me as, in a way, a kind of confirmation of the validity of some of Klages’s central arguments that today he is either attacked or ignored; after all, as Lance-Corporal Jack Jones so often observed in the BBC comedy series *Dad’s Army*, ‘They don’t like it up ‘em’, and one would expect any system to try and neutralize its critics by ignoring, vilifying, or otherwise seeking to dispose of them.

Against the consensus view of Klages stands the challenge of his actual writings. Collected in nine large volumes, they represent an act of defiance to anyone who seeks to dismiss his contribution to philosophy. And there is a substantial body of commentary on Klages’s works, from a large variety of scholars, as well as the ongoing work of the Ludwig-Klages-Gesellschaft e.V., a society whose mission is to promote, not Klages’s work *tout court*, but informed discussion of it. The Gesellschaft’s journal, entitled *Hestia* (after the goddess of the hearth, and a figure dear to Klages’s thinking), consists of academic articles that try to explicate and explore his rich and – to be fair – difficult philosophical prose. Over the years I have profited a good deal from the lively discussion at the LKG’s bi-annual conferences, and from the welcome it has extended to new members interested in Klages.

In particular, as seasoned readers of Klages will be aware, I am indebted in this presentation of his life and thought to two earlier accounts: first, the catalogue of the exhibition on Klages held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar, in 1972 on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, prepared by Hans Eggert Schröder (1905–1985). In its turn, this account draws extensively on Schröder's multi-volume biography of Klages, using materials from the Klages *Nachlass* in Marbach, and which will remain the standard work in the field – until, that is, the publication of the new biography currently being prepared by Heinz-Siegfried Strelow.³⁷ Second, I have been greatly helped by the account of Klages's thought given by Robert Josef Kozljanič in his introduction to the history of vitalist thought, itself an immensely helpful guide to this suppressed (or, at any rate, forgotten) tradition in Western thought.³⁸ To this extent, I should like to see this short study of Klages as, in its way, a contribution to the kind of project of recuperation that, on a much larger scale, Michel Onfray has been undertaking over recent years in France to write a 'counter-history' of philosophy.

In addition, I am grateful for two further sources: first, the extremely useful selection of passages from Klages's collected works, edited by one of his closest followers, Hans Kern (1902–1847), and published with extensive additions by another Klagesian, Hans Kasdorff (1908–1993, under the title *On the Sense of Life: Words of Wisdom from the Collected Works*.³⁹ And second, the fascinating collection of anecdotes about Klages, compiled from first-hand accounts, edited by Hans Eggert Schröder together with Annelise Krantz-Gross under the title *The Image that Falls into the Senses: Memories of Ludwig Klages*.⁴⁰

This book describes itself as a toolkit,⁴¹ and it is one in two senses: first, because it provides us with the conceptual tools required to understand Ludwig Klages's *Lebensphilosophie* or philosophy of life; and second, because those concepts in turn can be used to construct a life based on vitalist principles. As a toolkit, it consists of three chapters: each part can be read independently from the others, and they can be read in any order. But it is recommended to read them in order they are presented:

- Chapter 1 – offers an overview of the life of Ludwig Klages and his intellectual trajectory;
- Chapter 2 – considers some of the fundamental concepts of Klagesian philosophy;
- Chapter 3 – offers a selection of more advanced passages, illustrating the breadth and depth of Klages's thought.

Klages's writings are notoriously difficult to translate, for reasons that have long been recognized. In part, this is because Klages creates a good number of new psychological terms and, in part, because he sometimes uses words in a specific technical sense, whose meaning is not always obvious.⁴² (And maybe they are difficult for reasons that have not been so readily recognized). Wherein lies the

difficulty of translating Klages from German to English? First, there is his grammatical and syntactical complexity: put simply, Klages belongs to another epoch in terms of his grammatical sophistication, and on some places even the so-called native speaker has difficulty in following the sense of a sentence. To this extent, Klages is a child of another age, albeit one who has mastered the German language to an extraordinarily high degree. Second, this difficulty is in part deliberate: much as such members of the Frankfurt School as Theodor W. Adorno cultivate an obscure, hieratic style in order to force the reader to slow down and think carefully, Klages is trying to encourage us to see the world and ourselves in an entirely new light – the light of his central thesis about the antagonistic relationship between spirit (*Geist*) and soul (*Seele*). Third, and as a result, the grammatical and syntactical difficulties evinced by his language embody precisely this antagonistic relation, representing in linguistic and rhetorical form the metaphysical conflict of spirit and soul.

At the same time, there are passages which reveal Klages as a great essayist and stylist, and it is these qualities which the longer passages selected for study in Chapter 3 are intended to exemplify. For instance, Klages invents some remarkably striking images to convey his ideas, such as a master or signature image of body and soul as

poles of the life-cell which belong inseparably together, into which from *outside* the spirit, like a wedge, inserts itself, in the endeavour to split them apart, to ‘de-soul’ the body, to disembody the soul, and in this way finally to kill all the life it can reach

(*GWS=SW* 1, 7)

– the concluding scenario of his survey of the ‘prehistory of the discovery of the images’ where he describes how, in the 1890s, the final vitalist wave of this epoch has faded away and left with a (post)modernity summed up as follows: ‘The earth gives off smoke as never before from the blood of the slain, and all that is apelike struts with the spoils plundered from the shattered temple of life’ (*GWS=SW* 2, 923); or for that matter the apocalyptic landscapes infused with fantasies of death and destruction that one finds in some of his early prose or poetic sketches, such as the fragment which offers the following vision of ‘The End of the World’:

He had traversed the fields of night and was approaching the coast of destruction. Feebly across suspicious distances there flickered the bluish signals which surround the restless realm of the living. In front of him, however, from mists wavered immeasurably uncertain expanses, which massed together in the distance into dreadful darkenings. [...] And suddenly the shivers of ultimate solitude came over him. [...] Thus broke in him the part of being human that no-one can preserve across the threshold of silence: the power to wish and to hope. [...] And now the darkness began to brighten: a terrible, unpleasant greyness, and the naked skeletons of trees



Figure 2 Klages in Kilchberg.

that towered as high as the stars shot up out of it. [...] And the forest opened up and he was standing on the shores where existence ends. [...] And, first gently, and then increasingly audibly, rose from the unfathomably monstrous night a hoarse roaring noise: And now he knew: that is beyond the furthest cliff, and all the beings that life was able to bind: there the fall crushes them. But only for heroes or gods was this death destined; for no-one else would be able to bear the closeness of that noise that already rose up with a deafening rattle and called out resoundingly into a timeless darkness.

(RR, 233–234)

Yet the passages found in Chapter 3, the choice of which has been largely, but not exclusively, guided by that made by Hans Kern and Hans Kasdorff, have not been selected simply for aesthetic reasons, but are included out of the conviction that, whatever the hindrances – conceptual, cultural, historical, or ideological – to understanding his thought, Klages nevertheless has so much to say to us today. Or as the German sculptor, Wilhelm Hager (1921–2006), wrote in his tribute to Klages:

Whoever immerses oneself with dedication to the doctrine of the ‘reality of images’ will be transformed in every respect: one’s spiritual existence undergoes something like a complete 180 degree turn. One’s views and perspectives are suddenly changed, so that one believes one is looking at the face of a newly created world.

(CAK, 191)

Notes

- 1 *Hopscotch: A novel*, tr. G. Rabassa, New York: Pantheon, 1966, p. 445.
- 2 H. Hesse, ‘Über die heutige deutsche Literatur’ (1924), excerpted in *CAK*, p. 78.
- 3 K. Löwith, ‘Nietzsche im Lichte der Philosophie von Ludwig Klages’, in *Reichs philosophischer Almanach*, vol. 4, *Probleme der Weltanschauungslehre*, ed. E. Rothacker, Darmstadt: Reichl, 1927, pp. 285–348 (p. 293).
- 4 M. Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, tr. Manfred S. Frings, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009, p. 60. For discussion of the contrasting approaches of Klages and Scheler to the concept of the spirit, see K.-A. Sprengard, ‘Geist – Widersachervorwurf und Geistvertrauen in Lebensphilosophie und Neuer Anthropologie: Gedanken zu Ludwig Klages’ *Misstrauen und Max Schelers Zutrauen*, in K. Broese, A. Hütig, O. Immel, and R. Reschke (eds), *Vernunft der Aufklärung – Aufklärung der Vernunft*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006, pp. 305–317.
- 5 W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. G. Scholem and T. W. Adorno, tr. M. R. Jacobson and E. M. Jacobson, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 366. For further discussion of Benjamin’s interest in Klages, see J. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 234–240; R. Block, ‘Selective Affinities: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages’, *Arcadia* 35, 2000, 117–136; W. Fuld, ‘Die Aura: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffes bei Benjamin’, *Akzente* 26, 1979, 352–370; W. Fuld, ‘Walter Benjamins Beziehung zu Ludwig Klages’, *Akzente* 28, 1981, 274–287; and M. Großheim, ‘Archaisches oder dialektisches Bild? Zum Kontext einer Debatte zwischen Adorno and Benjamin’, *Deutsches Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und*

- Geistesgeschichte* 71, 1997, 494–517; as well as M. Pauen, *Dithyrambiker des Unterwegs: Gnostizismus in Ästhetik und Philosophie der Moderne*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993, pp. 139 and 187–189 (on Benjamin), pp. 139–140 and 189–190 (on Adorno).
- 6 O. Spengler, *Briefe 1913–1916*, ed. A. M. Koltanek and M. Schröter, Munich: Beck, 1963, p. 605. For further discussion, see M. Pauen, 'Affinität und Antagonismus: Zum Verhältnis von Ludwig Klages und Oswald Spengler', *Hestia: Jahrbuch der Klages-Gesellschaft* 19, 1998/1999, 192–209.
- 7 Compare with Spengler's letter of 3 October 1927 to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche:
- What you write about Klages coincides entirely with my opinion. He is basically a real professor and wishes to reduce Nietzsche to a level from which he can represent him as his own predecessor. Lastly it is a misunderstanding of Nietzsche's work, if one sees nothing in it except a system of psychology.
(O. Spengler, *Spengler Letters 1913–1936*, tr. A. Helps, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966, p. 223)
- 8 A. Kubin, *Dämonen und Nachtgesichte*, Dresden: Reissner, 1926; in *CAK*, p. 82. For further discussion, see P. Bishop, "'Mir war der 'Geist' immer eine 'explodierte Elephantiasis'": Der Briefwechsel zwischen Alfred Kubin und Ludwig Klages', *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 43, 1999, 49–98.
- 9 E. Pound, *The Cantos*, London: Faber & Faber, 1986, Canto LXXV, p. 450.
- 10 C. F. Terrell, *A Companion to 'The Cantos' of Ezra Pound*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 388–389.
- 11 W. J. H. Sprott, [Review of] '*The Science of Character*. By Ludwig Klages. Translated by W. H. Johnston. [...]', *Mind* [NS] 38, no. 152, October 1929, 513–520 (p. 513).
- 12 G. W. Allport, [Review of] 'Klages, Ludwig. *The Science of Character*. Translated by W. H. Johnston. [...]', *Psychological Bulletin* 30, no. 5, May 1933, 370–371 (p. 370).
- 13 Allport, [Review of] 'Klages, Ludwig. *The Science of Character*', p. 371.
- 14 M. Schütze, 'Toward a Modern Humanism', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 51, no. 1, March 1936, 284–299 (p. 286).
- 15 Schütze, 'Toward a Modern Humanism', p. 287.
- 16 W. Deubel, 'Umriss eines neuen Schillerbildes', *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft* 20, 1934, 1–64; reprinted in W. Deubel, *Im Kampf um die Seele: Wider den Geist der Zeit: Essays und Aufsätze, Aphorismen und Gedichte*, ed. F. Deubel, Bonn: Bouvier, 1997, pp. 163–198. For further discussion, see P. Bishop, 'The "Schillerbild" of Werner Deubel: Schiller as "Poet of the Nation"?' in N. Martin (ed.), *Schiller: National Poet – Poet of Nations: A Birmingham Symposium*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 301–320.
- 17 F. Wertham, 'Progress in Psychiatry III: The Significance of Klages' System for Psychopathology', *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 24, no. 2, 1930, 381–388 (p. 383).
- 18 K. Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, tr. J. Hoenig and M. W. Hamilton, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963, p. 436.
- 19 Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, p. 334.
- 20 H. Prinzhorn, 'Die Begründung einer reinen Charakterologie durch Ludwig Klages', *Jahrbuch der Charakterologie* 4, 1927, 115–132.
- 21 M. Reichardt, 'Brain and Psyche', tr. F. I. Wertham, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 203, no. 10, October 2015, 390–396.
- 22 A. Langelüddeke, 'Rhythmus und Takt bei Gesunden und Geisteskranken', *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* 113, no. 1, December 1928, 1–101.
- 23 E. Rothacker, 'Ludwig Klages neu gesehen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 August 1954.
- 24 J. Habermas, 'Ludwig Klages – überholt oder zeitgemäß?', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 August 1956, p. 8; translated in A. D. Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 117.