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The Nineteenth-Century Romance with "Mysteries": Literary Detectives and Historians of Religion[1]

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> *Twice I looked in the mirror and saw me. I didn't look like me at all.… I was looking at a big guy … who had no earthly reason for existing.*
>
> . . . . .
>
> *One day I would die and the world would be benefited by my death. And to the good there was only the perplexing question: Why did I live and breathe now . . . what could possibly be the reasons for [my] existence …?*
>
> —Mike Hammer, Private Investigator[2]

Abstract

Unlike the classical sources, nineteenth-century historians of religion characterized certain Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Mystery Religions." This was also the century in which the literary genre of mysteries (i.e., detective stories) developed (e.g., E. A. Poe). Was the nineteenth-century development of literary mysteries and the contemporaneous characterization of some Hellenistic initiatory practices by historians of religion also as "mysteries," especially, those characterized by R. Reitzenstein as "reading mysteries" (*Lesemysterien*), coincidental? I suggest that mystery novels may be read for insights into the historical and/or cultural landscape of Romanticism. These novels disclose a fascination with "mysteries," a "presentist" bias that influenced nineteenth-century characterizations of Hellenistic initiatory cults by historians of religion. In addition to a shared cultural influence, common neurocognitive features underlie both the act of reading itself, especially reading detective novels, and the *Lesemysterium* hypothesis.

[1] I should like to thank Donald Wiebe, the mystagogue who has initiated me into many intellectual mysteries, as well as Panayotis Pachis, the academic detective whose investigations have averted many errors on my part, and Mary Jane Dickerson, the litterateur who modulated—or attempted to modulate—my tendencies for Teutonic prose constructions.

[2] Spillane, Mickey. "One Lonely Night*"* In *The Mike Hammer Collection,* vol. 2. (New York: New American Library), 2001, 8,7.

Keywords

Mystery (detective) novels; E. A. Poe; Hellenistic "reading mysteries" (*Lesemysterien*); Reitzenstein; Western esotericism; Romanticism; Historiography; History of religions; Neurocognitive act of reading;

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Introduction

Perhaps as a rationalization for my reading of detective novels during the leisurely days visited by retirement, I wrote an article several years ago questioning whether mystery novels need be read solely for entertainment or whether the investigations of literary detectives, those portrayed in historical fiction, might be comparable somehow to the work of historians.[3] The detective stories by the English novelist Lindsay Davis featuring the first-century Roman investigator (*delator*)[4] Marcus Didius Falco, provided an interesting example of such accounts.[5] Historical fiction also raises questions about the fictive nature of academic historical narratives themselves and about the methods employed in the structuring of those narratives.[6]

In the present article, I continue my dilatory interest in "detective-crime-mystery" stories,[7] a literary genre that originated in the nineteenth century. As my professional research efforts includes a historical interest in the Hellenistic "Mystery Religions,"[8] I was intrigued to recall

[3] See for example, the series "true-crime fiction" by Max Allan Collins featuring the investigations by private detective Nathan Heller. The notion of "the historian as detective" was first proposed in 1968 in a homonymous volume of essays congenially edited by the Yale historian, Robin W. Winks. Martin, Luther H. "The Historian (of Religions) as Detective," *e-Rhizome, Journal for the Study of Religion, Culture, Society, and Cognition* 1, no. 2 (2019): 113–131.

[4] A Roman *delator* or private 'informer' was in many ways equivalent to the modern private investigator (Martin 2019: 116). Martin, Luther. H. "The Historian (of Religions) as Detective," *e-Rhizome, Journal for the Study of Religion, Culture, Society, and Cognition* 1, no. 2 (2019): 116.

[5] See also the two novels of "Roman noir" by Kelli Stanley, *Nox Dormienda (A Long Night for Sleeping)* (2008) and T*he Curse-Maker* (2011), featuring the first-century adventures of Arcturus, investigator for the Roman Governor of Britain.

[6] e.g. Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

[7] Although literary critics may distinguish between three separate genres of detective, crime, and mystery stories, for the non-technical literary purposes of this essay, I shall use them synonymously, as does the critic Howard Haycraft in his "Foreword" to *The Art of the Mystery Novel,* his edited anthology of some fifty-seven critics and authors of these stories (Haycraft 1983: 1). If pressed, I would say what interests me is stories about (fictive) detectives and the inevitably "mysterious" character of the crimes they investigate.

[8] "Hellenistic" refers to the period of history following the conquests of Alexander the Great (336–323 BC). This periodization of history was first defined by J. G. Droysen (1846–1843) and, following Droysen, is usually terminated, in terms of political history, with the first century AD *pax romana* of Augustus. More

that the scholarly characterization of a variety of Hellenistic initiatory practices as "mysteries" was also a nineteenth-century innovation. Was the nineteenth-century development of a literary genre of novels as mysteries and a contemporaneous characterization by historians of religion of some Hellenistic initiatory practices also as "Mysteries" only coincidental? Was there some sort of relationship between the nineteenth-century emergence of detective novels and concurrent scholarly descriptions of various Hellenistic initiatory groups as "Mysteries"? If so, what might that relationship be? Was there, for example, some contact between those scholars who described Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mysteries" and the authors of the detective genre of literature? My curiosity was piqued.

The mystery novel

Whereas medieval stories were romances and magical stories of heroic knights and dragons that inhabited a mythical world, the full-blown emergence of the modern novel in the eighteenth century echoed the "age of Enlightenment" with its emphasis on the sovereignty of reason. These eighteenth-century novels have been broadly characterized as "realistic fiction",[9] in which the characters were portrayed as real people in determinate geographical places engaging in basic routines of daily life; examples include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. By contrast, the celebrated age of nineteenth-century literature is predominantly characterized by Romanticism, an artistic, literary, and intellectual reaction against the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment and its resonances. It was an era that emphasized powerful emotions, such as horror, wonder, and awe in face of the secular potency of nature. One thinks, for example, of the feelings of *Sturm und Drang* evoked by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere". Coleridge's poem was co-published with those of his friend William Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Differing somewhat from Coleridge, Wordsworth emphasized "sensibility" (emotion), embracing, however, a more benign relationship with a personified nature. The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* is generally considered to mark the beginnings of Romanticism. At the height of the nineteenth-century, Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerken* ('comprehensive works of art'; "*Gesammtkunstwerke"* in Wagner's spelling) synthesized in one theatrical performance Romanticism's passions for literature, music and drama. One thinks, for example, of such notable scenes as the wild pagan sensuality of Wagner's operatic Valkyries (first performed in 1870), those Norse mythological

recently, the Greek historian Angelos Chaniotis (2018) has suggested a termination of a "long Hellenistic age," in terms of cultural history, with Hadrian's establishment of the *Panhellenion in 131–132 AD.* I have suggested a termination of this period, in terms of religious history, with the decrees of Theodosius in the final decade of the fourth-century AD that established Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire and proscribed any non-Christian religious practices. Martin, Luther H. *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987, 5–6.

[9] Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1963, 32.

heroines who decided between life and death on the battlefield. Mystery novels, with their sinister, often graphic, themes of peril and carnage, interlaced with furtive undertones of venturesome eroticism, developed during this age to become one of the most popular of modern literary genres.[10]

The definition of a genre of literature as "mystery" is ambiguous. Broadly, mystery novels refer to stories concerning an enigmatic crime,[11] typically involving that of murder, the solution to which often baffles public officials. However, at the end, the "mystery" is solved by an investigator, amateur or private. Literary critics have included in this genre everything from the popular hardboiled or noir detective stories with a plebian focus on gritty realism, such as, for example, the series of novels by Mickey Spillane, featuring the detective epigraphed in this essay, to some that have been compared to the most acclaimed authors of "true literature." Whereas Spillane's novels have been "critically pummeled",[12] those of James Lee Burke, for example, have been compared to William Faulkner.[13]

It is widely agreed that Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" (1841) was the first modern detective story and that it established many of the traits which became literary conventions in subsequent mysteries. Poe referred to his stories as tales of "ratiocination" that demand powers of "logical analysis and subtle and acute reasoning".[14] As French polymath Roger Callois wrote in his short monograph on *The Mystery Novel,* the narrative of the mystery novel "follows the order of discovery".[15.] On the other hand, Poe wrote in the opening of his "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) that: "There are few persons, even among the calmest thinkers, who have not occasionally been startled into

[10] e.g. Hannah, Sophie. "It's No Mystery that Crime is the Biggest-selling Genre in Books." *The Guardian: Books Blog, Crime Fiction,* April 12, 2018. https://theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/apr/12/mystery-crime-fiction-bestselling-book-genre-sophie-hannah (accessed 6/20/2019); Beemgee. n.d. "Why is Crime Fiction so Popular?" Accessed April 27, 2019. https://www.beemgee.com/blog/crime-fiction/; Anonymous. "Publishing ... and Other Forms of Insanity." Accessed February 5, 2017. https://publishedtodeath.blogspot.com/2017/11/what-are-most-popular-literary-genres.html

[11] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 17.

[12] Collins, Max Allan. *Better Dead.* (New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book), 2016, 119.

[13] On Burke as an acclaimed author of literature, see also Connolly, John. "*The Chill* by Ross Macdonald (1964)." In *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels,* edited by John Connolly and Declan Burke, 212–217. (New York: Emily Bestler Books/Atria), 2012, 212. Although Max Allan Collins (n. 3) is not compared to authors of "true literature," as is Burke, he has been compared to Raymond Chandler (Cannon 2006: 71), one of the first writers of the so-called hard-boiled detective fiction that includes the novels of Spillane. For various critical views of detective literature, see Haycraft 1983, especially Parts 1, 5, and 8. Even as I will not distinguish between detective-crime-mystery genres (n. 6), neither will I venture into perilously critical disputes over what among them is considered to be "good" (or "bad") literature. Williams, Wirt. "On the Tracks to Doom," Review of James Lee Burke's *Half of Paradise*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), *New York Times Book Review*, 14 March (1965): 46.

[14] Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*. (New York: Harper Perennial), 1961, 171–174.

[15] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 3.

a vague yet thrilling half credence in the supernatural."[16] Of course, it is widely agreed among all authors of detective stories that any "supernatural or preternatural agencies … [must be] ruled out [of detective stories] as a matter of course".[17] As Callois insisted, "the discovery of a culprit matters less than the passage from the impossible to the possible, from the inexplicable to the explicable, from the supernatural to the natural".[18] Everything that is incongruous and mysterious at the outset of a mystery novel must be left clear and coherent at the end.[19] In other words, as Helsinki professor of literature Heta Pyrhönen argued, mystery novels raise "the basic question of knowing".[20]

The popular and resilient plots of detective stories always take place in a social milieu,[21] a setting that was characteristic of much nineteenth-century fiction, e.g., the celebrated works of Charles Dickens. Noted detective novelist Dashiell Hammett has declared that "It's impossible to write anything without taking some sort of stand on social issues".[22] But fellow detective writer Raymond Chandler has noted that the social milieu of detective stories, "is not a very fragrant world".[23] It was within the malodorous social context of the Hellenistic world, wrought by the inconceivable expanse of the newly unveiled Ptolemaic cosmology and the incomprehensible vastness of Roman Imperial geography, neither of which were fathomable to the average citizen, that a variety of alternative small-scale collegial associations proliferated. Like the new genre of literature, the type of these associations became characterized by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars as "Mysteries."

[16] "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) is the second of Poe's detective stories in his Dupin Trilogy, after "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841); the third is "The Purloined Letter" (1844). The Trilogy is named after *Le Chevalier* C. Auguste Dupin, Poe's fictional investigator in these stories and the model for detectives in numerous subsequent crime stories.

[17] Knox, Ronald. "A Detective Story Decalogue," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft.* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 194–196. See also Van Dine, S. S. "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft.* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 189–193; Knox, Ronald. "The Detective Club Oath," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft.* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 197–199.

[18] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 18.

[19] Ibid, 30.

[20] Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House), 1994, 3, 7.

[21] Ibid, 3.

[22] Hammett, Samuel Dashiell. "Testimony of Samuel Dashiell Hammett." In *Hearing before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Subcommittee on Government Operations, United States Senate.* Part 1: 83–90. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office), 1953, 83.

[23] Chandler, Raymond. "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 222–237.

The Graeco-Roman "Mysteries"

Richard Reitzenstein, the German classical philologist and historian of religion, was the historiographical mystagogue who initially led scholars into describing the Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Mystery Religions." His influential *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (1910) was the "first attempt to determine the character of the Hellenistic mysteries".[24] While nineteenth-century scholars in the newly established academic discipline of history were primarily concerned with political history, related to confirming the legitimacy of recently constituted European nation states, classical philologists and historians of *ancient religions* were thrust into cultural history—and, in turn, were influenced by that history.

During the Hellenistic era, a number of small-scale "voluntary associations" (*Θίασοι*, *collegia*) diversified and proliferated as a consequence of the political disruptions and social anonymizations following upon the globalizing conquests of Alexander.[25] Some of these small-scale groups developed affiliation interests, whether of a fraternal, social, political, economic, or religious nature; or, often, a combination of these. Some of these groups instituted exclusionary ritualized practices to delineate membership. While these ritual practices retained their affinity to that of the Graeco-Roman civic religions generally, the exclusionary character of their rites differentiated them from those religions. As part of their identity or "brand" some of the Hellenistic associations claimed a deity from the traditional Graeco-Roman pantheon as their patron, even as modern Roman Catholic social or charitable clubs adopt a traditional saint for theirs. However, other Hellenistic associations adopted for their patron a so-called "Oriental" deity—e.g., Cybele from Phrygia, Isis from Egypt, Jupiter Dolichenus from Syria, or Mithras from Persia. Since the Greeks and Romans were well aware that these "Oriental" deities differed from those of the traditional Greek and Roman pantheons,[26] claims to these non-traditional deities reinforced a distinctive social identity for the growing number of Hellenistic associations. The exclusionary practices of these "exotic Oriental mysteries" gave rise to perceptions that they harbored "esoteric" or even "secret" doctrines (*μυστήρια*). It was those initiatory associations, characterized both by exclusionary initiation rituals and by having an exotic "Oriental" deity as their patron, that Reitzenstein characterized as "Mystery Religions".[27]

[24] Cumont, Franz. *Les mystères de Mithra*. Translated by Thomas J. McCormack. (New York: Dover), 1956, 214; Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1987, 1.

[25] Kloppenborg, John S., and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.). *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco Roman World.* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[26] Bianchi, Ugo. *The Greek Mysteries.* (Leiden: Brill), 1976, 1.

[27] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 196–197. Similar to my contention that the category "Mystery Religions" was a nineteenth-century construction, a similar argument concerning the understanding of the Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Oriental Religions" has been made by Affarth, Christoph. Religio migrans: Die 'Orientalischen Religionen' im Kontext antiker Religion: Ein theoretisches Modell in *Religioni in contratto nel Mediterraneo antico: modalità de diffusione e processi di interferenza*, Actes de Colloque (Como, May 2006), eds. C. Bonnet, S. Ribichini, and D. Steuernagel. Rome/Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore (Mediterranea 4), 2007, 333–356.

Characterizing the Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Mysteries"

The Greek word "mystery" (*μυστήριον*) has a meaning of "a hidden or secret thing; a matter unexplained or inexplicable; … a riddle or enigma" (*s.v*. L-S*:* II.5). This term was especially associated with the Hellenic mysteries of the Cabeiri at Samothrace (Hdt. 2:51) or those of Demeter at Eleusis (e.g. Pl. Phd. 69.d; *s.v*. L-S.). The "thing hidden," however seems not to have been a "mystery" or a "secret" in the modern sense of occluded knowledge but refers rather to the restricted membership of social inclusivity conferred by ritualized practices.[28]Accordingly, the Greek word was also associated with "initiation." The verb *μυστηριάζω* means "to initiate"; see also *μυσταγωγέω* (with the same meaning); *μύστης* refers to one who has been initiated (*s v.* L-S). Terms other than "mysteries" are more frequently attested for the Hellenistic initiatory cults, e.g., *ὄργια* or *τελετή* ('rites practiced by initiates') (*s.v.* L-S). It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that scholars imposed upon the Hellenistic initiatory associations the modern sense of "Mysteries" as a collective and essentialized category for those initiatory groups they held to conserve secret rites and knowledge. [29]

Christian August Lobeck's, *Aglaophamus* (1829), inaugurated the modern study of "Mystery Religions".[30] Entitled after a neo-Platonic reference to an Orphic priest (Proclus, *In Ti.* 3.168.8), *Aglaophamus* was a two-volume critical examination of the statements of ancient authors regarding the "Greek mysteries" (*mysticae Graecorum).* Lobeck's characterization of the Hellenistic initiatory associations as "mysteries" was taken up by, among others, Belgian historian Franz Cumont,[31] and by scholars allied with Cumont who were associated with the German *Religionsgeschichte Schule* ('History of Religions School'). Respected scholars in this group include Albrecht Dieterich (1891), Wilhelm Bousset (1913), and, of course, Reitzenstein.

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *Religionsgeschichtlicheschüler* understanding of the "Hellenistic Mysteries" was influenced by James Frazer's anthropological portrayal of a dying-rising god,[32] an expression of popular piety rooted in ancient agricultural fertility cycles of death and life. They understood this popular piety to draw esoteric sustenance from the "Oriental" religions that were "infiltrating" the Roman imperial

[28] Martin, Luther H. "Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities." In *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, edited by Hans G. Kippenberg, and Guy G. Stroumsa, 101–121. (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

[29] Interestingly, Reitzenstein acknowledged that *μυστήριον* was not "an established concept for Hellenistic religious language" (Reitzenstein 1978: 305). Reitzenstein, Richard. *Poimandres: Studien zur Griechish-Ägyptischen und Frühchristlichen Literatur.* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner), 1904, 305.

[30] Metzger, Bruce M. "Considerations of Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity." *The Harvard Theological Review* 48, no. 1 (1955): 1–2.

[31] Cumont, Franz. *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. (New York: Dover), 1956, 205–206.

[32] Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough*: *A Study in Comparative Religion,* 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1890); Bianchi, Ugo. *The Greek Mysteries.* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); Gasparro, Giulia Sfameni. "Mithraism and Mystery Phenomenology." In *Mysteria Mithrae*, edited by Ugo Bianchi, 339–348. (Leiden: Brill), 1979, 340.

world.[33] Central to the exoticism of these "Oriental" religions was, they presumed, a hidden religious essence, a "true knowledge of religion".[34] It is this secret of the Mysteries that was revealed to individual initiates.

A general nineteenth-century enthrallment with mysteries that conserved the hidden essence of true religions reflected a renewed stream of Western esotericism that was manifested in myriad esoteric sects, secret societies, pseudo-initiatory groups, hermetic and neospiritualistic groups, and epitomized by the influential Theosophical movement, founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. According to Blavatsky, many of the world's religions have their origins in a universal ancient religion, a "secret doctrine" that was known to Plato and early Hindu sages and which continues to underpin the center of every religion.[35] Consequently, Theosophical beliefs were a synthesis that drew upon their understandings of Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Vedānta, Buddhism, Islam, Alchemy, the Kabbalah, and, of course, "the ancient Mysteries".[36]

In 1893 (September 15–16), a Theosophical Congress was held in Chicago, within the framework of the World Parliament of Religion (11–16 September), in which scholars of religion who participated in the Parliament became acquainted with Theosophy, and some were influenced by its principles.[37] Theosophy even had an influence on Max Müller, generally considered to be the founder of a scientific approach to the study of religion[38]—despite the "esoteric Christian substructure" of his Gifford lectures.[39] He situated his position with reference to the theosophical project when he entitled the final course of his Gifford lectures as *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (1893).[40] Redolent of the syncretistic epitome of Western esotericism, Müller wrote that "[t]heosophy [is] the highest summit of thought which the human mind has reached, which has found different expressions in different religions and philosophies".[41] However, Müller differentiated himself from Blavatsky's project when he wrote, with clear reference to her influential *Isis Unveiled* (1877), that "[t]

[33] E.g. Cumont, Franz. *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. (New York: Dover, 1956).

[34] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religion*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 10, 112.

[35] Campbell, Bruce F. *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1980, 36.

[36] Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. *The Key to Theosophy*. (London: The Theosophy Company), 1889, 19. The syncretized and essentialized view of religion promoted by the Theosophists had been popularized among French academics already during the earlier 1800s (e.g., Matter 1828; Leví 1861).

[37] https://theosophy.wiki/en/World%27s_Parliament_of_Religions_(1893) (accessed 1/24/2021) Although Müller wrote that he truly regretted missing the Parliament, he acknowledged that a scholarly, comparative study of religion was more valuable for an understanding of religion than were such ecumenical gatherings as the Parliament (Müller 1894).

[38] Müller, F. Max. *Natural Religion,* The Gifford Lectures. (London: Longmans, Green and Co.), 1889, 11.

[39] Josephson-Storm, Jason Ānanda. "God's Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of Religion." *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013): 326.

[40] Josephson-Storm, Jason Ānanda. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2017, 108- 110.

[41] Müller, F. Max. *Theosophy or Psychological Religion.* (Gifford Lectures, London: Longmans, Green), 1893, 106.

he more we become familiar with the ancient literature of the East, the less we find of Oriental mysteries, of esoteric wisdom, of Isis veiled or unveiled"[42] —a clear disavowal of Blaviaskian theosophy. Rather, Müller's comparative studies of religion prevailed as an academic alternative to Blavatsky's institutionalization of Western spiritualism.[43]

Despite Müller's scientific pretensions for a study of religion, a syncretized and essentialized view of religion, the view that all religions have some inherent and unchangeable property (which survives most tenaciously in Christianity), subsequently exerted a strong influence over scholars of religion. Influenced by the esoteric tradition, for example, the prominent German theologian and historian of religion Rudolf Otto characterized the "sacred" as a "mystery," as a fascinating apprehension of mysterious potency (a *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*.[44] This essentialized (*sui generis*) view of religion is especially associated with scholars connected to the Eranos group, whose founding was influenced not only by Otto but also by Carl Gustav Jung; these include Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, Ernst Benz, Károly Kerényi, Gershom Scholem and Joseph Campbell.[45]

It was the wide-spread fascination by nineteenth-century Romanticists with occluded "mysteries" that influenced Reitzenstein's definitive interpretation of the Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mystery Religions." However, as classicist A. D. Nock has concluded, nineteenth-century descriptions of the Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Mysteries," "probably did not bulk so large in the life of the first century AD as in modern study"[46] and as historian of religion Richard Gordon has subsequently written, the prominence of Mysteries "in modern scholarship is quite disproportionate to their ancient profile"[47] (Gordon 2012: 990a).

Literary mysteries

In addition to characterizing the Hellenistic initiatory cults as "Mysteries," Richard Reitzenstein also posed the interesting, if generally neglected, notion of "*Lesemysterien"*

[42] Ibid, 327.

[43] Josephson-Storm, Jason Ānanda. "God's Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of Religion." *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013): 330.

[44] Otto, Rudolf. *Das Heilige*. Translated by J. W. Harvey. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1923, 5–7; Josephson-Storm, Jason Ānanda. "God's Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of Religion." *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013): 316.

[45] Hanegraaff, Wouter, "Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism." *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 178; Wasserstrom, Steven M. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1999.

[46] Nock, Arthur Darby. "Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background," In *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation,* edited by A. E. J. Rawlinson, 51–156*,* (New York, Longmans, Green); rpt. in *Arthur Darby Nock: Essays on Religion and the Ancient World,* edited by Z. Stewart, 1972, Vol. 1: 49–133. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1928, 72.

[47] Gordon, Richard L. "Mysteries" In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary,* edited by S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow, 990a-991a. (Oxford: Oxford University Press*,* 2012).

('literary…' or 'reading mysteries').[48] Modeled on his understanding of the Hellenistic initiatory cults as Mystery cults, Reitzenstein suggested that literary-mysteries were texts written in the form of cultic rituals that were, however, no longer connected with any cultic ceremony. In these literary mysteries, he described an author who plays the "the role of a mystagogue," publishing "a book" that preserves "the outward form of the mystery." The author/mystagogue "hopes that, if God wills it … his presentation will exert upon the reader the same effect as an actual mystery." Reitzenstein assumed that the reader's grasp of the narrative's initiatory teachings would allow him to experience (in his imagination) the final unveiling of the "mystery" that is scripted by the author," i.e., "the miraculous power of God's message".[49] That is, in Reitzenstein's understanding of literary-mysteries, the mystagogue of the "Hellenistic Mystery Religions" is replaced by the author/mystagogue of the *Lesemysterium*, while the initiate into the rites of the "Mysteries" in pursuit of social inclusion is replaced by the initiate/reader of the text in pursuit of occult knowledge.

Reitzenstein developed his notion of reading mysteries with reference to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which dates from the early Christian period. This *Corpus* is structured as teachings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the "thrice-great" Graeco-Egyptian deity of writing, in dialogue with a disciple.[50] Some scholars have suggested that Clement of Alexandria's reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries as a 'mystic drama' (*δράμα μυστικόν*: Clem. Al. *Protr* 2.12.2; ca. 190 AD) already implied a relationship between mythical-ritualistic manifestations and texts.[51] Others based the prospect of *Lesemysterien* on the geographer Pausanius, who wrote in his "Description of Greece" (*Περιήγησις τῆς Ἑλλάδος*) that "[w]hoever has been initiated at Eleusis or has read what are called the Orphica knows what I mean" (Pausanias 1.37.4; ca. 150–176). Although Pausanias' allusion is to Cyamites, a demi-deity associated with the cultivation of broad beans, French philologist A. J. Festugière nevertheless argued that it documented the existence of Orphic literary mysteries.[52]

Classicist Reinhold Merkelbach has argued that the Hellenistic romances, while not *Lesemysterien* in Reitzenstein's sense, were written in service of the Hellenistic mystery cults.[53] Though his view has been challenged,[54] Merkelbach's claim is generally accepted

[48] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 51–52, 62.
[49] Ibid, 51, 62.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Clement's emphasis on ritual drama over text anticipated the so-called "Cambridge School"—see Farnell, Lewis R. *The Cults of the Greek States,* 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon), 1907, 92; Farnell, Lewis R. "Mystery." In *The Encyclolopedia Britannica*. 11th ed., Vol. 19, 117–23. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 1911,121. In his Preface to *Cults* (1896: I, vii), Farnell refers to the new interest in Greek ritual and myth, especially at Cambridge. The "Cambridge School" consisted of Jane Harrison, Arthur B. Cook, and Francis M. Cornford, as well as Gilbert Murray, Farnell's colleague at Oxford (Kirk 1970: 3–5). The priority of cult to myth was also argued by the English "Myth and Ritual School" of the 1930s (see Brandon 1970).
[52] Festugière, A. J. *L'idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Evangile*. (Paris: J. Gabalda), 1932, 116–132.
[53] Merkelbach, Reinhold. *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*. (Munich and Berlin: Beck, 1962).
[54] E.g. Perry, Ben Edwin. *Ancient Romances:A Literary-Historical Account of their Origins.* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1967).

for at least two late romances, Apuleius's *Golden Ass* (mid-second century) and the *Acts of Thomas* (early-third century).[55] Apuleius's romance is clearly based on the Hellenistic initiatory cult of Isis, and the *Acts of Thomas* presents a Christian-gnostic mystery of redemption.[56] As such, their point is no longer to recommend dialogic—or social—activity but to present content through the written word to individual readers.

Whether anticipated by Clement of Alexandria, by Pausanias, by the Hermetic tradition, or by the Hellenistic romances, historian Brian Stock has described a general increase in literacy during late antiquity that prompted:

> a running away from ritual and symbol and towards an intellectualism inseparable from the study of texts: that is, a movement away from the performance of rites and from devotion to representational objects and towards the consideration of both primarily in terms of an inner lesson, meaning, or kernel of truth.[57]

A contentious understanding of the relationship between text and ritual endured in Christian theological disputations over the sacramental "mystery" of the Eucharist throughout the Middle Ages, and was finally resolved (at least in principle) in favor of the text (the Word) with the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century.

Modern detective stories as secular analogues of the Hellenistic "Reading Mysteries"

So, what might the interpretative penchants of nineteenth-century historians of religion have to do with the contemporaneous emergence of the detective story? In addition to sharing in nineteenth-century Romanticism's enchantment with "mystery," there are a number of other characteristics shared both with nineteenth-century views of the Hellenistic Mysteries, especially with Reitzenstein's notion of *Lesemysterien*, and with the emergence of mystery stories.[58]

Like the Hellenistic literary mysteries imagined by Reitzenstein,[59] the formal structure of secular mystery novels cast the reader as an individual (initiate), who follows (identifies

[55] Koester, Helmut. *Introduction to the New Testament,* Vol. 1: *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age.* (Berlin: de Gruyter), 1982, 139.

[56] Bornkamm, Günther. "The Acts of Thomas," In *New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher; English edited by R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster), 1965, 429.

[57] Stock, Brian. *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1983, 524.

[58] While writing this essay, I serendipitously came across reference to a YouTube presentation on "Horror Fiction as Lesemysterium" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adqkZvdUkm0), (accessed 1/12/2021). This presentation, by Mikheil Kakabadze, 24 January 2020, was a student of Professor Wouter Hanegraaff as part of the MA Course on "Religionism and Historicism" by, the University of Amsterdam-Faculty of Humanities.

[59] Whether or not *Lesemysterien* actually existed as developments from Hellenistic initiatory rites, as Reitzenstein argued, subsequent references to "literary mysteries" in this essay refer only to Reitzenstein's characterization of them.

with) an author/detective (mystagogue), through an often intricately constructed narrative, designed, however, to disclose the final solution (revelation) of the crime (mystery) that had incentivized the narrative at its outset. In the view of Raymond Chandler, "one of the most … literarily gifted … [of] detective writers",[60] the detective (mystagoge) leads the reader (initiate) "in search of a … truth" that is hidden until its final disclosure at the end of the narrative journey.[61] And as Callois has noted, "[y]ou don't read a mystery novel for the pleasure of hearing a story. It is because you want to attend a magic show in which the illusionist … [finally] reveals the secret".[62] The solution of the crime (the unveiling of the final "mystery"), results from clues, which are given throughout, and which the reader (initiate) follows the detective (the author/mystagogue) in identifying. For example, the detective, or a close friend of the detective, typically "acts in the … capacity of … [the] average reader" to comment "freely on what … [the reader] does not understand".[63] In other words, the readers of detective novels are afforded an "equal opportunity with the detective [mystagogue] for solving the mystery".[64]

Like the Hellenistic literary mysteries, which reflected the intellectualist rise of literacy,[65] mystery novels offer readers "an intellectual satisfaction".[66] Accommodating "both the ambitions of the intellect and … [Romanticism's] appetites of the senses",[67] detective novels depict a "struggle between order and chaos, whose perpetual rivalry put the universe in balance." This struggle "is manifested in the antagonism between crime and the law".[68] The "detective … unravels the mystery" and restores "balance, or a form of balance." The reader (initiate) is never left hanging at the end of a mystery".[69]

In conjunction with "ambitions of the intellect," detective novels, like the Hellenistic Mysteries, are "mythic," i.e., they are cultural tools "for explaining the world and the fate

[60] Haycraft, Howard (ed.). "Forward," *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays.* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 222.
[61] Chandler, Raymond. "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 237.
[62] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 20.
[63] Wrong, E. M. 1926. "Crime and Detection," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 22.
[64] Van Dine, S. S. "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 189; Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 10.
[65] Stock, Brian. *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1983,
[66] Freeman, R. Austin. "The Art of the Detective Story," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 9–11; Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 27.
[67] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 44.
[68] Ibid, 45–46.
[69] Brown, Rita Mae. "A *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens." In *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels,* edited by John Connolly and Declan Burke, 15–17. (New York: Emily Bestler Books/Atria), 2012, 17.

of the human being".[70] Lew Archer, for example, the detective in Ross Macdonald's acclaimed series, is said to be "emblematic of the human struggle … to make sense of who we are".[71] Apart from those detective novels in which mythic (i.e., Christian) themes are explicitly embraced, e.g., by G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy L. Sayers, or Graham Greene, Canadian cultural historian Peter C. Erb has identified parallel thematic concerns in fully secular mysteries.[72] Erb argues that like the religious (mythic) novelists, secular detective authors "struggle in some way with the ongoing fact of … human willing, thinking, and acting beyond itself, and this not necessarily as a need, born from the inability to accept too much reality, but as an element in human striving".[73] Mircea Eliade, one of those historians of religion influenced by the nineteenth-century understanding of a mysterious sacrality, has noted several modern secular authors in whose writings mythic themes are clearly discernible, e.g., T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" or James Joyce's *Ulysses*.[74] Might Eliade's judgement about a continuation of mystery (mythic) themes in such "good" literature be especially apt for detective novels, the most popular genre of literature since its emergence in the nineteenth century?

Like the Hellenistic literary mysteries, mystery novels address issues about the "meaning of life".[75] Since their expressions of existential concerns with life and death since Poe's inaugural tale of murder,[76] crime novelists, especially, have been called students of "human nature",[77] and their novels judged to be "epics of the modern age".[78] Confrontation with death was a concern familiar in the Hellenistic world since the Classical Age. Referring to Euripides, for example, Diogenes Laertius wrote in the third century CE of a general Greek sense that equated life with death and death with life (*Vitae phil.* 9.73.1). Israeli historian Yulia Ustinova has argued that a confrontation with death and a changing attitude to life

[70] Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House), 1994, 7.

[71] https://www.amazon.com/Strangers-Town-Three-Discovered-Mysteries/dp/188594151X (accessed 1/24/2021). Like the literary accolades ascribed to Burke, "the Archer books," have been judged by one reviewer to be "the finest series of detective novels ever written by an American" (Goldman 1969: 90). Goldman, William. Review of "*The Goodbye Look* by Ross Macdonald." (*The New York Times Book Review*, June 1), 1969, 90.

[72] Like me, Erb is also a retiree who, in his "free time" reads, among other interests, "mystery novels." (https://islandscholar.ca/people/perb; accessed 1/24/2021).

[73] Erb, Peter C. *Murders, Manners, Mystery: Reflections on Faith in Contemporary Detective Fiction.* (London: SCM Press), 2007, 3–4.

[74] Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. (New York: Harper), 1958, 134.

[75] Wright, Willard Huntington. "The Great Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 70.

[76] Chandler, Raymond. "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 223.

[77] Weingarten, Marc. "Craig Johnson Makes Crime Pay." July 20 (2008): 66.

[78] Erb, Peter C. *Murders, Manners, Mystery: Reflections on Faith in Contemporary Detective Fiction.* (London: SCM Press), 2007, 4.

was at the core of initiation into the Greek cults.[79] She cites Cicero's view of life after initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries (*De leg. 2.36*) as conferring upon initiates "[t]he unique gifts … [of] joyful existence, peace of mind, and readiness to accept death".[80] Reitzenstein maintained that the goal the Hermetic *Lesemysterien*, like that of the "Hellenistic Mysteries", was that of a rebirth from death into life.[81] Even the most unreflective of literary detectives are portrayed as occasionally ruminating on the possible reasons for their existence in the face of mortality, for example, in the popular Mickey Spillane novels with their graphic accounts of vengeful justice by death (e.g., by Mike Hammer, as epigraphed above).

Like the Hellenistic literary mystery, mystery novels' themes of an opposition between "human conduct and nature"[82] inexorably raise questions of morality. Even as classical Greek philosophical reflections on Platonic/Aristotelian metaphysics were supplanted by popular concerns with ethics in the Hellenistic era, so were Enlightenment concerns with rationality usurped by the concerns of Romanticism with behavior. "[A]ll mystery writers," John Connolly and Decan Burke conclude, in their anthology *Books to Die For,* "are secret moralists".[83] And, G. K. Chesterton, in his pioneering criticism of detective literature, concluded that "[t]he romance … [of detective stories] is … based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies".[84] So, Reitzenstein claimed that the "soul" of a reader of a Hellenistic literary mystery might "rid itself of an evil impulse",[85] a freedom from evil that involves a dramatic interplay with the "positive power of God"[86]—although final resolutions of good vs. evil in modern secular mysteries do not depend upon whether or not "God wills it".[87] As in the literary mysteries, in other words, detective novels are constructed around a constant interplay between right and wrong, good and evil, where morality is portrayed ambiguously as principled or as compromised.[88] This ambiguity is expressed, in a well-regarded true-crime series, by one detective in response to a certain

[79] Ustinova, Yulia. "To Live in Joy and Die with Hope: Experiential Aspects of Ancient Greek Mystery Rites." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 56, no. 2 (2013): 108.
[80] Ibid, 105
[81] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 50–51.
[82] Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House), 1994, 7.
[83] Canolly, John, and Declan Burke (eds.). *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels.* New York: Emily Bestler Books/Atria, 2012, 19.
[84] Chesterton, G. K. "A Defence of Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Howard Haycraft* (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1983, 6.
[85] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as The Hellenistic Mystery Religions. Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 50–51.
[86] Ibid, 50.
[87] Ibid, 51.
[88] Canolly, John, and Declan Burke (eds.). *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels.* New York: Emily Bestler Books/Atria, 2012, 19, 48, 56, 70; Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House), 1994, 53–64.

offer: "I'm not the most ethical guy on the planet, but I'm not necessarily for sale to the highest bidder".[89]

This is not to suggest that any of the mystery novelists knew of, or were influenced by, Reitzenstein's scholarly suggestion for the historical existence of Hellenistic literary mysteries or vice versa, or had any independent acknowledge of possible historical examples of such literary mysteries. It is to suggest, however, that mystery novelists, like the historians of religions' interpretation of the Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mysteries," exemplified Romanticism's wide-spread fascination with "mystery," an attraction illustrated by the writings of Blavatsky and by the broad general interest in the Western esoteric tradition. This nineteenth-century fascination with "mystery" not only engendered scholarly interpretations of Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mystery Religions," with its attendant thesis of *Lesemysterien*, but transformed the "realistic literature" of the eighteenth-century into the genre of mysteries that came to dominate the nineteenth.

Neurocognitive considerations of reading

Neither Reitzenstein's characterization of Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mysteries" nor his proposal for a subsequent development of *Lesemysterien* has had significant influence on contemporary history of religions research. However, his suggestion that readers of *Lesemysterien* somehow actually performed the mystery rite was a perceptive intuition about the act of reading itself. As his contemporary, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is reputed to have said, "reading is thinking with other people's minds".[90] Methodologically, such characterizations of acts of reading by Schopenhauer, for example, and by literary critics (e.g., *supra*), provide the necessary descriptions of what is to be explained. Recent neurocognitive research has provided explanatory support for Reitzenstein's prescient characterization of the act of reading itself.

The neurocognitive act of reading

Cognitive psychologist Richard Gerrig, in his insightful (if sometimes contested) study *On the Psychological Activities of Reading*,[91] has proposed two phenomenologico-cognitive "metaphors" or "frames" that describe acts of reading: "being transported" and "performance".[92] Gerrig notes that "being transported" refers to the common experience of any reader be-

[89] Collins, Max Allan. *Better Dead.* (New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book), 2016, 158.
[90] Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1977, 149.
[91] See, for example: Marback, Richard. "Review of Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*." *Criticism* 37, no.1 (1995): 172–174; See also: Miall, David S. "Review of Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds.*" *Journal of Pragmatics* 32, no. 3 (2000): 377–382.
[92] Gerrig, Richard. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading.* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1993, 2.

coming "lost" in some "narrative world," whether fictive or non-fictive.[93] Neuroscientist Gregory Berns and colleagues confirm that simply by reading a novel, the reader is transported into the body of the protagonist.[94] This "transport" of readers into a narrative text occurs "by virtue of performing that narrative",[95] "just like actors performing roles".[96] As prominent historian of ancient religions Ugo Bianchi has concluded, even the *mystai* of the ancient initiatory cults "presupposed that … [they took] part, in the adventures" of the cult narrative, by being "present at the ritual … as an actor".[97]

Similar to Gerrig's portrayal of a reader's experiences of transport and performance, neuropsychologist Marcus Cheetham and colleagues have independently defined a cognitive process of reading they term "trait identification".[98] For Cheetham *et al*., trait identification refers to a reader's perception of being transposed into the "thoughts, feelings and situations" of a novel's character, of "experiencing the character's happenings from the character's perspective".[99] Gerrig described this perception comparably as the "process whereby individual readers experience narratives in consonance with their own identity themes".[100] These processes of transportation and performance are unexceptional, Gerrig concludes, requiring only that a reader "have in place the repertory of cognitive processes that is otherwise required for everyday experience".[101] The experiences of transport and performance that Gerrig and Cheetham have described as ordinary occurrences for everyday readers are, of course, those Reitzenstein portrayed for the reader of his *Lesemysterien*.

While the experiences of transport and performance described by Gerrig and Cheetham may result from "automatic inferences … in the absence of special goals or strategies on the part of the reader",[102] they may also arise, Gerrig concludes, "through processes that … are under the strategic control of the reader".[103] According to Reitzenstein, "strategic control" of performance by the reader of his *Lesemysterien* was shaped by "well known" cultural "forms of the cult of the dead." In this managed or intentional performance of the *Lesemysterien*, Reitzenstein argued, the reader, like actors, gave "substance to the psychological lives of

[93] Ibid, 3.
[94] Gregory S., Blaine, Kristina, Prietula, Michael J., and Pye, Brandon E., "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain," *Brain Connectivity* 3, no. 6 (2013): 598.
[95] Gerrig, Richard. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading.* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1993, 2.
[96] Ibid, 17.
[97] Bianchi, Ugo. *The Greek Mysteries.* (Leiden: Brill), 1976, 5.
[98] Cheetham, Marcus, Hänggi, Jürgen, and Lutz Jancke. "Identifying with Fictive Characters: Structural Brain Correlates of the Personality Trait 'Fantasy'", *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, no.11 (2014), 1836, 1840.
[99] Ibid, 1836.
[100] Gerrig, Richard. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading.* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1993, 22.
[101] Ibid, 239.
[102] Ibid, 30–31
[103] Ibid, 39.

characters".[104] Even as Reitzenstein argued that the readers of *Lesemysterien* acquire the characteristics of initiates in the mystery, Gerrig concludes that all readers assume "certain new characteristics (as called for by the narrative)" they read.[105]

Central to Reitzenstein's literary mysteries is the identification of the *author* as the fictive *actor* (the mystatogue) with the *reader* (initiate). The author/mystagogue shepherds the narrative drama towards its narrative *denouement* with the reader's initiation into the mysteries by a grand mystical revelation. While Reitzenstein's supposition that this "revelation" to the readers of *Lesemysterien* is "achieved only in vision"[106] sounds quite phantasmagoric, an identification of author, reader, and fictive actor is, of course, experienced by most readers of literature—but without any reliance upon divine intervention.

While literary critics have described identifications of *reader* and *author* (*supra*), French neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene has explained that identity by identifying a common neurocognitive architecture that governs the constraint and construction of the written word. This neurocognitive architecture is a pan-human characteristic[107] that involves functions of the left, occipito-temporal area of the brain.[108] It is genetically constrained, the consequence of evolutionary adaptations to the imagistic potential of the primitive visual system to be able to recognize alphabetic characters.[109]

Literary critics have also described identifications of a *reader* with the intentions, actions, behavior, etc. of fictive *actors* (*supra*). The Hermetic literature that was the model for Reitzenstein's literary mysteries is structured as teachings of Hermes Trismegistus to a student, i.e., the reader of the teachings. Since "teaching required learners to have the ability to imitate the behavior of their teachers … and to guess what they wanted to teach, such guesses are facilitated by the readers' Theory of Mind".[110] Theory of Mind (ToM) is a neurocognitive reference to folk-psychological understandings of the mental states of others, and of one's own, with its associated inferences of agency, intentionality and teleology.[111]

[104] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 51, 17.
[105] Gerrig, Richard. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading.* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1993, 11.
[106] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 62.
[107] Dehaene, Stanislas. *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention.* (New York: Viking), 2009, 7.
[108] Dehaene, Stanislas. *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention.* (New York: Viking), 2009, 119; Cheetham, Marcus, Hänggi, Jürgen, and Lutz Jancke. "Identifying with Fictive Characters: Structural Brain Correlates of the Personality Trait 'Fantasy'," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, no. 11 (2014), 1836.
[109] Dehaene, Stanislas. *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention.* (New York: Viking), 2009, 53, 97, 125.
[110] Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press), 2018, 39.
[111] Gopnik, Alison. "Theory of Mind." In *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil, 838–840. (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press), 1999.

"Functional magnetic resonance imaging and transcranial magnetic stimulation both reveal the same regions of the brain are active in thinking both about our own actions…and about the actions of others".[112] Consequently, the constructions and the comprehension of any narrative involve the reader's identification (involuntary and non-conscious) with the author's ToM, as well as with the functions of the reader's own.

According to Reitzenstein, reading a *Lesemysterium* culminates in a "vision".[113] Altered states of consciousness were central to the initiatory rites of antiquity. Their dramatic effects were provoked by assaulting one, usually multiples, of the senses—olfactory, auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory, proprioceptory (Martin, *forthcoming*). In addition to literary mysteries, altered states of consciousness were claimed to be fundamental to Theosophy and to contemporaneous nineteenth-century occult movements. Eliade has pointed out that a number of the nineteenth-century occult movements continue to exist today. Like Reitzenstein's *Lesemysterien,* individuals might become initiated into these groups solely by reading one of the large numbers of initiatory books and periodicals they publish.[114] Like the *mystai* of the Hellenistic literary mysteries, these modern-day initiates are assured that the arcane knowledge of true religion, preserved in the ancient mysteries, will be revealed to them by reading their texts.

Acts of reading are associated with altered states of consciousness, although less dramatically so than with the initiatory rites of antiquity,[115] or those of modernity. As we have seen, they involve mundane alterations to the "resting state [of neural] networks",[116] such as transport and performance, trait identification, reader/character/author identifications, and/or ToM. Together, these cognitive processes allow for the formation of an alternative "global workspace" of "dense long-distance [neural] connections." This network allows for the "confrontation, synthesis, and distribution of information … [and] for the testing of new ideas".[117]

It is not clear which linguistic or literary stimuli prompt and guide specific cognitive processes of reading.[118] However, given their wide-spread international popularity since

[112] Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press), 2018, 108.

[113] Reitzenstein, Richard. *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen. Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen.* Translated by J. E. Steely as *The Hellenistic Mystery Religions*. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press), 1978, 62.

[114] Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. (New York: Harper), 1958, 133–134.

[115] Martin, Luther H. "Aspects of `Religious Experience' among the Hellenistic Mystery Religions," *Religion & Theology* 12, no. 3 (2005): 349–369.

[116] Berns, Gregory S., Blaine, Kristina, Prietula, Michael J., Pye, Brandon E., "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain," *Brain Connectivity* 3, no. 6 (2013): 598–599; Ustinova, Yulia. "To Live in Joy and Die with Hope: Experiential Aspects of Ancient Greek Mystery Rites." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 56, no. 2 (2013): 116–118.

[117] Dehaene, Stanislas. *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention.* (New York: Viking), 2009, 321.

[118] van Krieken, Kobie, Hoeken, Hans, Sanders, José. "Evoking and Measuring Identification with Narrative Characters — A Linguistic Cues Framework." *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, 1190 (2017): 14; Gerrig, Richard.

their first appearances in the nineteenth century, detective stories, with their Romantic enthrallment with "mystery" and analogues to the literary mysteries imagined by Reitzenstein, would seem to be fitting candidates for that role.[119]

The neurocognitive act of reading detective novels

Literary critics have long described the detective novel as an "operation of human minds",[120] "a game of the mind",[121] "a mental exercise".[122] While detective stories share, of course, the neurocognitive processes that characterize the reading of any genre of novel, the reading of detective novels do exhibit a few distinctive neurocognitive characteristics.

Readers of a cleverly constructed detective novel realizes the final solution to a mystery not only through logical deductions from the clues, but they might also experience an "aha moment," an "emotional reaction that typically occurs at a moment of sudden insight into a problem or other puzzling issue" ("aha experience", in *APA Dictionary of Psychology*). An "aha experience" in the reading of a detective novel would characterize an epiphanous realization of the nature of and solution to a crime at the conclusion of the story, even as an initiate into a *Lesemysterium* would anticipate the final revelation of the "mystery".[123]

Neuroscientists have concluded that simply the act of reading itself releases oxytocin, a pleasure producing hormone,[124] which, as neuroeconomist Paul Zak concludes, is "the biological instrument that puts people in thrall to a story".[125] This is especially the case with tension-filled stories like a detective tale,[126] and even more so when the crime to be investigated involves death,[127] that most signal characteristic of the detective genre.

Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading. (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1993, 4.

[119] Like notions of literary mysteries of old, a recent volume of detective stories, having to do with "stories of crime in the world of books and bookstores," has been entitled "Bibliomysteries" (Penzler 2017).

[120] Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House), 1994, 64.

[121] Callois, Roger. *The Mystery Novel.* (Bronxville, NY: The Laughing Buddha Press), 1984, 14.

[122] Ibid, 28.

[123] While I use "revelation" in its religious sense with reference to the *Lesemysterien*, I use "epiphanous" in its fully secular sense as a literary device that refers to modes of heightened literary realization. Although the literary device of the "epiphany" is associated primarily with the writings of James Joyce, (Joyce, James. Stephen Hero. (Theodore Spencer, ed. (New York: New Directions), 1963, 211)) literary critics trace its roots to what William Wordsworth referred to in his poetry as "spots of time" (MacDuff 2015), *e.g.*: "*There are in our existence spots of time,/That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue*" ("The Prelude" XII [1805], lns 208–210).

[124] Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press), 2018, 86.

[125] Zak, Paul J. "Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative." *Cerebrum* Jan.-Feb. (2015): 3.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid, 5.

The neurocognitive act of reading historical sources

Stock's description of a general historical "realignment of oral discourse within the cultural reference system of late antiquity based on [an intellectualist rise of literacy, i.e., on] the logical priorities of texts" would seem to support Reitzenstein's view of literary mysteries.[128] However, Reitzenstein's historiographical "attempt to determine the character of the Hellenistic Mysteries",[129] with his attendant thesis of "reading mysteries," was shaped more by nineteenth-century views of "Mystery" than based upon substantial historical evidence. In other words, Reitzenstein's proposal for *Lesemysterien* is illustrative of the "presentist" bias that has plagued much historiography, biases that are influenced by cultural suppositions contemporaneous with the historian. This presentist bias is also the historiographical manifestation of a "hindsight bias" that is a general characteristic of human cognition.[130]

Rosenberg has argued, insightfully if a bit overly-stated, that since an author's ToM is central to the construction of all narratives, this cognitive default renders both of them, thereby, as fictitious compositions.[131] This would be the case both for fiction (e.g., detective stories) as for historical narratives (the nineteenth-century story of "Mystery Religions), Dehaene has found that writing, including what historians write, is governed by the same cognitive architecture that governs reading, namely, the left, occipito-temporal area of the brain.[132] In other words, Reitzenstein's historiographical reading of the evidence for Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mysteries" exhibits the same neuro-cognitive as well as cultural biases as those shaping the emergence of the detective genre of literature.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that what piqued my curiosity, in consequence of reading detective novels, was the question of whether there might be some sort of relationship between the nineteenth-century emergence of "mystery novels" and the concurrent description by historians of religion of the various Hellenistic initiatory groups as "Mysteries." Despite the rather striking parallel between the creation of the literary genre of mystery novels and the origination of the *Lesemysterium* hypothesis, there is no documentation for any direct interaction between authors of mystery novels and those historians of religion who described Hellenistic initiatory associations as "Mysteries." Rather, what the nineteenth-century historiographical fabrication of "Hellenistic Mystery Religions" shared with the

[128] Stock, Brian. *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1983, 522.
[129] Cumont, Franz. *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. (New York: Dover), 1956, 214.
[130] Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2011, 2002–2004.
[131] Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2018).
[132] Dehaene, Stanislas. *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention.* (New York: Viking), 2009, 53, 97, 119, 125.

emergence and popularity of mystery stories is Romanticism's extensive enchantment with "Mystery," exemplified in the widespread institutional practices of Western esotericism. My sciolistic inquiry into the cultural trajectory of nineteenth-century Romanticism sheds some light on the popularity of the genre of mystery novels that originated during this century while exposing, at the same time, the "presentist" bias of Reitzenstein's mystagogic historiography and that of his contemporary historians of religion.

Furthermore, I have suggested that mystery novels may be read for their literary significance, which they may or may not be judged to have. Or, they may be read for insights into the historical and/or cultural landscape of their tales, many of which are portrayed in colorful and attentive detail.[133] Or, they may be analyzed as instructive expressions of acts of reading itself, which have been described by literary critics and explained by neuroscientists, whether of detective stories or of other narratives, historical and fictive alike.[134] Or, more likely, they express some bricolage of these possibilities—apt cerebral entertainment for those of us academics now relieved from the time-consuming demands of professional obligations and deadlines. However, the esteemed detective story author Ian Rankin has also reminded us of the oxytocin effect —that reading, and especially the reading of mystery stories, is just fun.[135]

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[133] Martin, Luther H. "The Historian (of Religions) as Detective," *e-Rhizome, Journal for the Study of Religion, Culture, Society, and Cognition* 1, no. 2 (2019): 113–131.

[134] Rosenberg, Alex. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories.* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

[135] Rankin, Ian. "Introduction" In *Bibliomysteries. Crime in the World of Books and Bookstores,* edited by Otto Penzler. (New York: Pegasus Crime, 2017); Canolly, John, and Declan Burke (eds.). *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels.* (New York: Emily Bestler Books/Atria, 2012), 17.

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