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A Critique of *Against the Modern World* by Mark Sedgwick

(Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century by Mark Sedgwick. Hardcover, 370 pages with glossary, bibliography, and index. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-19-515297-2)

This book—the curious cover of which reminds one more of a spy-novel than an academic work—declares itself to be “a biography of René Guénon and a history of the Traditionalist movement that he founded” (p. vii). This is rather a strange objective on the part of an author who hardly makes any reference to the works of the most important authors of the spiritual current at issue, and who either fails to refer to its numerous representatives or just lightly touches upon some of their names¹; furthermore, he appears to know little about the periodicals of this current and mainly refers to those accessible through the Internet. In our view it is too ambitious to define a book “a history of René Guénon and the Traditionalists” (*ibid.*) when the author is in the dark about certain important historical sources of the theme,² and consequently writes “Heidnische Imperialismus” instead of *Heidnischer Imperialismus* (pp. 104, 298, 353), “Editions Traditionnels” in place of *Editions Traditionnelles* (p. 132), “Herrenclub” for *Herrenklub* (p. 224), “Agiza” instead of *Algiza* (pp. 297, 319), and “Mediterrané” in place of *Mediterranee* (p. 320). In addition to all this, he does not manage to give the precise date of birth of Julius Evola (p. 363), although he devotes nearly two chapters to him.³ All in all, it is quite obvious that we cannot find a work reliable, when, expressing the references to Hungary numerically, it transpires that out of 21 pieces of information 13 are false (pp. 186–187).⁴ We do not intend, however, to dwell upon these mistakes too long, since the work of the assistant professor of the American University in Cairo includes much graver errors than these.

The author ultimately traces this extended and vast spiritual current back to only one single person: René Guénon—and to his works and influence. We certainly do not desire to belittle the significance of Guénon, but we consider this conception mistaken both historically and phenomenologically. How can one imagine that the influence of a single person—or of even a few—might be as great as that? The conceptions, ideas and truths appearing (in a concentrated and clarified form) in the life-work of Guénon were once the main directions and principles of whole cultures; they cannot be seen as the privilege of certain individuals. Their *reappearance* is a fact, even if the written teachings in Guénon’s works are necessarily generalising rather than full of practical details. Referring to the equivalents of the spiritual current long before Guénon, Mr

¹ Thus, the connecting German thinkers, such as Leopold Ziegler, Othmar Spann, Taras von Borodajkewycz, Walter Heinrich and others, as well as André Préau, Arthur Osborne, Elie Lebasquais (Luc Benoist), Kurt Almqvist, Charles Le Gai Eaton, Lord Northbourne, William Stoddart, Rama Coomaraswamy, Gaston Georgel, Bruno Hapel, etc., are not mentioned at all, while others such as John Levy, Leo Schaya, Whitall Nicholson Perry, Franco Musso (Giovanni Ponte), Renato del Ponte, are only mentioned briefly in passing.

² The author is uninformed about sources of historical importance, such as the two letters of Michel Vâlsan to Frithjof Schuon dated 17 September 1950 and November of 1950 (unpublished, typed version, pp. 2 and 25, A/4); Florin Mihăescu’s article entitled “Mircea Eliade e René Guénon” (*Origini* [Milan], March 1997, [Eliade-special issue], pp. 15–18); the volume with the title of *Eliade, Vâlsan, Geticus e gli altri* by Claudio Mutti (Parma: Edizioni all’insegna del Veltro, 1999); the book entitled *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy* by Kenneth Oldmeadow (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000); etc. He confesses in a footnote that he has not read the letters of Vâlsan, but in spite of this, he refers to one of them repeatedly over a few pages (304–306). Had he known about the relevant article from Mihăescu, he could not have called Eliade even a “soft traditionalist.” Some of his basic conceptions—in terms of the “Fragmentation” and the “Dissension” (pp. 123–131)—would similarly have been shattered, had he informed the reader that Vâlsan in the above mentioned breaking-away letters addressed Schuon as his “Most dear and honoured Master.”

³ None of the listed mistakes has been corrected until the appearance of this critique in the book’s Errata on the Internet: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/faculty/sedgwick/trad/book/errata.html> (08. 12. 2005). Incidentally, we find it strange that a non-traditionalist has been occupying the following Internet address for years for his own purposes: www.traditionalists.org

⁴ It is impossible to indicate each and every mistake here, but it is highly bizarre that Hungary—and therefore Béla Hamvas, for instance—is mentioned in a chapter called “Terror in Italy.” A historian ought to have known that being “near the Romanian border” (p. 186) has never meant anything in terms of spirituality for the Hungarians.

Sedgwick simply lists the names of a few individuals while gratuitously separating Spiritual Traditionality from “Perennialism.” It must be emphasised that Ficino and Agostino Steuco are but two names in the long chain of representatives of universally open, strictly traditional spirituality and intellectuality.⁵ It is also ridiculous to speak about “Vedanta-Perennialism” (pp. 24, 40), since *every* real tradition is a representation of spiritual Perennialism. In addition, the author mingles these “origins” together with such individuals and schools that—not only on the surface, but also in their very nature—show modern, and not at all traditional characteristics. Who was Reuben Burrow and who were all the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theosophists, we might ask, compared to those ancient people who believed in a perennial wisdom both in the East and the West?

Mr Sedgwick seems to be uninformed about the difference between *philosophia* and wisdom (*sophia*), and also about the fact that the term *philosophia perennis* often used by the Scholastics was also generally used in the academic circles of philosophers until the mid-twentieth century.⁶ He does not seem to know about that Plato, who was interested in the primordial wisdom of the Greeks and that of Atlantis, or about Plutarch, one of the priests of the Shrine of Delphi, who was also versed in the Egyptian traditions. He also seems to forget about Plotinus, who had his eastern connections, and whose influence upon post-Platonic European spiritual culture cannot be denied. Not a word is uttered about Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), who first attempted to unify the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, nor about the outstanding role of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya who aimed at the totality of Hindu tradition, and we could continue to list those ancient authors whose spirituality is either closely related to or analogous—if not identical—with the latest traditional authors of our age. After this it naturally follows that the author also fails to mention that the concept of the transcendent unity of the great spiritual traditions and world religions, or the idea of the primordial Tradition are not new at all, that is to say, they are neither the fiction of Guénon, nor Schuon, nor Matgioi, nor anybody else. The validity and reality of an idea do not depend on the fact that the religious tradition practised by the majority is silent about it. The Tibetan *ris-med* current and the following extracts from the Indian-Hindu sacred texts unequivocally show the primordially in terms of the idea of the universal and integral Tradition:

“For whatever path men choose, they all come to me [the Godhead] in the end...”

“...that man sees the truth who sees *sāṅkhya* and *yoga* as one.”

“...whatever form any devotee worships with true faith, I give them this unshakable faith.”

“Even those who worship other gods and offer their sacrifice to them with faith, they, too, sacrifice to Me alone...”

“The ordinary man, who draws a [final] distinction among the divinities of the Trinity [Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva], surely will stay in hell as long as the Moon and the stars are glittering on the sky. My follower is allowed to venerate any gods, for by ascending towards them he can reach the knowledge leading to the ultimate liberation. Without rendering homage to Brahmā one cannot venerate Viṣṇu; without rendering homage to Viṣṇu one will not venerate me either.’ Having said that, Śiva, the Lord Supreme, the Merciful God uttered the following words in everyone’s hearing: ‘If a follower of Viṣṇu hates me, or a follower of Śiva hates Viṣṇu, both draw curses upon their heads, and they will never realise Reality.’”⁷

The spiritual current at issue and the spirituality of the ancient authors are *basically* identical. This is only blurred to a certain extent by one characteristic: the contemporary representatives take modern circumstances into consideration while writing. This characteristic, however, makes them different only on the surface: in their approach to the topic, in their style, in their external starting point, and in their lives. They remain essentially identical. The numerous historical correspondences or, at least, the spiritual relationship also convey the suggestion that the most eminent representatives of this current must be called *contemporary traditional authors*, and not

⁵ The reference to Steuco originates from one of the Gifford-lectures of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, but the author forgets to give his source. Cf. “What is Tradition?” in S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 69. (The author miswrites the date of birth, as did Mr Nasr: he gives 1497 instead of 1496.)

⁶ See, e.g., *Athenaeum* (Budapest), Vol. XXVIII (1941), pp. 136 ff.

⁷ *Bhagavad-gītā* IV. 11, V. 5, VII. 21, IX. 23 (Hungarian translation by József Vekerdi). *Śiva-purāṇa*, Rudrasaṅhitā II. 43. 17–21 (Hungarian translation by the author).

“Traditionalists.” We must totally agree with Professor András de László, who first applied this term to them. From the order of things it also evidently follows that not every thinker connected to this current can be considered a traditional author. As we expressed in a previous article,⁸ those “Traditionalists” to whom the worthy “traditional author” title cannot be applied yet, can be regarded as those who, by virtue of proper efforts and achievements may become traditional authors one day.

As we can see, in Mr Sedgwick’s book even the expressions “Traditionalism” and “Traditionalists” are highly debatable. If the author had really taken his aim seriously to write about René Guénon and the history of the spiritual current “he founded,” he should have consequently dismissed the idea of using the expressions “Traditionalism” and “Traditionalists,” as Guénon himself did.⁹ Taking into account the time and events that have passed since his death, our strong advice is not to separate Traditionalism from Tradition as definitively as Guénon did,¹⁰ but to look at it as a strictly transitional and intermediary term.¹¹ This applies so much the more in the case of the term “movement.” What might politically be acceptable, and in certain cases even desirable, is not always valid in a higher order. Guénon himself refrained from using such a fundamentally leftist label as “movement,” together with the view and conceptions connected to it.¹² He and all the representatives of the spirituality reembodyed in his life-work have always represented spiritual aristocratism, the true spiritual elitism which has never allowed itself to have any of the characteristics of a “movement.”¹³ As to politics and the collective nature of influences, the characteristics of a movement might appear occasionally, although they are by no means essential. They are not something to which the true representatives of this current would pay much attention, nor on the basis of which anything could be defined.

After all that has been said, the following question arises: has the author chosen his *ab ovo* erroneous starting points because of lack of proper knowledge or intentionally? Immediately on the second page of the Preface one can come across such unsavoury expressions as “anti-Semitism, terrorism, and fascism,” while in the next sentence—as it were just for safety’s sake—the terms “SS” and “Nazi Germany” catch one’s eye (p. vii). What original impressions these words convey! Under their influence the average reader of the book will certainly turn with great interest and an open heart towards the spiritual current and look forward to learning more objective details about it! The Prologue begins by painting a similarly “winning” picture of the Russian intellectual state of

⁸ “A ‘tradicionális szerzők’ kifejezésről” [“About the term ‘traditional authors’”], *Axis Polaris* (Budapest), No. 5 (2003) pp. 5–9. Modified version: *Tradíció* yearbook (Debrecen), 2004, pp. 19–24. Revised and expanded English version: <http://www.cakravartin.com/archives/about-the-term-traditional-authors-by-robert-horvath> (06. 06. 2007)

⁹ In Guénon’s life-work the terms “Traditionalism” and “Traditionalists” never occur in a positive or approved sense.

¹⁰ See, e.g., René Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 203–209.

¹¹ Cf. note 8.

¹² Guénon refused not only the principle of equality, democratism and liberalism, but also socialism. See René Guénon, *Precisazioni necessarie: I saggi di Diorama-Regime Fascista*, (Padua: Il cavallo alato, 1988), p. 26. Furthermore, René Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps*, pp. 53–58. René Guénon, *La crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 68–112.

¹³ We have no knowledge of anyone among the representatives of the spiritual current that would have belonged to the left wing. The “anarchism” of John Gustaf Agélii (Ivan Aguéli) was a unique case, Henri Hartung had a positive attitude to Evola, and Tage Lindbom amended his early leftist attitude in no less than four volumes. Evola was the one who systematically expressed the political application of internal traditional spirituality, but the other outstanding representatives of the current also showed countless characteristics of a rightist attitude in the classical and traditional sense. See, e.g., Henri Hartung, “Rencontres Romaines au milieu des ruines,” *L’Age d’Or* (Puisseaux), No. 4 (1985), pp. 26–38; Tage Lindbom, *Omrövning* (Borås: Norma, 1983); Tage Lindbom, *Roosevelt och det andra världskriget* (Borås: Norma, 1985); Tage Lindbom, *Fallet Tyskland* (Borås: Norma, 1988); Tage Lindbom, *The Myth of Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality,” in his *The Bugbear of Literacy*, (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1979), pp. 125–150; Titus Burckhardt, “A konzervatív ember,” *Arkhé* (Budapest), No. 1 (1996), pp. 27–33; Marco Pallis, “Do Clothes Make the Man?” in his *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), pp. 141–159; Martin Lings, “The Political Extreme,” in his *The Eleventh Hour: The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), pp. 45–59.

Under the influence of Alexander Dugin on one side, certain Islamic movements on another, and various representatives from the USA on a third, today many people are unfortunately toying with leftism, although—to our knowledge—none of them may be called a leftist.

Evola, besides his partial cooperation with German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, can be considered the most important twentieth-century theoretician of the right-wing attitude in the classical, traditional, and European sense.

affairs, from which we can learn—among other things—that an alleged representative of “Traditionalism” worked as a street-sweeper in the Soviet era (pp. 3–5). The basic tone of the book is set by many such pictures, which the Western readers will without doubt “profoundly understand,” and which—right at the beginning—will surely paint the whole current in the “most favourable” light. Likewise, “a biography of René Guénon” also wishes to introduce the “founder” in the most bizarre environment possible: it names all the well-known scholars and artists who are the least significant from the spiritual current’s point of view (pp. 22–23, 29–30, 36–38, etc.), reports on the Theosophical Society (pp. 40–44, etc.), Isabelle Eberhardt (pp. 63–65), or Adam Alfred Rudolf Glauer *alias* Rudolf von Sebottendorff (pp. 65–66), most of whom had nothing or hardly anything in common with Guénon, who attacked their mentality in thick volumes. Mr Sedgwick goes into full particulars about Guénon’s “foolish youth” (p. 12), and to muddle things more, he also includes in Guénon’s life-work those ideas which he later outgrew and criticised. The author seems to know—for instance—not only that Guénon occasionally smoked opium before he was 26, but also that Albert Puyou (Matgioi), the Count of Pouvourville had taught him how. He seems to have cast-iron proof of it: Matgioi has written a book on opium (pp. 58, 283). Mark Sedgwick also wonders—in the manner of a “good,” modern historian—whether Guénon would have moved to Egypt had it not been for his comforting, new lover, Mary (Dina) Shillito (p. 74). Despite the fact that in Cairo many Muslims took Guénon to be a saint (or even more than that), it turns out that during Ramadan he did not refrain from “smoking a cigarette and drinking a coffee,” and he did not go on a pilgrimage to Mecca (pp. 75–76). How terrible! According to this, then, all the Muslims who do not smoke and drink coffee, but go to Mecca, are much more eminent and considerable persons than Guénon was. By this time we have reached the second part of the book, the title of which is “Traditionalism in Practice.” Here we learn about Frithjof Schuon, in whose case the motif of love and psychology also appears (pp. 85–86, 90–91), and immediately after him comes chapter 5 entitled “Fascism,” which, to say the least, is only loosely connected to the previous topics. Here, at least, it comes to light why von Sebottendorff had to be drawn into the story earlier, although the author very carefully keeps to himself that Evola wrote a work entitled *The Right-Wing Critique of Fascism*,¹⁴ which obviously hardly fits the conception of “Practice,” and is thus better considered non-existent. Regarding Romanian “Fascism,” it is necessary to make some corrections: Mircea Eliade was not a “follower” of Evola (p. 109), nor was the Legion of the Archangel Michael identical with the Iron Guard (p. 113), and it was not Vasile Lovinescu who “introduced” Evola to Corneliu Codreanu (p. 114). As can be seen we are able to quote many examples for the author’s lack of information, and indeed, on the basis of his standpoints, the given information, and the structure of the whole book we cannot assume a *bona fide* ignorance on his part, but rather we can find traces of certain manipulations.

The spiritual current’s influence upon academic life and its cultural and social impact seem to be sore points for the author. The way he treats Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy is truly astounding (perhaps only Evola, Schuon, and Nasr are treated worse). We are informed that the reason why this prince among scholars, this “50-year-old museum curator from Boston,” became more receptive to Guénon’s Traditionalism was—in part—that Coomaraswamy’s second wife had “become pregnant by [Aleister] Crowley in 1916. [...] This incident presumably helped to diminish Coomaraswamy’s enthusiasm for occultism” (p. 53), and in this he was supported by Guénon’s critiques on occultism. The author is also able to reconstruct in which occultist bookstore in New York Coomaraswamy might “possibly” have met with Guénon’s works (p. 34). It reminds one too much of the psychologising methods of the numerous historians, who inform us, for instance, about the *thoughts* of Adolf Hitler. Certainly, they sometimes delineate their ideas as mere hypotheses, but they are also fully aware of the fact that the readers soon forget the conditional structure.

As is mentioned above, the impact of the spiritual current at issue upon scientific-academic circles seems really disturbing to Mr Sedgwick. He names many individuals whom he believes to be connected to the spiritual current (e.g. pp. xiii–xiv), which, on the one hand, clearly reveals his ignorance about it, and on the other, confuses things even more. Thus he is able to get as far as

¹⁴ First edition: *Il Fascismo: Saggio di una analisi critica dal punto di vista della Destra* (Rome: Volpe, 1964). Second and third editions: *Il Fascismo visto dalla Destra. Note sul Terzo Reich* (Rome: Volpe, 1970; 1974). And most recently: *Fascismo e Terzo Reich* (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001).

stating his theory of “dangerous” “soft Traditionalism” which exercises significant influence upon the cultural and social levels, but this only results in his mixing even more names (Gérard Encausse [Papus], Jacques Maritain, Oswald Wirth, Mircea Eliade, Louis Dumont, Paul de Séligny, Alan Watts, Louis Pauwels, Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, the Aristasians, Edvard Limonov, etc.) with the true representatives of the current. His irritation is obvious with respect to the spiritual current’s influence upon the scientific and academic life in the USA (Huston Smith, Thomas Merton, World Wisdom Books, Fons Vitae [pp. 162–170, 190–193], etc.), upon the cultural-political level in Great Britain (Temenos Academy, John Tavener, Charles, the Prince of Wales [pp. 213–216], etc.), and he shows effective paranoia towards its general social-political impact (Italy, Central-Eastern Europe, Neo-Eurasianism, Islamic countries, etc.). He is in too much of a hurry to emphasise Evola’s alleged influence on Italian terrorism in the 1960s, skilfully referring to the work of Gianfranco de Turrís (pp. 179 ff. and 319), although he does not happen to mention that this work entitled *The Praise and Defence of Julius Evola. The Baron and the Terrorists* rather acquits Evola from the charges brought against him. It is even stranger that pages 222–240 and 257–260 of the book deal with the persons, schools, and parties that are admittedly “post-Traditionalists” at best (cf. p. 260) in the etymological sense of the word, that is to say, that recanted Traditionality in the course of time.¹⁵ Naturally, the author must act like this, otherwise his book would not raise enough interest: he could not toll the storm-bell of a “school” or “movement” which is so dangerous in its influence.

To those who, after these examples still have their doubts about the malice and manipulations of the author, suffice it to say that the book was written in such a way that shows the “Traditionalist movement” for sympathisers and judges them at the same time. One of the nadirs of this work is the introduction of the term “Traditionalist Sufism,” by which the author suggests that it is an essentially modern current which merely alludes to the Tradition, the various traditions, and Sufism. At this point he wants to be more Catholic than the Pope, similar to his Hungarian colleagues who—either as laymen or biased devotees—feel entitled to tell one what true Christianity, Gnosis, true Orthodoxy and true Islam are, without heartfelt and unifying reference to the Godhead. In like manner, he attempts to point out why Sufis are not Sufis, and why traditional people are not traditional. His answers and arguments in most respects lack deep insight and profundity, and stand on the ground of formalism, dogmatism, and phariseeism. He seems to know and accept solely the conventional and rustic form of Sufism, while he keeps silent about the Sufi characteristics—of mostly Persian origin—of the eastern part of the Muslim world, those super-religious manifestations which were occasionally rejected by official Islam, and whose representatives were once burnt at the stake, but without whom Islamic metaphysics, esoterism, gnosis, and initiation would hardly exist today. The author is not—or at least appears not to be—conversant with the principle according to which the validity and reality of an idea do not depend on the fact that the religious tradition practised by the majority may keep quiet about it.

“There is no doubt that the Lord of the inhabitants of Heaven and Earth, our Master, God’s Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace) was openly manifested, like a sun on standard, and in spite of that was not seen by all, but only by some. God veiled him from others, just as He veiled the Prophets (on them be peace) from certain men, and just as He veils the Saints from the men of their time, so much so that they slander the Saints and do not believe them. God’s Book testify to this: ‘Thou shalt see them looking toward thee and they see not’ (VII. 197) and they said: ‘What kind of a messenger is this, who eats food and walks in the markets’ (XXV. 7) and so on, in all the other analogous passages. Two thirds or more of the divine Book tells how Prophets (on them be peace) were slandered by the men of their time. Among those who did not see God’s Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace) was Abū Jahl [Ibn Hisham] (God’s curse be upon him); he saw in the Messenger only the orphan who had been adopted by Abū Ṭālib. The same applies to the spiritual Master who is simultaneously ecstatic (*majdhūb*) and methodical (*sālik*), who is at the same time both drunk and sober; only a few find him.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Sedgwick puts too much emphasis on politics, even more than on psychology or sociology, although he noticeably disguises it. It is as if the whole book were centred around Alexander Dugin. Might it be possible that the author suffers from a well-developed anti-modernist and Eastern-European phobia? (Cf. note 4 to this essay.) Not incidentally we would remark that Dugin’s political activity can be seen as modern in many respects. (Cf. note 13 in this essay.)

¹⁶ Al-’Arabī ad-Darqawī, “Letter 14” [At-Tarjumāna] (English translation by Titus Burckhardt).

It is well known in traditional circles that spiritual Tradition is beyond conventions and religious forms. Mr Sedgwick, however, noticeably blames Schuon for permitting the members of his community to drink beer (p. 126), and in one of the footnotes he draws a parallel with the hijackers of the 11 September 2001 attack in New York, who “had been seen drinking vodka” (p. 305).¹⁷ After this the malice, the manipulations of the facts, the petty bourgeois bookishness and the special pseudo-traditional dogmatism on his part do not require further evidence.

In Hungary, different assumptions have arisen about the author of this book. Some presume that he is a kind of Euro-Atlantic spy, whose official task is to hunt for all the anti-modernist conceptions that have fertilised the contemporary Islamic world.¹⁸ According to others he has not been allowed to enter an initiatory order with “Traditionalist” connections, and has written this book as revenge. Some hold the opinion that certain “Traditionalists” chose him to write the history of the “movement,” although mistakenly (cf. pp. 347–349). However it may be, the Oxford University Press should have been more cautious about whose book they were going to publish, since the scientific value of this work is, to say the least, insignificant. We do admit, that—apart from everything mentioned above—the author successfully collected the secondary and tertiary historical sources of the spiritual current, and that he occasionally makes a proper distinction among certain authors. However, the primary sources of a work concerning the history of ideas can only be considered the works of the significant representatives of that current, whom Mr Sedgwick, unfortunately, hardly knows about. He refers to five books from Coomaraswamy, four books, two articles and two letters from Schuon, only one book from Titus Burckhardt and four books and two articles from Nasr (pp. 34, 316–318, 351–359), leaving out such works as *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* by Whitall Perry. These references, moreover, do not presume a thorough knowledge of the books, since the long—although partial—list of the works of Guénon and Evola (pp. 353–354) seems only a mere enumeration in the light of what we have read so far. With respect to this current’s history of ideas, the books must be considered first sources, and not websites, analytical articles written subsequently, or telephone, fax, and e-mail interviews. As for the personal interviews made with witnesses, they can only be seen as secondary sources, since, on the one hand, it is unascertainable who said what, and on the other—and this is the most decisive factor—the personal interests of the subjects of an interview should always be transparent and clear, since their memory and words show events in a personal light, emphasising only the idiosyncratic aspects or parts of history.¹⁹ As proof of the author’s familiarity with the basic works, periodicals and articles, we would gladly have read about how and to what extent a topic, an idea, or a certain conception of the spiritual traditions were presented in the contemporary authors’ thoughts and lives according to the evidence of their writings. We would have appreciated reading about the works of significant authors, such as Vasile Lovinescu, the eminent writer and great knower of mythologies and analogies; Leo Schaya, the outstanding representative of theistic metaphysics; John Levy, the expert of autology; and others. We would happily have heard where, how, and in whose writing a traditional conception has appeared; who has taken up the thread again and how it has been expounded in more detail; and finally, which elements have been continued or disappeared from their works. Had the author written about these, he would have presented a true history. We would also have been pleased to read about the theoretical debates (in the spirit of the moral of their different viewpoints, and not in terms of demonstrating “dissension” among them) between Evola and Guénon, Michel Vâlsan and Marco Pallis, Claudio Mutti and Antonio Medrano, instead of descriptions of the environment of Mutti’s publishing office and the “appetizing smells of Italian cooking” which pervaded it (p. 11).

¹⁷ After this parallel the author ineffectually adds that “these reports must be treated with extreme caution” (p. 305).

¹⁸ He gave a lecture on Islam for a Danish elite commando group. See <http://aucegypt.edu/faculty/sedgwick/lectures.html> (07. 08. 2005)

¹⁹ Mark Koslow, the later denouncer of Schuon, for instance, was obviously motivated by jealousy (cf. pp. 174–175). We cannot use even such an important historical source uncritically as the *Document confidentiel inédit* by Marcel Clavelle (Jean Reyor).

Taking all of this into consideration, we have practically read a *gossip book*, nothing more than a new false history. “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgement.”²⁰

Addenda

Writing the foregoing has to a high degree been motivated by the supposition that no competent review will be written about the book in the English-speaking countries. The supposition turned out to be unfounded as Michael Fitzgerald published an annihilating critique in the July 2005 issue of the on-line periodical *Vincit Omnia Veritas*.²¹ The *Sophia Journal* also brought out a summary written by Wilson Eliot Poindexter, and although we do not know it, owing to the similar spirituality of the two journals, we can take it for granted that the review is also appropriate.

In spite of the fact that Mr Fitzgerald performs a thoroughgoing critical annihilation and unmasking, we do not consider our work to be unnecessary. (He criticizes Sedgwick for ranking Evola among “the seven most important traditionalists,” but he does not criticize him for tendentiously including others who were in the best possible case only the “followers of followers”, etc.) As we thought our writing above completes the American review with further important aspects, on 13th March 2006 we sent it to the forums mentioned. Copies of the electronic letter containing the English translation prepared in the meantime were also sent to Mark Sedgwick and a representative of his publishing company.

The letter was sent at 21 minutes past 4 in the afternoon, and Mr Sedgwick replied to it in record time at 4 minutes to 11 the next morning—14th March, 2006. By that time he had corrected the mistakes in the Internet errata of the book mentioned in the first paragraph (except some awkward ones like Evola’s wrong year of birth and the incorrect names of two significant publishing companies).

At the beginning of his electronic letter we found a typical evasion. He must have been criticized by several people for his false statements concerning the “origin” of the spiritual current (and also for considering people who do not even regard themselves as “traditionalists” as belonging to the current), so he turned to Aristotle’s theory regarding the four causes.²² Aristotle differentiated four kinds of causes as the explanatory principle of beings: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause and final cause. According to Sedgwick’s new point of view the material, formal and final causes of “traditionalism” may be different from what he wrote in his book, but it is the study of the efficient cause (and partly the material causes) that is the task of historical science and, as he is a historian, his task too. Yes, but in the history of an intellectual phenomenon, the nature of the efficient causes are different from those of a historical phenomenon. As stated above, in the case of a history of ideas the efficient causes—to mention only these—are the works: books which, carrying ideas, had the greatest effect—and which the writer in this case is almost unfamiliar with.

Mr Sedgwick continues his letter saying that “Some of the difference may also result from different readings of what I wrote. Once it is assumed that I have some sort of malevolent intention, it seems, perfectly unproblematic statements are taken as attacks. To give the most obvious example from your review, it never occurred to me that anyone might see my statement that Guenon broke his fast at the end of the day in Ramadan with a cigarette and a coffee as any sort of a criticism—I simply mentioned it to illustrate how he retained some French habits. And why not? What is wrong with retaining a French habit?” We are happy to believe that the author *wanted* to write this in his book, but why then did he not write it?

Shortly after these sentences he writes the following: “I was never refused admittance to any initiatic order, and I am not any sort of a spy—the ‘elite commando group’ I once lectured consisted of young conscripts who were learning Arabic. They would have been most flattered that anybody thought of them as elite!” This explanation is rather strange, since our critique makes it perfectly

²⁰ Matthew 12:36 (The Gideons International, Tennessee).

²¹ See, <http://www.religioperennis.org/documents/Fitzgerald/Sedgwick.pdf> (2006. 05. 24.)

²² <http://www.aucegypt.edu/faculty/sedgwick/trad/book/aristotle.html> (2006. 05. 24.)

clear that this was not our own opinion, but the assumption of some Hungarians, which we mentioned because it well illustrates the questionable nature of the book. Why did the author excuse himself to *us* regarding this?

Finally, we were quite astonished when Mr Sedgwick—as if he had not read our critique—came forward with the following: “But anyhow, my purpose in writing to you is not actually to object to your critique, but rather to ask you for information. (...) Might you be so kind as to tell me which 13 [pieces of information] are false, and to correct me/them? I will then be able to post corrections on my ‘errata’ page (thanking you by name if you so wish, or leaving your name out of things if you prefer), and the corrections will also benefit a forthcoming Russian translation of the book.”

What shall we say about all this?

We had at least three reasons not to answer Mr Sedgwick’s letter:

1. We consider him to be neither an authority of the subject, nor one who is informed on it.
2. *Against the Modern World* cannot be the standard work of the subject, because so many corrections should be carried out that it would be easier to rewrite it.
3. Both in his letters and in his books, the writer shows characteristics, because of which we find it better to keep away from him. He intentionally does not mention Fitzgerald’s and Poindexter’s critiques among the reviews of his books on his web page, and, as we have noticed, it is staggering how far he goes to make it successful—while what he is willing to do is merely correct (some) factual mistakes.

Translated from Hungarian by Andrea Gál and Tamás Bencze (Addenda)