

**Review of Paul Bishop. *Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life. A Vitalist Toolkit.*  
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He who seeks shall find, but only after he has surrendered his being to  
the guidance of the gods.  
*L. Klages* (RR, p. 253)

**H**ermann Hesse felt so ‘deeply moved’ by the psychological profundity of Klages’s *Of Cosmogonic Eros (Vom kosmologischen Eros)* that he claimed that in that work ‘something almost inexpressible has found the right words’ (Schröder 1972:78). Oswald Spengler, the German philosopher mostly known for *The Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abendlandes)*, pointed out that ‘in the field of scientific psychology, Klages towers over all of his contemporaries, including even the academic world’s most renowned authorities’ (Spengler 1963:605). Alfred Kubin considered Klages nothing less than ‘a scientist of the highest rank’ and ‘the most important psychologist of our time’ (Schröder 1972:82). Karl Jaspers even compared Klages’s work to C. G. Jung’s, only to affirm the superiority of the former: ‘Jung [...] lacks the impressive vividness of Klages and his work has nothing like the same weight. He is the deft master of all the means of interpretation but the inspiration is missing. Klages has inspiration. [...] As the reader emerges from many of Klages’s pages, he is struck by a winged quality which is lacking from the work of Jung’ (Jaspers 1963:334). The question that inevitably follows from this is: how can it be possible, that a figure of such weight for his contemporaries has ended up entirely forgotten, or at best, glossed over in our time? Paul Bishop’s latest book (2018) attempts to fill this gap by giving us the very first comprehensive introduction to Klages’s work in English, thus beginning to tackle what years ago Richard Sheppard told the author himself in Oxford, at the time of his research on Jung and Nietzsche: ‘no one realises how important Klages really is’ (xxvi).

Ludwig Klages (1872-1956) was indeed an exceptional figure. In

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the bohemian quarter of Munich, *Schwabing*, he became involved with the George-Kreis, centred around the activities of the Symbolist poet Stefan George, and the Munich Cosmic Circle, based on the visionary ideas of Alfred Schuler. He mastered the study of hand-writing analysis (graphology), from which he developed a science of 'expression' (*Ausdruckswissenschaft*, 53) leading to an in-depth psychology of 'character' (*Charakterkunde*, 57) or 'characterology'. Akin to Jung's *Psychological Types* (*Psychologische Typen*, 1921), he built up an entire typological system, based on the recognition of the driving forces of 'self-assertion' and 'self-devotion' (60-61) as the two fundamental attitudes of man towards life, also identified as the masculine '*spirit*' (der '*Geist*') and the feminine '*soul*' (die '*Seele*'). Klages's entire philosophical system largely inclined to the latter, and could be characterised by its capacity for enthusiasm and its ability to unleash the vital forces—by a Nietzschean disposition to 'say yes' to life (*Ja-Sagen*) beyond the narrowness of rationality and egocentric purposes. On this basis, Klages, a forerunner of modern ecology among other things, developed a strikingly profound *Lebensphilosophie*, a vitalistic project aiming to restore the force of nature and life to the heart of Western philosophy.

Paul Bishop lists six main reasons why an outsider like Klages may have disappeared from the European intellectual scene after the Second World War. Among them, he 'was never a big player within the academy', he 'had never been a "public intellectual" in the conventional sense', his works were scarcely available in the bookshops (neither are they today), and his philosophical discourse was 'simply too difficult' to engage lay readers (38-39). In addition to that, two other important aspects should be taken into account. That the name of Klages has been wrongly and superficially, as once and for all demonstrated by Bishop, associated with National Socialist ideology (34-35). And that, quite simply, Klages's work has been hardly available in English at all! This is, in fact, we believe, an outstanding merit of Bishop's book: that it provides the reader with original translations of many passages (which were previously only available in German) and of key philosophical terms from Klages's works. Given the exceptional complexity and richness of Klages's use of German, the importance of this contribution cannot be emphasised enough.

As the title suggests, Bishop regards his book as a 'toolkit', nay, a 'vitalist toolkit'. He explains this in two senses, as follows: 'first, because it provides us with the conceptual tools required to understand Ludwig Klages's *Lebensphilosophie* or philosophy of life; and second, because those concepts in turn can be used to construct a life based on vitalist principles.' (xx). Following this ambitious plan, the book is divided into

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three parts. Chapter 1, 'Life', offers a meticulous overview of Klages's life and intellectual roots, based on an impressive historical research concerning the events, figures, achievements, and failures that took place in his career. Bishop gives a prominent place to the philosopher's highly ambivalent reception of Nietzsche, in which a profound sense of affinity comes to terms with the recognition of the 'devastating self-contradiction' that 'the same thinker who, like no-one else, reveals the crimes perpetrated against life by the will-to-power, should try to understand life itself as precisely this will-to-power' (22). Interestingly, Bishop suggests that Klages, like Nietzsche, 'understood all too well the power of the daimon: but whereas he [...] had been able to come to terms with his daimons, Nietzsche for his part, had struggled—and ultimately succumbed' (28). Chapter 2, 'Works and Key Ideas', consists of nine 'conceptual tools' corresponding to nine of the most important Klagesian ideas, namely the 'science of "expression"', the 'study of "character"', the 'theory of the will', the 'genesis of consciousness', the 'doctrine of "the reality of images"', the 'opposition of "spirit" and "soul"', '*Schablonisierung*'—'the problem in the modern world of "becoming stereotyped"' (94)—, 'images' as 'elementary souls', and 'specific happiness'. Each 'Conceptual tool' is carefully introduced and scrutinised by Bishop, guiding the reader via an exhaustive, yet somewhat contrived, attempt at covering the whole of Klages's thought. Finally, Chapter 3, 'For Advanced Readers — Selections from Ludwig Klages', takes us even more deeply into the breadth of Klages's philosophy, by presenting a further selection of passages from his works, originally chosen by Hans Kern, expanded by Hans Kasdorff, and published as *Of the Meaning of Life (Vom Sinn des Lebens)*, (1940; 1943; 1982). This section lets Klages's exuberant voice speak more plainly than the previous ones, allowing the reader to directly enjoy the vibrant, Dionysian language which characterises his 'cosmogonic reflections'. The book's narrative is beautifully accompanied by rare pictures of Klages collected by the author from the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv*, in Marbach am Neckar.

All in all, Bishop's monograph makes for compelling reading for all those who are interested to know better the life and vitalist principles of this very unconventional German thinker. In this respect, the reader finds in the referred toolkit-like structure of the book an optimal companion, strongly bringing out the qualities of exhaustiveness, ease of consultation, and clarity of exposition. Nevertheless, Bishop's book presents not only the strength of a 'toolkit', but also, arguably, its contraindication. Namely, the risk of losing much of the spontaneous beauty of Klages's writing and originality of mind, which is, first of all, deeply ensconced in his expressive power.

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He is above all a rhythmical proser of Dionysus's party, an inspired poet-philosopher constantly in search of the word in harmony with the erotic movement of nature, categories at best expressed in aphoristic, radiant writing. We are afraid that this is something which a 'toolkit' and, more generally, a scholarly work, can hardly contain, without running the risk that vitalism will take revenge on the very rational attempts at systematising what vitalism first defends. As Bishop himself quotes from Goethe at the very beginning of his book, 'the point of life' is not a philosophical statement. It is *just life*. It is very hard for us rational jugglers, therefore, not to recognise ourselves in what Bishop correctly acknowledges towards the end of his work: 'the difficulty we have in understanding Klages's argumentation might even be seen to confirm his thesis: we are so saturated with Geist that we can no longer hear what the Seele is telling us' (81).

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