palgrave pivot

Robert Eisler and the Magic of the Combinatory Mind

The Forgotten Life of a 20th-Century Austrian Polymath

Brian Collins

palgrave macmillan

Robert Eisler and the Magic of the Combinatory Mind

Brian Collins

Robert Eisler and the Magic of the Combinatory Mind

The Forgotten Life of a 20th-Century Austrian Polymath

palgrave
macmillan

Brian Collins
Ohio University
Athens, OH, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-61228-3 ISBN 978-3-030-61229-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61229-0

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For all those scholars
whose books have been moved to the library's off-site storage,
whose ideas have been relegated to footnotes,
and whose stories have been forgotten.

Preface

Twelve years ago, I was poking around in a bookstore in Ann Arbor, Michigan when my eyes were drawn to a paperback book with a rather crude drawing on the cover. The drawing depicted a face that was blandly human on one side, while the other side was that of a wolf, mouth open to reveal his cruelly sharp teeth. I turned it over and saw that it was given the triple subject classification "psychology/occult/anthropology." This curious book was the 1978 paperback edition of *Man into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism, and Lycanthropy* by Robert Eisler. At the time, I was dating an anthropology graduate student at Michigan who was enrolled in a course on "non-canonical" scholarship, in which students were required to focus on the work of an outdated, discounted, or otherwise marginal anthropologist. The idea of non-canonical scholarship fascinated me (as it still does) and I had it my mind when I purchased the book for $8.00. And so began my long detour onto the dimly lit and overgrown path that leads to this book.

Following my initial purchase and perusal of *Man into Wolf* in 2008, I began to seek out other books written by Eisler. I wanted to read everything that others had written about him as well, but soon discovered that most of the available biographical material could be traced back to a handful of writings by Eisler's sometimes-friend, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem. By far the most commonly quoted sources about Eisler are Scholem's autobiographical books and essays, which usually portray him as something of an oddball, if not a crank. So, in order to balance out the condescension in Scholem's accounts, I sought out

archives that held Eisler's own correspondence and papers at Oxford and the Warburg Institute.

Having done some research on *Man into Wolf* and its author, I wanted to present it to my fellow historians of religion. To that end (and to the bemusement of my colleagues) I put together a wild card panel on "non-canonical scholarship" and gave a paper at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Atlanta in 2010, a few months after I got my PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School. The paper, titled "Unmasking the Sovereign Sadist: Robert Eisler's *Man into Wolf*," was full of errors and misunderstandings, and so it is fortunate that no one had any idea what I was talking anyway. I was, however, encouraged by the size of the crowd we managed to get on a Monday when a good number of attendees have to catch their flights home. They were almost certainly there for Jeffrey J. Kripal's paper on Charles Fort and Paul C. Johnson's paper on Michel Leiris rather than my paper on Eisler, but the fact that other scholars of religion had an interest in the work of disciplinary outsiders inspired me to keep looking into Eisler and his work with an eye toward eventually publishing something.

In the years that followed (years in which I was in search of an academic position of any kind), I wanted to produce something that called attention to Eisler's overlooked importance in the history of the religious studies. But I had no idea where to publish, whether anyone would be interested, or even if this was an advisable course of action, given that I was looking for a job teaching Hinduism and Buddhism rather than whatever subfield this project might fit into—if any such subfield even existed.

In November of 2011, I met with Natalie Dohrmann at the AAR annual meeting in San Francisco so that we could catch up. Natalie had taught me the Hebrew Bible and Judaism at North Carolina State University when she was a newly minted PhD in the late 1990s. Over the course of our conversation, she asked me "what was keeping me up at night." I took this to be her way of asking what scholarly problems were occupying my mind. My dissertation on the mythology of Paraśurāma was finished and I was working on a different book project on mimetic theory and Hindu myth, but I still had Eisler on my mind, as I explained to her. She was editing the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (JQR) and she invited me to submit a note for the journal if I ever got around to writing one.

Two years after my meeting with Natalie, I finally landed an academic position as the Drs. Ram and Sushila Gawande Chair in Indian Religion and Philosophy at Ohio University. The next several years were occupied

with the new job, so my research on Eisler took a back seat. But the chair came endowed with a research budget, which allowed for travel. And in June of 2015, I flew to rural Maharashtra in central India to explore the possibility of setting up a study abroad program at the Gopikabai Sitaram Gawande College in the small trading town of Umarkhed. On my flight out, I scheduled a four-day stop in London, where I could finally visit the Warburg Institute and examine the boxes of papers and correspondence that Eisler's widow had donated after his death. I would not feel so strange about indulging my curiosity about Eisler if I was able to do it in the course of traveling to India, where my "official" research and curricular development projects were focused.

The wealth of material at the Warburg convinced me to make a return trip the next summer, again on my way to India. The five days I spent reading through the papers in May 2016 deepened and expanded my understanding of Eisler and also renewed my interest in writing something about him. I finally finished the "note" I was working on for JQR and submitted it to Natalie. She informed me that it was much too long for a note, which could be published at the editor's invitation, and would have to be submitted to peer reviewers for publication as an article.

The external reviewers were, of course, scholars in Jewish Studies, the field into which I had wandered aimlessly. And though they gave me some great feedback, they ultimately recommended not to publish it. Consequently, I edited it down to the appropriate length for a note (which I had only ever been asked to submit anyway) and limited the subject matter to Eisler's public debates about the Slavonic Josephus with the American scholar of post-Biblical literature Solomon Zeitlin (debates which, appropriately, had originally played out in the pages of the JQR in the 1930s) and his psychoanalysis of Robert Whitehead around the same time. It was published in the JQR in 2017 as "By Post or by Ghost: Ruminations on Visions and Epistolary Archives."

In the spring of 2017, I was corresponding with the Milan-based author and publisher Roberto Calasso. I had discovered, while perusing the bookshelf at my mentor Wendy Doniger's house in Truro several years before, Calasso's one-of-a-kind untitled masterwork on the foundations of human civilization (nine volumes as of this writing: *The Ruin of Kasch*, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, *Ka*, *K.*, *Tiepolo Pink*, *La Folie Baudelaire*, *Ardor*, *The Celestial Hunter*, and *The Unnamable Present*). I had met Roberto in person in the fall of 2014 in Palo Alto and we sent emails back and forth for a few years, mostly on the subjects of René

Girard and Hindu mythology, which he knows quite well (having taught himself Sanskrit).

On April 6, 2017, I wrote Roberto an email updating him on what I had been working on, including the JQR note, which I had just finished. Four days later, Roberto wrote me back. He had been happily shocked to see the name "Robert Eisler" in my email, he explained to me, because he had been interested in Eisler's work for years and had made his own inquiries about Eisler's papers at the Warburg. In a subsequent email, he told me that his publishing house, Adelphi, had done an Italian translation of *Man into Wolf*, and they were only waiting for him to get around to writing an afterword to publish it. He offered me the opportunity to write the afterword myself, which would then be translated into Italian and published with *Uomo diventa lupo.*

I happily accepted and wrote a 23,000-word biographical essay on Eisler in the summer and fall of 2018, during which time I also learned that *another* Italian translation of *Man into Wolf* had already been published by Medusa in 2011 as *Uomo Lupo.* The translation was in many ways an improvement on the 1978 American edition. It contained several dozen images, a bibliography of Eisler's published works, and two new introductory essays. When I mentioned this fact to Roberto, he was unconcerned by it. *Uomo diventa lupo* was published in May 2019 with my 68-page afterword, now titled "*Un pezzo troppo quadrato: la vita e l'opera di Robert Eisler.*" I had finally come out with a major piece on Eisler, but it had been published in a language I could not read.

One month before the publication of the Italian translation, I received a grant from my university to pay for a student assistant to help me produce a podcast about Robert Eisler over the summer break. This was an idea I had conceived of some months before after listening to a professionally produced podcast called "S-Town," which is about a small-town eccentric whose peculiar obsessions included clocks, astrolabes, hedge mazes, exotic flowers, and "fire-gilding." I thought that if this podcast could make me care about the esoteric interests of this man with whom I had no connection by making them part of a compelling story, then I could do something similar with Eisler.

The problem with telling Eisler's story is, and always has been, that his life is inextricable from his work in economics, art history, religion, philology, and philosophy. Writing a proper intellectual biography would require more background research than it would be possible for me to do. But, I reasoned, if I could do it collaboratively, and bring in experts in the

various fields in which Eisler worked so that they could contextualize and evaluate his ideas for me, it might be possible. A podcast would allow me to facilitate this collaboration with experts in the form of audio interviews. And in the place of the block quotes from and about Eisler that I would use in a book, I decided to employ voice actors to read the quotes in character.

On March 30, 2019, I took the idea to an informal salon called "Iterator" in which friends and colleagues presented creative or scholarly projects in the early stages of development for feedback. At the salon, hosted in my living room on this occasion, I explained to the audience who Eisler was and how the podcast would work. I even had a few audience members read some excerpts out loud to demonstrate what role the voice actors would play in making the podcast something like a Ken Burns-style audio documentary, rather than a lecture recorded with an iPhone (which is what academic podcasts often sound like). What I really wanted to know was whether anyone would be likely to listen to something like what I was describing. The feedback was positive and I got some good advice from friends in the artistic community so I decided to go ahead with the project.

It will surprise no one that podcasting turned out to be much harder than I had anticipated. Recording my voiceovers was arduous, the voice acting sessions were difficult to schedule, editing was very time-consuming, and a surprisingly high number of scholars were unwilling to participate as guests. When I explained that I was doing a podcast about Robert Eisler, who wrote on art history, and that I wanted to talk to them about art history, they would tell me that they knew nothing about Robert Eisler. That was no problem, I would reply. *I* know about Robert Eisler; I want to talk to *you* about art history. To this, they would reply again that they knew nothing about Robert Eisler. And it went on like that. Adding to these unanticipated complications were my teaching commitments, my new duties as chair of my department, and the two other book projects on Hinduism that I was trying to bring to completion. Ultimately, I only got two of an anticipated ten episodes completed over the summer.

But in the fall, I received another grant from the Ohio University Humanities Research Fund to complete the project. This allowed me to hire a new assistant and some new voice actors, and finally get the job done in June of 2020. I had some vague idea that eventually the right person, in publishing or at the AAR, would hear about my project through the grapevine and approach me with an offer to distribute it. This was an

unreasonable expectation, and more so in light of the fact that the AAR had already denied my requests for funding twice. Rather than wait to be approached, my assistant suggested I contact the New Books Network (NBN), which I already knew from its "New Books in Hinduism" series.

I got in touch with Marshall Poe at NBN and sent him the pilot episode of the podcast. Marshall liked it and decided to go ahead and release "A Very Square Peg: A Podcast Series About Polymath Robert Eisler" on NBN, even though it did not really fit their format. The episodes began coming out weekly on June 9, about three months into the COVID-19 pandemic. As of this writing, we are three episodes in. And though I am very proud of the podcast and have gotten some enthusiastic responses, it became clear early on that a podcast could not replace a book. But I did not even have a book; I had an afterword that Roberto and Adelphi had told me was mine to do with as I wished a year after its Italian publication.

In November of 2019, I took my copy of *Man into Wolf* with me to the AAR's annual meeting in San Diego, where I met with every possible publisher I could think of and pitched the idea of a new edition of *Man into Wolf* with the original English version of my afterword and maybe with the wonderful images included in the 2011 Medusa translation as well. Absolutely no one was interested in obtaining permissions for two dozen images. But beyond that, there were several other problems with my proposal. First, the book was already widely available online as a PDF and as a print-to-order book. Second, the copyright was an open question that no publisher wanted to have to answer. Third, *Man into Wolf* did not fit into anyone's catalogue. It was Phil Getz at Palgrave who was intrigued enough to tell me that if I could expand the essay a bit, it might work for the Palgrave Pivot series. Three manuscript reviewers agreed and here we are.

This is not the book that could have been written about Eisler—the much larger book written by a polyglot and polymath possessing mastery of the many disciplines in which Eisler worked. That book may yet come, but this is the book I was able to write. It is the book I have long known that I would write, without quite knowing how. May it serve as a contribution to the history of the history of religions, with its exclusions and arbitrary boundaries, its winners and losers, and all its glorious unlikelihoods (of which this book is one).

Athens, OH, USA — Brian Collins
July 2020

Acknowledgments

My "Eisler Project," as I have designated it in the hold-all folder on my computer desktop, has taken many forms over the course of its existence. And each of those forms was made possible with the help of various friends and colleagues. From the panel on "non-canonical scholarship" at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2010, thanks are due to my co-panelists Jason Bivins, Paul C. Johnson, Jeffrey J. Kripal, Hugh Urban, and Alexander Van Der Haven. For their assistance during my two research trips to the Warburg Institute, I am grateful to Eckart Marchand and Claudia Wedepohl. Natalie Dohrmann was the reason my note on the Eisler–Zeitlin controversy was published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, the same journal in whose pages that controversy had originally played out in the 1930s. I also received valuable feedback from some of that piece's anonymous readers. The person most directly responsible for the essay that is the basis of this book is Roberto Calasso, who originally solicited me to write an afterword for his long-planned Italian translation of *Man into Wolf* and guided me through several rounds of revisions with his considerable skills as an editor. When I was contemplating turning the project into a podcast, I had a very useful feedback session with friends and colleagues David Colagiovanni, Matt DeTar, Melissa Haviland, Natasha Madoff, Kate Raney, and Lucy Schwallie at the informal "Iterator" salon conceived and hosted by Jeremy Bessoff. My work on the podcast was made possible by the assistance of Bryan Baur, Julie Ciotola, Caleb Crawford, Logan Crum, Brian Evans, Chloe Grogean, Logan Marshall, Marshall Poe, Chiara Ridpath, Tina Saraceno, Alyssa Skikus, Kristen Tobey, and March Washelesky, with partial funding from the Ohio

University Honors Tutorial College and the Ohio University Humanities Research Fund. I am also grateful to the women and men who were brave enough to be guests on (or at least be interviewed for) an experimental academic podcast of nebulous description: Steven Beller, Nick Campion, Willem De Blécourt, Marcello De Martino, Roberto Duncan, Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, Amir Engel, Michael Gubser, Marsha Hewitt, Tom Hurka, Miles Kimball, Vladimir Marchenkov, Dorothea McEwan, Kristy Montee, Myrna Pérez Sheldon, Peter Vronsky, and Steven Wasserstrom. At various periods over the course of my research, I have received assistance from the Bodleian Libraries, the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, the Griffith Institute at the University of Oxford, the National Library of Israel, the Warburg Institute, and members of the extended Von Pausinger and Reitzes families (Ruth Armstrong, Peter Regen, Sue Regen, David Stork, and especially Richard Regen). This book in its current form owes its existence to Phil Getz, who took a risk on an unlikely project. Over the years, I have received encouragement to keep going down what often felt like a blind alley from my wife Jennifer Collins, along with Jeremy Biles, David Dawson, and H. C. Greisman. But none of the above people or institutions is responsible for any mistakes I have made in this book; those are mine alone. As Robert Eisler once told an exasperated editor, "I have the courage to err."

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: *Man into Wolf*

Abstract This chapter introduces the polymathic scholar of religion, economics, philosophy, art history, and philology Robert Eisler through his last book, *Man into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism and Lycanthropy*, in which he theorizes that to survive the Ice Age, proto-humans abandoned the vegetarian and polyamorous life of social primates and began to imitate the hierarchical structures and hunting practices of the wolf pack, and that human aggression stems from incorporation of the wolfish instinct for cruelty in the collective unconscious. Following Eisler's journey from being "one of the most prodigiously learned men of our time" to being dismissed as a "somewhat reckless amateur," Collins presents Eisler's biography as a way to explore the changing nature of intellectual life in Europe in the twentieth century.

Keywords Werewolves • Lycanthropy • Sadism • Masochism • Intellectual History

For those readers who are unacquainted with Robert Eisler's *Man into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism and Lycanthropy*, I will begin by describing its unusual format. In the 1978 edition (which is also the American edition), the main text is preceded by an introduction written almost 30 years after the book's original publication by someone named Donald D. Lathrop MD, a private practitioner in

B. Collins, *Robert Eisler and the Magic of the Combinatory Mind*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61229-0_1