[*JSRNC* 11.3 (2017) 379-383] JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
http://doi.org.10.1558/jsrnc.34602 JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Jason Reza Jorjani, *Prometheus and Atlas* (London: Arktos, 2016), xlv + 416 pp., $36.50 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-910524-61-9.[1]

Jason Reza Jorjani's *Prometheus and Atlas* takes its title in imitation of Nietzsche's division of tragedy into the Apollonian and Dionysian in *Birth of Tragedy* (1909 [1872]); however, while Nietzsche used his mythic references to link art to the divine, Jorjani has selected his Titanic title for a darker purpose: to link the human condition to those immortals victimized by the gods of Olympus. In myth, Prometheus is vivisected for giving fire to humankind, while Atlas must hold the heavens for rebelling against the Olympians. Jorjani wishes humankind to emulate the Titans' stand against oppressive deities, but it is emblematic of the problematic nature of his scholarship that he conflates the Titan Atlas with the same-named son of Poseidon who was king of Atlantis (Plato, *Criti.* 114a), and then proceeds to build his framework atop that faulty identity, imagining the conflated Atlas as a 'world-colonizing' hero.

The book, consequently, operates on two levels. The first is a relatively straightforward, if unconvincing, examination of mostly Germanic philosophical views on the antagonism between the natural and the paranormal and supernatural, which Jorjani—a mostly uncritical believer in both—collectively terms the 'spectral'. The second is a polemical argument in which the author asserts that certain human groups, explicitly at points named 'Aryans', are oppressed by the Abrahamic (read: Semitic) God and by godless materialist science. So only by embracing the romantic irrational can the oppressed return to a mythical exalted status as, literally, 'supermen'.

Even this description, though, gives too much coherence to the resulting argument. This is a book where the author concludes that the Abrahamic God is actually a collection of 'mercurial beings', possibly space aliens, who are engaged in 'psychological warfare' and 'systematic deception' against humanity. This is a book that uses ghosts, psi, and UFOs as evidence against the scientific method, and a book that at one point approvingly cites as a proven scientific fact former CIA agent Cleve Backster's claim that plants possess psychic mind-reading powers (p. 161). Jorjani dedicates the book

1. Evaluating books from outside traditional academic publishing may seem beyond the concern of scholarship, but critiquing such works is vital for two reasons. First, books like the one under consideration here ask their readers to approach them as though they were works of serious scholarship, and scholars should take such claims seriously. Second, such books seek to influence the public understanding of scholarship, often for polemical ends, and deserve to be understood as artifacts of the movements they represent.

to parapsychologist Jeffrey Mishlove and argues that the telekinetic powers Mishlove investigated could be harnessed in warfare.

It is also a book that cannot entirely subsume its politics beneath the façade of academic neutrality inherited from the book's origins in the author's doctoral dissertation in philosophy. Jorjani has embraced the label of 'alt-right' and in January 2017 entered into an intellectual partnership with white nationalist leader Richard Spencer (Gray 2017). Even the most casual reader will not fail to note the overwhelmingly Germanic cast to the book. The author has taken pains to privilege a particular set of philosophers—such as Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche, and above all Heidegger—who were influences on National Socialism and its philosophers, or who were themselves Nazis (enthusiastically, reluctantly, or somewhere in between) or apologists for fascism. Jorjani minimizes or overlooks other relevant philosophers in the same field. While no one choice is itself indefensible—and indeed these thinkers' works are essential—the consistency of these choices calls attention to them. To give but one example, in discussing 'the sublime and the beautiful', Jorjani privileges the views of Schelling and the 'total art' of Wagner and Nietzsche without mentioning the most famous philosophical treatise on the subject by Irish conservative Edmund Burke (1806). It cannot escape notice that the author places just about dead center in the volume Heidegger's praise for National Socialism, and amplifies it, making Nazism into history's 'most profound reckoning' between humanity and technology, a claim Jorjani makes without criticism or commentary (p. 203).

Lapses in scholarship undercut the argument throughout the text. At one point, Jorjani misleadingly truncates a quotation from F.W.J. Schelling in order to suggest that he supported fanciful claims about Egyptian prehistory (namely, that some pharaonic buildings predate Egypt by thousands of years). Three temples that Jorjani mistakenly believes Schelling possibly used as inspiration were, in fact, not discovered or excavated until many decades after Schelling's works were published (Murray 1904; Zivie-Coche 2002: 19, 38).

Jorjani's surface argument is similarly unconvincing, and not just because it emerges from incomplete research and basic factual errors. Jorjani has gathered philosophical and pseudoscientific ideas in three general areas: (a) support for the paranormal and the occult, (b) the ability of art to transcend the limits of natural law, and (c) criticism of methodological naturalism and modern science. These three disparate subjects he believes can be woven together to delegitimize Abrahamic monotheism and materialist science, with the aim of facilitating the Nietzschean *Übermensch* to embrace a nationalist, romantic irrationalism leading to the full expression of the Will to Power. To that end, Jorjani employs the binary opposition of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (via secondary sources) to suggest that the spectral serves as a destabilizing influence on culture and is therefore suppressed out of a 'holy dread of the numinous', a claim he ascribes generally to 'academics' with the implication that it is an anthropological certainty (p. 2). The phrasing, unacknowledged by Jorjani, is from psychologist Carl Jung (1969 [1958]: 150), writing of Abrahamic monotheism, and not widely used elsewhere. Jorjani chooses to elide the implications of his own argument. He does not, for example, recognize that 'natural/supernatural' (or 'material/spectral') is as valid a binary opposite as any other, and therefore the spectral is not inherently *by definition* a destabilizing 'third' category beyond the oppositional system.

His claims for Greek mythology are equally misleading. Jorjani wishes us to follow Paul Feyerabend (once a Nazi army officer before developing an anti-science philosophy), in seeing the Olympian pantheon of the Classical period as 'tyrannically unified', in order to construct an analogy with the Abrahamic God, but this is mistaken. From the Archaic to Late Antiquity, unity was never consistently applied. Some ancient philosophers, such as Cleanthes in his Hymn to Zeus, and the Neoplatonists, did preach the unity of the gods under Zeus, but Jorjani generalizes from secondary references without recourse to primary sources and therefore overstates Greek monotheistic tendencies. It is from the same reliance on secondary sources that Jorjani speculates at length on the cultural motives that spawned the myth of the Olympians overthrowing the Titans, while ignoring or remaining ignorant of research into the near-certain influence of the Hittite myth of the succession of the gods on Hesiod's *Theogony*. The astonishing similarity has been known since Güterbock's seminal publications (1946, 1948), but not to Jorjani. The author does not explain why we should privilege Classical, Hellenistic, or modern views of the symbolic power of myth over the literary and archaeological evidence for the stories' origins if we are searching for an underlying universal truth. It is evident that Jorjani views literature as embodying a certain *zeitgeist* through which one might trace the spirit of the age. But he offers no method for connecting these changeable views to universal truths. Instead, his overall purpose seems to be to demonstrate through literary analysis the superiority of Western civilization.

This Western civilization is not confined strictly to Europe, however. Jorjani alleges that it is one branch of an 'Aryan world order' that, through the Indo-European migrations, gave rise to European, Iranian, Indian, and eventually (via Buddhism) Eastern civilization. He asks whether returning to the 'Aryan world order' represented by a 'light-skinned, blue-eyed Aryan' Buddha would be the key to settling world conflicts and restoring the primitive, pre-technological, and spiritual peace of the ancient world (p. 313). Jorjani interpolates this into a discussion of the writings of Kitarō Nishida, a World War II-era Japanese philosopher who did not call for an Aryan global culture, or recognize one. The phrase 'Aryan world order' instead appears in the work of white nationalist William L. Pierce, as the name of a pro-Nazi Welsh organization, and in one of Hitler's early statements (Heiden 1944: 150; Hitler 1980: 698). Similar echoes of National Socialism color Jorjani's claim, following and preceding attacks on Abrahamic religion, that '*techne* is more fundamental than *theoria*' (p. 326), a slightly more scholarly phrasing of the old *Deutsche Physik*, which vaunted applied physics in Nazi Germany over 'Jewish' theoretical physics. It is therefore disturbing that Jorjani closes his tenth chapter by disparaging Chinese cultural traditions and praising Japan for 'moving beyond these "Asian" values', making the Japanese, in essence, honorary intellectual Aryans, an echo of Axis rhetoric.

That said, Jorjani does show a relatively strong understanding of the connections between various myth cycles describing primeval times. He correctly understands Plato's myth of Atlantis to follow a similar scheme to the Hebrew myth of the Nephilim and the pre-Flood world (cf. the last lines of the *Critias* to Genesis 6.1-17), a similarity that inspired the content and title of Ignatius Donnelly's classic work of pseudohistory, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882). However, rather than adopt the seemingly logical conclusion that both accounts reflect elements of the Near East Flood Myth, as most mainstream scholarship suggests, Jorjani employs a popular conspiracy theory involving the Book of Enoch (a non-canonical Jewish scripture). This conspiracy

involves efforts to suppress the activities of extraterrestrial beings to hybridize humanity, paralleling at times point for point (without acknowledgement) claims made by pseudohistorian Erich von Däniken (1971) (e.g. both give an account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a nuclear event, manifestations of God as various spacecraft, and the Ark of the Covenant as an electrical weapon), and culminating in assertions that Abrahamic religions 'betrayed' Classical culture, to which he would like to return. Like von Däniken, Jorjani asserts that the cruelties of Yahweh suggest that the being in question is not divine, but something else masquerading as a god. He adds that parts of the Qur'an are 'evocative of space travel' (p. 365).

He concludes the book with a *non-sequitur* by repeating 'ancient astronaut' conspiracy theories from computer scientist Jacques Vallée about the alleged connections between visions of angels and lights and UFOs, which again assumes that the framework of 'ufology' represents a valid and objective evaluation of ambiguous data. Many of the claims that Jorjani repeats uncritically have been effectively and convincingly challenged by skeptics, myself among them, due to Vallée's methodological shortcomings and his acceptance of false translations and hoaxes (see Colavito 2013, 2016). Jorjani assumes the validity of a conspiracy theory proposed by Vallée regarding UFO encounters, particularly his allegation that society is controlled by elites (human and alien) who manipulate perceptions of UFOs as a method of social control. This is despite Jorjani having attributed this same suppression to a Jungian unconscious 'holy dread of the numinous' earlier in the same text (p. 2). He suggests that 'another Constantine' will replace Jesus with an 'alien god'—by which he means a space alien (p. 377). To that end, he suggests that space aliens and other entities (especially Yahweh) are hostile powers of indeterminate origin that intend to manipulate humanity for unspecified nefarious purposes. He demands that Western civilization stand against these monsters lest they cause a 'collapse' of secular culture (p. 389).

Jorjani argues near the end of the book that belief is never entirely intangible but has specific consequences for the well-being of others. He means this as proof that ideology can overwhelm reality, but he is blind to the application of this claim to his own beliefs, which, while sometimes well-hidden, are rarely unclear. He never considers that the 'spectral' might be fictitious (or, for that matter, genuinely divine), and he seems to see in it a common enemy that can unite the planet behind his call, borrowed from Nietzsche, to remake the world under a 'spiritual aristocracy of post-human supermen' (p. 404). If we are to read his earlier references literally, these supermen must come from those who are born into or adopt 'Aryan' culture.

Ultimately, Jorjani seems to exemplify the impulse identified by German sociologist Max Weber (1963 [1922]), who said that our world had experienced a 'disenchantment' due to the retreat of the supernatural in the face of science. Jorjani wishes to reenchant the world by broadening science to include the 'spectral', but he declines to recognize Weber's insight into his own efforts. Weber's political liberalism might explain his absence here, despite his overwhelming relevance to Jorjani's thesis on the supernatural and the political in modern thought.

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