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# Edgar Zilsel: Philosopher, Historian, Sociologist

 Springer



**Vienna Circle  
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## Chapter 11

# Insufficient Recognition: Comparing Julian Hirsch's and Edgar Zilsel's Analyses of the Glorification of Personalities

Julia Barbara Köhne

**Abstract** This article focuses on two important theorists of critical genius research in the early twentieth century, Julian Hirsch and Edgar Zilsel. With *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* (1914) and *Die Geniereligion* (1918), they responded to the wide-spread glorification of exceptional personalities in European literary, biographical and academic culture, especially in the humanities. Both considered the negative socio-political effects, like anti-Semitic and racist tendencies, that the cult of personality and admiration of geniuses had on the scientific community and European societies, to be most alarming. They criticized the resulting devaluation and exclusion of certain 'inferior' groups in society, including Jews and people belonging to the so-called "masses," as well as the quasi-religious habitus displayed by the growing community of genius admirers, whose manners resembled religious rituals. Exploring similarities between Hirsch's and Zilsel's life journeys, their epistemic approaches and strategical rhetorical choices, the article points to the structural similarities of their argumentation in their monographs. While Walter Benjamin, among other thinkers, referred to Hirsch's innovative work on various occasions, posterity did not always honor him as a pioneer (except recent literary and memory studies). In contrast, Zilsel's work was generally rediscovered in the 1970s by Wolfgang Krohn, and *Die Geniereligion* was reprinted in 1990, shortly before the Institute Vienna Circle (*Institut Wiener Kreis*) was founded. In this book, Zilsel did not disclose his close reading and partial adoption of central arguments from *Die Genesis des Ruhmes*. In retrospect, Hirsch's work needs to be regarded as one of the main sources of the idea of criticizing the cult of personality around 1900, while

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I would like to thank Jason Crouthamel for generously supporting me in questions of grammar and idiomatics.

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are my translations from the German originals.

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Zilsel still earns full credit for further developing the system of criticizing the glorification of genius in the context of modern historical sociology of science.

**Keywords** European academic culture · History of the humanities · Modern historical sociology of science · Critical genius research · Cult of personality · Admiration of genius · Jewish history · Anti-Semitism

## 11.1 Introduction: Critical Geniology

In the first and the last year of the First World War, literary scholar Julian Hirsch (1883–1951) and philosopher Edgar Zilsel (1891–1944) published their monographs, *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* (The genesis of glory) in 1914 and *Die Geniereligion* (The religion of genius) in 1918, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Both criticized the wide-spread socio-cultural practice of admiring and worshiping mainly male European personalities, who in most cases were already deceased and, in the uncritical genius discourse, were labeled as “eminences,” “exceptional individuals,” “heroes of mind,” “intellectual leaders,” “revolutionizers of their age,” “superlatives of mankind,” “male heroes” or “geniuses.” This phenomenon of (blind) adoration across a temporal, spatial, cultural and disciplinary distance deeply disturbed and irritated these sensitive Jewish intellectuals who were living and teaching in Berlin and Vienna in the early twentieth century. Both feared that the superficial biographical veneration of widely known personalities that manifested itself in the cult of genius, along with the neglect of critical studies of the ‘great men’s’ actual work and achievements, would aggressively promote the urge for adoration (Hirsch 1914, 59: *Verehrungsbedürfnis, adoratische Triebe*), moreover, that glorifying another person would immobilize the admirers’ own intellectual capacities, powers and freedom to the point of deliberate self-incapacitation (cf. Zilsel 1990 [1918], 180 et seq.). In particular, Zilsel stated that the veneration of geniuses enabled one to participate formally in the rich experiences of extraordinary personalities, taking on the shape of an imaginary connection (or congeniality, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 105) established by the admirer, without having to produce any activity of one’s own. He criticized the genius figure from a socio-political, collectivist and humanitarian perspective, because implicitly this idea degraded all other people, consigning them to the broader “masses” (cf. Zilsel 1930, 60 et seq.). On a political level, the concepts of “eminence” and “genius,” in Hirsch’s and Zilsel’s eyes, had a profoundly negative impact on the democratic foundation of European societies, because they covered up or even caused inequalities, injustice, and structural and physical violence among human beings. According to both authors, the enthusiastic, quasi-religious

<sup>1</sup>Hirsch 1914 und Zilsel 1918.

admiration of rare personalities, which their contemporaries practiced with verve, reinforced contempt for “the masses” and “mediocre people,” and finally may even “erupt into inhumanity” (*in Unmenschlichkeit entladen*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 233).

This article sees itself as part of a non-affirmative geniology that emerged in the humanities around 1900 and still influences today’s critical research of excellence. The first goal is to provide background on the historiographical and discursive context of Hirsch’s and Zilsel’s reflections, whose work aimed at a similar critical trajectory, as both referred to concepts of the exceptional individual in a sociological perspective. I will point to selected texts in which genius admiration was practiced, and then introduce important philosophical and sociological countertexts, which were at odds with this trend. The latter can, at least in some respect, be seen as fore-runners or followers of Hirsch’s and Zilsel’s critique of the solemn cult of personality. This group includes writings by Walter Benjamin, Jacob Cahan, Theodor Geiger, Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum and Jakob Wassermann.

Second, the article provides a comparison of Hirsch’s and Zilsel’s monographs as two of the most nuanced, skeptical and critical responses to the elitist notion of genius and the habitus of genius adoration that were written in the first two decades of the twentieth century. With slightly differing tools and terms, their analyses described the sociological, empirical and cultural-historical aspects of the cult of personality, for which Zilsel coined the unique term *Geniereligion*. After having traced similarities and differences between Hirsch’s and Zilsel’s life paths, careers, their transdisciplinary approaches and scientific methods, I will elaborate on their distinct concepts of genius glorification, their favorite terminology and metaphors, as well as their view of the severe negative socio-political effects of the latter. In the literature on Zilsel, especially in the secondary literature on *Die Geniereligion*, it has not yet been acknowledged that its author extensively borrowed elements from Hirsch’s work (e.g. McMahon 2013, 189–199). To this end, this section points out the structural similarities in their argumentation.

Third, the article highlights the way in which Zilsel’s *Die Geniereligion* went beyond Hirsch’s reflections. By speaking about practices like pilgrimages and the apotheosis of genius, Hirsch did not explicitly declare the veneration of genius a culture of (pseudo)religion, but Zilsel did. The latter developed a sophisticated and nuanced criticism reflecting on rampant religious dogmatism, belief and sentiment,<sup>2</sup> including the notion of rarity, immortality, brotherhood in the hereafter and futurist productivity towards posterity. According to Zilsel, scholars who followed the religion of genius suffered from a lack of objectivity, precision and critical thinking, as well as empathy for the ‘other.’

Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was felt that the exploration of “genius,” as a project of knowledge production, was impossible to bring to closure, for the category was not bound by definite characteristics. The “genius” was never a discrete figure, or a one-dimensional object of inquiry. Rather, it evolved from the

<sup>2</sup>For tracing Zilsel’s references to earlier philosophical texts and for a deeper analysis of his notion of religion, see Bernadette Reisinger’s contribution to this volume.

formation of late modernity as a complex phenomenon of overlapping processes, such as the differentiation and profiling of academic disciplines, and new interdependencies between (pseudo)religion, culture, science, power and socio-politics. The present reevaluation of the work of two of the most skeptical anti-genius thinkers seeks to show how they succeeded in clarifying the intervention of the cult of the extraordinary personality or genius into the worlds of individual experiences and emotions in European societies.

## 11.2 Discursive Context

To contextualize the studies by Hirsch and Zilsel, I begin with a short overview of some discursive cornerstones that the cult of genius generated in this period (cf. Köhne 2016, 115–135). Embedding their work in the intellectual climate of Berlin's and Vienna's *fin de siècle*, also other critical thinkers must be named who described and criticized the “genius problem” (W. Lange-Eichbaum). But first the question needs to be addressed: what were these critical thinkers reacting to?

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, a new cult of genius emerged in European cultures. The extensive international discourse on the phenomenon of genius included authors like Thomas Carlyle, Havelock Ellis, Francis Galton, Arthur de Gobineau, Moreau de Tour and Cesare Lombroso, who enthusiastically glorified or pathologized genius (Schmidt 1988; Köhne 2014, 64, 371 et seq., 497 et seq.). For instance, Thomas Carlyle in his 1840/41 book, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (which appeared in German in 1853), worshipped international “great men” in the context of the historiographical-biographical genre.<sup>3</sup> In Carlyle's work, universal history was presented in the form of heroic biographies—heroes who would exude a kind of magic. This was based on the assumptions “that history or science were created by outstanding men, that is, they emanated from the autonomously acting, thinking or researching individuals, some of them of monumental size, and [...] that historiography] tended very much to set up genealogies of outstanding minds” (*Ahngalerien genialer Geister*, Szöllösi-Janze 2000, 18). According to this classic, self-referential model, science and art are products of outstanding, ingenious men. Great scientists would refer to great scientists, who consistently followed the ‘path to truth.’ Carlyle, like many others following him, created a self-referential system of genius acknowledgment, resulting in ongoing discursive (self)recreation. Thus, from an internal scientific perspective, genius figures served as mediators for profiling, identification and legitimation of academic scholars, who with their help tried to represent or secure certain scientific theses and methods. In addition, they also served as cultural and social, collective and national symbolic figures and bearers of hope, as stabilizers and fulfillers of longing. All complex and problematic material, socio-cultural and political factors were removed from this equation.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Carlyle 1852 [1841]. The underlying text of the lecture series dates from 1840.

In the course of the twentieth century, this way of thinking about the quasi-heroic individual intensified and it converged more and more with the cult of charismatic leadership, a phenomenon that also Max Weber described in his sociology of power (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft [Economy and Society]* 1921/22).<sup>4</sup> In *Die Geniereligion*, Zilsel turned against authors like Carlyle, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Ralph Waldo Emerson,<sup>5</sup> Herbert Eulenberg,<sup>6</sup> Richard Wagner and Otto Weininger, who supported this idea and advocated the culture of genius-mythologization (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 51, 83, 85, 88). In his 1903 book *Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)*, Weininger conceptually merged “the feminine” with “the Jewish”—and thereby the two political groups standing behind these theoretical concepts were harshly devalued. Both were placed at the lower end of the pyramid-based hierarchy of society that Weininger had conceived. As representatives of the whole “incredulous saeculum,” a lack of faith was artificially attributed to them. By contrast, this racist philosopher considered the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth an ideal individual, for he supposedly overcame “Judaism” in himself and rose to become a “founder of religion” (Köhne 2014, 298–360, 344 et seq.).

The German composer Richard Wagner was celebrated by Chamberlain and others as “the outstanding genius of the century” (Chamberlain <sup>25</sup>1940 [1898/99], 443). In *Die Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts (The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century)*, Chamberlain transformed the idea of single geniuses into the idea of a “brilliant,” “Aryan” German national body, which was supported by individual geniuses. Ideas concerning the promotion, breeding or selection of gifted children found expression particularly in Albert Reibmayr's *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte des Talentes und Genies* (The history of the development of talent and genius) (1908), Wilhelm Ostwald's *Große Männer* (Great men) (1909) und *Die Züchtung des Genies* (The breeding of genius) (1911),<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Flüge's *Rassenhygiene und Sexualethik* (Racial hygiene and sexual ethics) (1924), Ernst Kretschmer's *Geniale*

<sup>4</sup>Ní Dhúill 2011, 33; Weber 1980 [1921/2], the included texts were actually written between 1911 and 1913.

<sup>5</sup>Emerson 1989 [1850].

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Eulenberg 1910, XXI et seq. His frequently reedited book, *Schattenbilder*, refers to the so-called “Morning Celebrations” (*Morgenfeiern*) at the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf, which since 1905 successfully served as Sunday service replacements. Here, the audience sat under the pedestal of a great man, honouring the godhead that created him. The lively poetic sketches presented had a pathetic tone and were spiced up with anecdotes, fiction and elements of heroic narratives and genius myths. Eulenberg described the celebrations' motto: “Thou shalt have no other gods beside these.” Cf. Germanese 2000, 73 et seq.; Hirsch critically remarked that here the need to adore was mingled with deification of certain objects (*Vergottung, abgöttische Menschenverehrung!* Ludwig), as, back then, the celebrated artists served as saints and patrons for the masses (Hirsch 1914, 61–63).

In 1945/6, Ernst Cassirer described the transformation of hero worship into the adoration of selected races, according to Carlyle's *On Heroes* and Gobineau's notion of the “totalitarian race” (Cassirer 2015 [2002], 289 et seq.)

<sup>7</sup>Wulz, Monika. 2020. “Genie-Ökonomie zwischen nationalen Interessen und globalen Kontaktzonen. Begabtenförderung, Investitionsstrategien und Wissenschaftsorganisation bei Wilhelm Ostwald.” In Köhne 2020: *Exzellenz, Brillanz, Genies*, 205–226.

*Menschen* (People of genius) (1929) and Ottokar Matura's *Das Deutsche Genie* (The German genius) (1941). These ideas reinforced the fantasy of the intellectual potency of unborn children, which was intended to prevent the collapse of human society (Köhne 2014, 361–400).

Besides Hirsch and Zilsel, there were only a handful of authors, including Walter Benjamin, Jacob Cahan, Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum, Theodor Geiger and Jakob Wassermann, who criticized this trend of thought. They were skeptical about the idea of giving prominence to singular, outstanding individuals within the German collective, which in turn was lifted up and “genialized” by the very same gesture, combined with eugenic fantasies of breeding, racial purity and sexism. Each of these authors expressed their concerns by focusing on different aspects. Not coincidentally, several of them had Jewish backgrounds and were confronted with anti-Semitism on a daily basis, which might have increased their sensitivity to racist ideologies and their ability to problematize mainstream trends. As genius-critical thinkers, this group of authors represented a distinct minority, because it was much more common to idolize “geniuses” than to deconstruct the phenomenon of genius admiration, and critically evaluate the rhetorical and biographical narratives occurring in genius discourse. Indeed, the overall atmosphere of the time was thick with ‘genius-fever,’ which was fed by competition between multiple disciplines of knowledge.

At the time, hundreds of biographies on “geniuses,” and high-circulation science publications fueling the problem of “genius,” impressed themselves on large sections of European societies.<sup>8</sup> Most of these texts only dealt with surface issues—matters of biography and personality and *not* the geniuses’ achievements, artefacts or writings. And while they admired and idealized, mystified and pathologized—resulting in varied, and sometimes contradictory ascriptions to “geniuses”—the overall effect of this diverse body of writings was to enhance the aura and fame of the theoretically abstract genius-figure. Walter Benjamin briefly referred to this phenomenon in his 1923 “The Task of the Translator”: “The period of basically eternal survival [of works of art] in subsequent generations is addressed as glory” (Benjamin 1923, 11). A similar reflection was articulated by the Swiss Jacob Cahan in his 1909 dissertation, with the title *Zur Kritik des Geniebegriffs* (On the critique of the concept of genius). He wrote that the notion of genius “in all its glory and redemption” was the “comforting guiding star of time,” filling in the void left after the erosion of religion, and therefore needed to be criticized with regard to its historical-psychological aspects (Cahan 1911 [1909], 11 et seq., 28, 31). Cahan problematized that “genius,” in the form of the “personal cult of god” was associated with the metaphysical, the unconscious, the mysterious and the divine. The remarkable in an individual often was referred to in terms of a personified idea of god. Later the notion of “genius” was used to attribute value to a person’s mental qualities and extraordinary creative power (Cahan 1911 [1909], 9, 20, 27, 29). Already Cahan

<sup>8</sup> Key writings on genius research from that era, which enjoyed an extremely high circulation include, Weininger 1997 [1903]; Chamberlain <sup>25</sup>1940 [1898/99]; Kretschmer 1931 [1929].

said that “genius” had its own religious cult, its holy places, its priests and admirers (Cahan 1911 [1909], 38), a perception that would be taken up by Hirsch and Zilsel some years later.

Benjamin and Wassermann were among the few early voices of feminist perspective and gender critique in genius criticism. In his “Metaphysik der Jugend” (“The Metaphysics of Youth”) (1914) and “Sokrates” (1916), Benjamin stated that the formula of the male genius was based on its separation from the category of “the feminine.” Symptomatic of the conceptual and political exclusion of “the feminine,” in his view, was a rhetoric laden with reproductive and familial metaphors (Köhne 2019, 54, 229–236). Authors invoked “intellectual (in)fertility” (Kretschmer <sup>2</sup>1931 [1929], 111), “mental pregnancy,” “spiritual creation” and “spiritual children” while writing of men as “pregnant with knowledge” (Benjamin 2002 [1996], 53). The philosopher diagnosed these gendering metaphors as a sexualization and eroticization of the spiritual (*Vergeschlechtlichung des Geistigen*), which in turn would serve to guarantee the “asexuality of the spiritual” (*Geschlechtslosigkeit des Geistigen*, Benjamin 2002 [1996], 130). In his 1912 *Faustina*, Jakob Wassermann asked about the possibility of a female genius, and questioned contemporary ideas of divinization, spiritualization and transcendence, in the context of discourse on love and the cult of genius. Despite all longing for gender twisting, in the end of the novel, Faustina despairs of the male notion of genius (Köhne 2014, 265–297).

More than a decade later, Theodor Julius Geiger and Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum explored various political aspects of genius discourse. The sociologist Geiger, who specialized in social stratification and the function of the intelligentsia, analyzed the emphatic genius cult in his “Führer und Genie” (Leader and genius) (1926/27) as a response to the scientific objectivation of the world.<sup>9</sup> He stated that the public cherished personalities whose history and achievements were structured by popular myths and legends, not reason and science (cf. Nemeth 1997). In his eyes, genius concepts in the Weimar Republic were conducive to the pursuit of “self-incapacitation,” ceding power to political authorities and “genius leaders.” Shortly thereafter, in his *Genie, Irrsinn und Ruhm* (*Genius, Insanity and Fame*) (1928), the psychiatrist Lange-Eichbaum stated that the question of genius was a “matter of the heart” and “sacred” to certain people. The dispute about “genius” was a war of world-views, a war of religion, and such fights had always been fought with fanaticism (cf. Lange-Eichbaum and Kurth <sup>4</sup>1956, 24).

### 11.3 Comparing the Intellectuals Hirsch and Zilsel

In some key respects, Julian Hirsch's and Edgar Zilsel's life journeys show astonishing similarities, from their German-speaking, European provenance, and their identification as belonging to the white male gender, to their Jewish family

<sup>9</sup> Geiger 1926/27, 232–247.

background and their intellectual education, academic scholarship and professional orientation. Hirsch's life story started in 1883 in Jarotschin (Poznan).<sup>10</sup> He studied linguistics, Germanic and Romance languages, in Wroclaw and Berlin. In 1906, he passed the state examination for teaching at high schools. After having completed his doctorate in German philology in 1910, he did not pursue an academic career. Instead he worked as a secondary school teacher in the German metropole. Later, he married Johanna Lewy, who worked as a medical doctor at the Charité in Berlin. Zilsel, born in 1891, studied philosophy, mathematics and physics at the University in Vienna from 1910.<sup>11</sup> At the end of 1915, he earned his doctorate with a dissertation, titled *Ein philosophischer Versuch über das Gesetz der großen Zahlen und seine Verwandten* (A philosophical essay on the law of big numbers and related ones),<sup>12</sup> in which he dealt with the preconditions of scientific understanding and knowledge. After having been let down by academia when he applied for his habilitation with the 1923 manuscript *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Geniebegriffes* (Contributions to the history of the concept of genius),<sup>13</sup> Zilsel also situated his career beyond the confinements of the *alma mater* (cf. Fleck 1993, 501). As a consequence of the lack of academic recognition, from 1917 onwards he decided to work as a teacher in secondary schools, just as Hirsch had done some years before in Berlin. But shortly thereafter he switched the place of work and taught as a lecturer at adult evening classes. In the year *Die Geniereligion* was published, he joined the Social Democratic party (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs*, SDAP).

Both intellectuals had served as soldiers in the First World War. In the year 1938, under the influence of growing public anti-Semitism, which included collective racial exclusion and legal dimensions, both went into exile, to Great Britain and to the United States of America. Due to racist political pressure, having been suspended from service because of his Jewishness, Hirsch emigrated to London with his wife Johanna; he died there in 1951. Zilsel fled with his wife and son first to London, and eventually to New York, where he received a Rockefeller scholarship. Having lived in 'The Big Apple' for some years without feeling accepted by its scientific-intellectual elite (Zilsel 1988, 931), he ended his life in 1944 in Oakland, California (Sandner 2006, 181–184; Dvořák 1981, 1990).

<sup>10</sup>The following information on Hirsch's life, refers to Werle 2006, 30 et seq., footnote 21. Werle refers here to a self-written short biography of Hirsch in his doctoral thesis.

<sup>11</sup>For more biographical information, cf. Dvořák 1981, Sandner, 181–184/see footnote 6.

<sup>12</sup>A revised version was published with the main title *Das Anwendungsproblem*: Zilsel 1916 (For his *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* Hirsch had worked together with the same publisher, Johann Ambrosius Barth). Cf. Dvořák 1990, 7; Romizi 2019, 397 et seqq.

<sup>13</sup>Published as: Zilsel 1926.

## 11.4 Hirsch's Foundational Criticism

Hirsch's three hundred page-long study, *Die Genesis des Ruhmes. Ein Beitrag zur Methodenlehre der Geschichte* (The Genesis of Glory. A Contribution to the Methodology of History), appeared four years before Zilsel's 1918 study. Herein, Hirsch developed "a theory of glory, that was opposed to the cult of great men in history, outlining fame not as an essential correlate of the greatness of an allegedly extraordinary individual, but as a sociological and collective-psychological phenomenon."<sup>14</sup> What motivated Hirsch's energetic writing? With *Die Genesis des Ruhmes*, he distanced himself from pro-genius writings of some of his university teachers in Wroclaw and Berlin, like Erich Schmidt and Gustav Roethe, who were both also Friedrich Gundolf's professors. Schmidt, a German historian of literature, served as president of the Goethe Society in Weimar and was rector of the Berlin Friedrich-Wilhelms-University at the time Hirsch had contact with him. Hirsch associated Schmidt with Chamberlain and criticized his way of creating biographical knowledge by quoting from former biographies and already knowing about the "central point" before having applied the methods of historical "Erkenntniskritik" (Hirsch 1914, 262–263). The Goethe researcher Roethe was an anti-Semitic, Germanophile philologist, who, among other writings, is the author of *Deutsches Heldentum* (German heroism) (1906). Shortly before Hirsch's publication of *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* (1914), Gundolf had published his habilitation thesis in 1911 on Shakespeare (*Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist*), and in 1912 the genius-affirming essay "Vorbilder" (Role models) which appeared in *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung* (Yearbook for the intellectual movement).<sup>15</sup> In its preface, Gundolf and Friedrich Wolters argued against progress linked to modernity and Americanization. They anticipated the political ascent of the "masses" and feared degeneration of the human species by the proliferation of mediocre people, who they referred to as "terrible spawn" (*fürchterliche Ausgeburt*), and the feminization of entire peoples (Gundolf 1912, iv–vii). Simultaneously, they praised "the greatest works of the spirit," the "great feat" of the "great men" of history, as well as erotic qualities of the cult of friendship as a precondition of higher culture (Gundolf 1912, iv).

Somehow alarmed by these voices, Hirsch switched to the university in Würzburg for his doctoral examination in 1910, to work with Karl Oscar Brenner and Hubert Carl Anton Roetteken (Werle 2006, 30–31). It can be assumed that he moved away consciously from his aforementioned professional colleagues, who submitted to genius admiration and created an unacceptable anti-intellectual climate for him.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Werle 2010, 169. See here also footnote 1, in which Werle names several texts by Detlev Schöttker, who was among the first scholars who appreciatively wrote about Hirsch's work. See Schöttker 2007, 36–37 and idem 1996, 550–551.

<sup>15</sup>Werle assumes that Gundolf and Hirsch had not explicitly revealed whether they had read each other's work (Werle 2006, 30). But for Hirsch it can be said that he briefly quoted Gundolf twice (Hirsch 1914, 186, 197).

Hirsch's monograph can be interpreted as an attempt to take on an antagonistic, critical position in the field of German philology, with which he opposed these authors. In his systematic reception-analysis, Hirsch concentrated on the relationship between the acknowledged individual, whom he called an "eminent personality," and his admirers. In his eyes, the relation was influenced by socio-cultural preconditions and value judgements, which were linked to the collective psyche (Hirsch 1914, v, 10, 21 et seqq.). "With the ingenious individual, the 'opinion' becomes a storm, which takes the opponent's every hold and sweeps away the baseless," he stated (Hirsch 1914, 11). Hirsch carefully examined which intellectual processes in historical-biographical scholarship created fame or posthumous fame for an exceptional personality (Hirsch 1914, v). He asked, how does a real biography become a literary one? Which human needs (need for sensation, community, compassion, etc.) constitute this act? He aimed to describe how opinions about a significant individual arise and outlast the times. And how can the degree of fame and position which a person had reached in cultural history be reduced again?

Hirsch investigated the role of "masses" in the production of "geniuses" both in a diachronic-historical perspective and in terms of mass psychology. The linguist and specialist in German studies partly affirmed the assumptions behind the psychology of the "masses" invented in the nineteenth century (Hippolyte Taine, Gustave Le Bon; Hirsch 1914, 4, 19). He was interested in the question to what extent historical biographies were shaped by the category of fame, and how fame, in turn, could be viewed as a "collective psychological effect," activated by masses of readers of genius biographies.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, in the context of genius discourse, the "masses" were devaluated and seen as the opposite of eminent personae (Hirsch 1914, 18). While dealing with the nature, creation and diminution of the posthumous fame of "eminent personalities," who stood out for their artistic or ethical superiority, Hirsch analysed distinct "types of fame," especially in sources from the history of literature. From a sociological-empirical and "phenomenalist" perspective (*phänomenalistische Geschichtsbetrachtung*, Hirsch 1914, vii), he examined interrelations between objects of veneration, the habitus of genius admirers and scientific biographers. That is, he explicitly did not look at the "geniuses" themselves.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the interrelation noted was guided by a "drive to adoration" (*adoratorischer Trieb*, Hirsch 1914, 59) that ascribed the rating "ingenious" to the eminent individual. In this very process, the "genius" would inevitably be mythologized:

The personality to whom the people owe their existence, or at least their significance, is endowed with higher powers and is—not always slowly—mythologized. [...] The rulers, the legislators, the founders of a religion belong not only to the past but also to the present, by becoming authorities to be obeyed, role models to be emulated (Hirsch 1914, 68 et seq.).

<sup>16</sup>Hirsch 1914, V, 21–24 et seqq. Explicitly, he refers to lesser known contemporary authors of mass psychology, namely Theodor Kistiakowski's *Gesellschaft und Einzelmensch* (1899) and Wilhelm Brönnner's reflections on phenomena of the collective psyche from 1911. This does not mean he did not have in mind broader theories of mass psychology.

<sup>17</sup>Zum Begriff des Werturteils, Hirsch 1914, 9.

In order to describe the functioning of the "modern cult of genius," Hirsch devoted his epistemic interest to the various manifestations and ways of recognizing historically eminent personalities (Hirsch 1914, v), which he sought to capture "(bio)phenographically" (*(Bio-)Phäno-graphie*, Hirsch 1914, 275, 277). His main question was, how did the appearance of an individual develop? (Hirsch 1914, 285) On a rhetorical level, Hirsch analogized the special "ingenious" appearance with a "shell," the "cocoon of a silkworm," or he spoke of a "powerful cloud of glory" enveloping the "genius" (Hirsch 1914, 11 et seq). Hirsch investigated by whom and how an individual was assigned fame and distinguished between aspects of fame formation. These included "glory-generating" (*ruhmzeugende*) or "glory-creating" (*ruhmbildende*) factors, which covered the profession and type of death of the genius and his biographers, "glory-expanding" (*ruhmerweiternde*) and "glory-enhancing" (*ruhmverstärkende*) factors, which embraced the daily press, print and mass media, popular literature and translations, as well as "glory-reducing" (*ruhmvermindernde*) factors like certain tendencies in time or an urge for variety (inter alia, Hirsch 1914, 242, 271). Later, Zilsel converted these distinctions into his differentiation between "religion-building" (*religionsbildende*) and "religion-enhancing" (*religionsverstärkende*) elements (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 78 et seq.).

The list of ways in which Zilsel adapted arguments by Hirsch is long. Overall, Hirsch investigated questions that *grosso modo* are also taken up by Zilsel: how do great personalities appear in synchronous or posthumous reception? How are eminence, fame and historical meaning created? What role do biographical "facts" such as the occupation and mode of death of the individual play? (Hirsch 1914, 36–51) Hirsch's unique point was the following question: what was the function of popular science representations of "geniuses," as they appeared in newspapers and magazines, biographies and anthologies and were preserved in museums, libraries and in the fine arts? In his work, Zilsel did not differentiate between the distinct media forms, nor did he derive a further argument out of their distinction.

In detail, Hirsch dealt with the "unrecognized genius," in his opinion a "contradictio in adjecto" (Hirsch 1914, 17 et seq.). He explored the history of genius metaphors by pursuing the function of metaphors to create a symbolic surplus value, for example in the form of decorative epithets such as: "the great," "the classic," etc. (Hirsch 1914, 72 et seq.). Hirsch observed the "transforming" (*Transformierung*, Hirsch 1914, 22) of the modern need to worship "geniuses," by referring to older types of hero and saint cult such as the primitive cult of the dead and the ancestors (Hirsch 1914, 42–45, 52). He viewed family ancestry as a precursor to the veneration of genius and subtly noted the veneration of misfortune that was attached to the biographies of geniuses—all elements that were to find their counterpart in Zilsel's book *Die Geniereligion* published four years later (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 165). In addition, as indicated above, Hirsch commented on the relationship between the modern cult of genius and national memory of genius, as well as the divinization of the eminent individual (Hirsch 1914, 77–83).

Like Zilsel later, he saw connections between religious institutions of the past and the powerful contemporary rise of the cult of genius, and he criticized the

quasi-religiousness<sup>18</sup> attached to the “geniuses” and their representative function. Similar to contemporary religious theorists such as Rudolf Otto, Hirsch assumed that the “decline of the original form of religiosity [including the adoration of gods] would result in a rise of the cult of genius” (Hirsch 1914, 59, 66). “Where the religious feeling begins to loosen up or to turn away from its original object, the cult of the personality expands into ever larger forms” (Hirsch 1914, 59). In modern times, the irrational deification of the eminent individual would manifest itself in the relic cult, pilgrimage and an apotheosis of the “genius” (Hirsch 1914, 64). Hirsch quoted theologian and writer David Friedrich Strauß to make his point clear: “A new paganism or a new Catholicism came over Protestant Germany: one is not satisfied with the incarnation of God and, in the Indian manner, wants a series of repeating avatars... This time [in the 1830s] tends to worship the revelation of God in all the great spirits who have had an invigorating and creative effect on humanity. The only cult [...] that survives the decay of religion, for the educated people of this time, is the cult of genius” (Strauß/1838, quoted after Hirsch 1914, 60).

In *Die Geniereligion*, Zilsel adapted parts of Hirsch’s terminology to his philosophical mindset, enriched and altered the given vocabulary, added new dimensions of critique, and carried some points to rhetorical and ironical extremes. Among the obvious adaptations are the following: the “individual,” “eminent individual,” or the “genius” in Hirsch’s book became mainly the “personality” or the “genius” in Zilsel’s. The question of “fame,” “posthumous fame” and “adoration of genius” was transformed into the question of “veneration of genius” and “posterity fame,” “enthusiasm for genius” and “religion of genius.” The “average individuals” (cf., *Durchschnittsindividuum*, 141 et seq.) were addressed by Zilsel as the “dozen-people” (*Dutzendmenschen*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 142, 152). Certain fashions, sways and distortions in the evaluation of personalities (*Moden, Wanken, Verzerrungen in der Persönlichkeitsbewertung*, Hirsch 1914, 73, 230, 239, 244, 250) in Zilsel’s book became “fluctuations in posthumous fame” (*Nachruhmchwankungen*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 65). Instead of using Hirsch’s term “transforming” (*Transformierung*, Hirsch 1914, 22), Zilsel wrote about “transformation” (*Transformation*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 67), “feeling” was altered to the “dogmatics” of genius worshipers (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 54). In addition to these religious-psychological considerations, Hirsch had already spoken of “irrational tendencies” of his time and, just like Zilsel later, he wrote about a feeling of family-based community and pity as the basis for fame, of “judgment of posterity and of the contemporary world” and the problem of imitation (Hirsch 1914, 10, 23, 75, 110, 206, 218 et seq.). Hirsch adopted the theoretical problem of imitation from nineteenth century research on the collective psyche, in particular from Gabriel Tarde (Hirsch 1914, 223, 227, 229, 272). He stated that the psychic needs of the “masses” as well as traditionalism, social heredity and certain institutions of a society were all aspects that play a role in shaping the concept of the respective “eminent individual” (Hirsch 1914, 251). They would all contribute to the conformity of the judgement “genius,” which was articulated by

<sup>18</sup>Zilsel clearly distinguished the “religion of genius” from serious forms of religiosity.

the people who judge and, not seldomly, they would see a kinship between themselves and the alleged “genius” while perceiving the historical persona (Hirsch 1914, 231, *Apperzeption*, 238). Whether a person is synchronically or retrospectively named or “invented” as a “genius” or not did not depend on that person but rather was the result of a “*fable convenue*” (agreed fable) (Hirsch 1914, 245 et seq., 264, *inventeur*).

Zilsel himself stated that the decisive difference between Hirsch’s and his book was that the former had described the “feeling of genius worshippers” and the cult factor, but not the huge dogmatic system of rules behind it: the “religion of genius” (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 54). Religion is more than a cult, rituals, sacred texts and hierarchy, its dogmatism is normative and obligatory. The “religion of genius” does not establish a connection to god but unites geniuses, who according to the genius-formula are deceased and sacralised, with their priests, prophets and admirers.<sup>19</sup> Zilsel was interested in the historical and sociological dimensions of genius worship.

Comparison of the two texts shows that in addition to these differences, numerous similarities can be found. Most of Zilsel’s monograph is organized according to similar textual and structural features as Hirsch’s *Die Genesis des Ruhmes*. However, a large number of differences remains, for example, the following: Hirsch’s historically-oriented book lacks some special dimensions and synthesizing gestures, that, in turn, make Zilsel’s approach stand out. Hirsch makes less use of scientific or mathematical rhetoric like “*Nachruhmchwankungen*” or “elements” and “curves” (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 65). And Zilsel usually strikes a sharp, sometimes mocking tone; the title “The Religion of Genius” brings the problem he wanted to address to the point.

### 11.5 The Surplus Added by Zilsel

In 1915, after having served briefly in the First World War and having defended his doctoral thesis while working as an actuary (*Versicherungsmathematiker*), Zilsel, deeply inspired by Hirsch’s recently published *opus magnum*, started working on his monograph *Die Geniereligion*. Central to it is the problem of the modern ideal of personality, which Zilsel tried to systematically deconstruct as a mechanism of delusion and willful obfuscation in terms of a “metaphysical genius-idealism” (*metaphysischer Genieidealismus*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 120). In his later *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes. Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Antike und des Frühkapitalismus* (The Origin of the Concept of Genius: A Contribution to the History of Ideas of the Antique and of Early Capitalism), he addressed the problem of genius admiration as a “social figment” (*gesellschaftliches Gebilde*, Zilsel 1926, 1; his emphasis) with religious-aesthetic features, which had serious, reactionary

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Thomas Macho’s conference lecture “Edgar Zilsels Geniereligion. Eine Re-Lektüre,” Dec 6, 2018, at Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften IFK in Vienna.

political radiance. Zilsel built on Hirsch's earlier conclusion that "the degeneration of religiosity results in an increase of the cult of genius" (Hirsch 1914, 59, 66). He acknowledged this as one very important and distinct characteristic of the contemporary genius cult in comparison to earlier forms of adoration.

Similar to the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, and later on, Hans Blumenberg and René Girard, Zilsel understood that the gradual disappearance of god and the divine in a secularized modernity prompted, in turn, a heightened need for religion.<sup>20</sup> Due to the universality, originality, intensity, sensitivity, innovative ability, creativity and the sacred ascribed to it, the genius figure promised to give meaning to scientific and social life. Zilsel was concerned that it would take the place of the divine creator, in certain respects. According to Blumenberg, secularization meant a "reassignment (*Umbesetzung*) of a position that had become vacant but could not be eliminated as such" (Blumenberg 1964 [1962], 241). Sacred elements in a community that from then onwards understood itself as secularized were no longer interpreted as signs of continuity and certainty, but were instead given "reassigned functions" in a system of meaning (*umbesetzte Systemfunktionen*) in the "process of epochal change" (Blumenberg 1988 [1974], 88). At the same time, allegedly secular discussions still often referred to Christian or other religious concepts, such as angels, demigods, and religiously-inspired leaders. Thus, the "genius" can be identified as a figure mingled with Christianity,<sup>21</sup> that was transposed to the intellectual-scientific sphere.

Around 1900, the already well-established symbolic and rhetorical linkage of the concept of genius to religious metaphors and imagery was revitalized and given new energy. Part of the religious potential of the "genius," as one can learn from Blumenberg, was to amplify the re-sacralization of the profane. Zilsel made "genius-priests" partly responsible for increased modern tendencies towards secularization and the excavation of 'true' religiosity. Secular religions practiced in scientific and literary arenas—such as the religion of genius—borrowed and transmuted central elements of monotheistic religions, such as the longing for salvation and redemption, and the desire for life after death. The "genius" was addressed as a godlike being, a demiurge, or Christlike figure who, at the same time, labored in the pursuit of modern science and knowledge. The genius figure was described in a range of metaphors that touched on different aspects of the divine, ranging from images of Biblical salvation to visions of apocalypse. Scientific, belletristic and biographical writings adopted the rhetoric of the sacred; and in an era of apparent godlessness, exceptional historical personalities were re-sacralized as secular apostles, prophets, martyrs and saints, as in Zilsel's words "ominous deities" (*unheilvolle Gottheiten*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 168).

The creation of new gods to serve as descendants of more traditional gods and religious figures, or as replacements for aristocratic leaders, was harshly criticized by Zilsel and labeled with the term *Geniereligion*: "Rather, emotional needs, the

<sup>20</sup>Nietzsche 1999 [1882], 481 et seqq.; Girard 1988 [1985], 227–46; Blumenberg 1964 [1962].

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Köhne 2014, e.g., 89–113, 374 et seqq.

longing for eternal life, as well as the desire for posthumous retribution and an infallible judgment of the dead led to an overestimation of posterity" (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 69). Allegedly scholarly examinations and biographical descriptions of the "genius," he argued, explicitly and implicitly referred to religious and metaphysical categories. Zilsel distrusted these writings for methodological reasons, as he saw them as filled with subjective emotionality, whereas he was interested in the macroscopic, social level and in repetitive, exact historical laws.<sup>22</sup> For example, the genius literature repeatedly alluded to the dogma of the fraternization of dead "geniuses," who in the afterlife met in a celestial community, linked only by the posthumously conferred identification of "genius" (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 84–88). Zilsel viewed "geniuses" as revitalized, reborn, reanimated dead, or undead (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 76). The idealization of the dead in the cult of genius had the function of masking the fear of one's own mortality. Frequently, these men, who had gone unrecognized and underappreciated in life, working in loneliness and sacrifice, served in death as paragons of earthly existence. In the cult of genius, deceased "geniuses" come together in the hereafter to form a "metaphysical brotherhood" (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 88; his emphasis).

"After all," Zilsel declared, "posterity does not *recognize* an already existing significance but first *creates* it itself" (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 74; his emphasis). He added that "[t]here is a certain connection between the irrational genius-cult's belief in posterity and the rational and enlightened idea of progress: both interpret progress of time as an increase in value; one has the impression that the passage of time enriches the culture and amends the verdict on the deceased" (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 72). And he was insightful about the process by which fame—a sort of secular canonization—was manufactured retrospectively to serve the uses of the present:

In the genesis of posthumous fame [...] numerous, totally accidental circumstances play a significant role, including serendipity, influential benefactors and enthusiastic disciples. [...] The personal idiosyncrasies, artistic and philosophical qualities of the famous and influential dead are the focus of posterity; they are mentioned in numerous texts, yet at the same time transformed and reinterpreted or distorted depending on the disposition of posterity (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 75).

There are several aspects by which the philosopher of science 'outperformed' Hirsch's *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* in terms of intensity, accuracy and acuity. What set Zilsel's work apart is his most diversified system of criticizing the cult of genius in terms of (pseudo)religious beliefs. Since 1918, Zilsel fundamentally rejected the idea that this sort of adoration of others would do any good, as he deeply distrusted the widespread "genius enthusiasm" and the religious dogmatism accompanying it. He traced the psychological reasons for following the dogmatics erected by the genius cult. Zilsel highlighted the subjective, individual emotional needs of the "enthusiasts of genius"—like exaltation of others or fervor for the life stories of their "favorite geniuses" (*Lieblingsgenies*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 53). In this way, they

<sup>22</sup>For a deeper understanding of Zilsel's methodological account, see Monika Wulz's essay in this volume.

tried to conceal their own fears of being vulnerable, ephemeral and mortal. Superficial admiration of genius, which included only being interested in the historical *persona* but not in his or her *œuvre*, was, in his eyes, an obstacle for in-depth understanding of theoretical or philosophical concepts. Instead, as a philosopher, he wanted to achieve a systematic and unified 'building of truth,' which would embrace all areas of life (Zisel 1990 [1918], 94, 188).

Zisel must be seen as a representative of early transdisciplinary thinking around 1900 who did not accept the narrow confinement of disciplinary identities (cf. Fleck 1993, 501, 515). As an intellectual crossing borders between natural science and, in particular, mathematics and statistics, philosophy of science, social sciences and the humanities,<sup>23</sup> Zisel attempted to sharpen his rationalistic and empirical profile with his analysis, and later on, as a sympathizer with the intellectual community of the Left Vienna Circle, his positivistic one. Zisel's poly-methodological approach intended to stress the "underground threads" between different fields of knowledge (*durcheinanderlaufende, unterirdische Fäden*, Zisel 1926, 211, 280, 319). He aimed for a model of transdisciplinary ethics concerned with the "subject matter itself" (*die Sache selbst*),<sup>24</sup> the rational (*ratio*),<sup>25</sup> that sought out objectivity and causal explanation, doubt as much as lawful precision, and rejected the irrational exaltation of the admired historical personality (Zisel 1990 [1918], 209, 220). In his later work, this historian of science was to focus on the specific historical period, the transition between the middle ages and the early modern period, when the traditional gap between the professional spheres of manual labor and mental work (*Hand- und Kopfarbeit*) was in the process of being overcome,<sup>26</sup> a process which, he argued, intensified in the course of modernization, technologization and capitalization. Zisel conceptualized this development as the basis of the genesis of modern science (Fleck 1993, 510). Zisel considered the cult of genius around 1900 as a crucial juncture, an ideological turning point for modern academic practice, which ideally should be based empirically on observation, experiments and systematic theory.

Summing-up, for Zisel the discursive existence of the "genius" functioned on the basis of religious-dogmatic conditions and the postulated belief, admiration and enthusiasm of the idolizing group. Zisel described the religion of genius as a response to de-sacralizing trends, as a both conscious and unconscious (textual) strategy, created mostly by male scholars and researchers to spread metaphysical ideas and justify anti-egalitarian politics. According to his research, the religion of genius contributed to the lack of objectivity, critical reflection and empathy for the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also Monika Wulz' article in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Elisabeth Nemeth contextualized *Die Geniereligion* primarily within the framework of some socio-historical and selected contemporary philosophical terms, such as "reflection" and "ideal of the matter" ("Ideal der Sache"). Nemeth 1997, 157–178. She intensifies these research questions in her text in this volume, and in addition asks about Zisel's special understanding of relevant psychological notions.

<sup>25</sup> Wulz 2011, 295–316.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Zisel 1930, 410–424. See the secondary text: Romizi 2018, 78–79, 2019, 444–453.

'other.' Zisel criticized this development, favoring, instead, principles of rationality and accuracy, empiricism and pragmatism. Yet in some ways, these same principles, combined with his relative blindness for applied psychology,<sup>27</sup> prevented him from fully grasping the typical characteristics of the cult of genius: its irrationality, sentimentality and subjectivity, as well as the need of its followers to evaluate (and give value to) the surrounding world (*Wertungsbedürfnis*, Zisel 1990 [1918], 195).

Zisel proceeded with the demystification of the notion of "genius" in his 1926 *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*, which concentrates on the history of ideas and biography-critical aspects. Here Zisel explored the historical conditions of the genesis and unfolding of the concept of genius, and how the ideal of immortality was interconnected with social structures of mankind, ranging from its roots in antiquity to its culmination in the thought of the Renaissance. Zisel was interested in the social laws underneath the practice of admiration of genius individuals throughout history. By identifying these empirical, socio-psychological substructures, Zisel tried to develop an instrument of criticism that would pass the test for rational and objective, unerring thinking. His goal was to combine the methods of the humanities, especially of sociology, history and philosophy, with positivist exactness (Romizi 2018, 89–90).

The actual problem detected by Zisel was that the metaphysics of genius, coming from the political conservative camp, brought with it severe socio-political consequences, which were grounded in a general contempt for human beings. Zisel named specific criteria by which the genius culture could be described as an instrument of exclusion and social distinction. The latter would harm or subordinate certain people who were comprehended by the metaphor "the masses."<sup>28</sup> But let us first read what he observed about his contemporaries in the Dual Monarchy Austria-Hungary:

[O]ur audience does not believe that there is anything wrong with admiring genius, in fact it seems to them to be the obvious thing to do. We do not see a problem in the notion of genius, our literature and our *zeitgeist* has completely appropriated it. There is not the slightest hint of alienation, let alone rejection. [...] Although we ourselves seem only partially aware of the extent of our admiration for genius, our notion of genius is of relevance to cultural historians; the full significance of such semi-conscious guiding concepts will only truly come to light with the benefit of time (Zisel 1990 [1918], 52).

Part of the community of contemporary writers and intellectuals, Zisel affirmed, had become willing 'victims' of the cult of the individual personality and the "glory ideal," which they peddled in their works in a far from disinterested way. By awarding this title to specific historical figures and declaring themselves connoisseurs of "genius," these writers touted their own importance. By referring to the "great men of history," researchers tended to envision themselves as ingenious, attributing to themselves some of the main qualities of "geniuses." This was due to a process of "coloring" and transference of feelings (*Abfärben der Gefühle*, Zisel 1990 [1918],

<sup>27</sup> As an exception, see: Zisel 1990 [1918], 135, 140.

<sup>28</sup> See the negative stereotypes that have been associated to the concept of the "mass," since early mass psychology, Köhne 2009, 31–37.

106 et seq.) that had long been part of the history of constructing the genius ideal, as Zilsel stated. Something of the “genius” seemed to rub off on those who studied and at the same time admired “genius,” taking on the shape of psychological or religious feelings like fear, respect, devoutness and awe. This phenomenon reached into the deepest layers of consciousness, manifesting itself in a special kind of suggestive mood (*suggestive Stimmung*) that Zilsel compared invidiously to reasonable thinking (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 106 et seq.):

Nothing is more opposed to this fuzzy transfer of feelings (*unscharfe Gefühlsübertragung*) than reason, which has its goals in precision, and in the clear separation of everything that does not belong together. The transference of feelings must thus disappear the more admiration is rationalized and replaced by value judgments (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 107).

As the passage suggests, those who in their own perception best understood what “genius” was about—revealing its secrets and identifying its formulas—made pretensions to similar qualities themselves—a process which, in *Geniekult*, I describe as a process of “self-geniusification.”<sup>29</sup>

Given his political engagement as a writer, Zilsel mocked the pretensions of these petty “genius priests,” who, according to him, were nothing but second-rate schoolmasters with the desire to evaluate others (*Wertungsbedürfnis*). But the ingenuity could never be objective—rather it was always subject to a change in historical values:

Here comes the modern minister of genius, the measure of merit (*Wertmaßstab*) in his hands, like a schoolmaster; anyone who can ‘discern’ is a ‘genius,’ who gives priority to the mysteries of knowledge, a profound personality (*tiefe Persönlichkeit*); in contrast the remaining thinkers are relegated to the back seats in the philosophical classroom like mediocre pupils (*Dutzendmenschen*) (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 232).

Yet genius-enthusiasm was not only fodder for Zilsel’s ironic humor and an annoying feature of his times, but it was also considered by him to be dangerous. The “religion-like nature” (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 53) of the cult of genius, Zilsel asserted, as a “semi-unconscious guiding principle” (*halb unbewusste Leitidee*, Zilsel 1990 [1918], 52), fostered alienation, contempt of the “masses” (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 51) and the exclusion of the ‘other.’ Toward the end of *Die Geniereligion*, Zilsel proved his socio-political prescience by cautioning that “ignorance and strong prejudices” demonstrated by such contemporary admirers of genius as Houston Stewart Chamberlain would be “paid for with the happiness and blood of fellow men” (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 233). The dominance of the “concept of the genius personality and of profundity” indicated a “severe danger” for his age (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 234). It had to be viewed in the context of wider socio-cultural problems, insecurities and utopian beliefs. In his eyes, the genius knowledge of the time and the artificial ‘geniusification’ of individuals were connected to mechanisms of exclusion and extremist ideologies of racism and sexism.

Contemporary writings on “genius,” Zilsel observed, expounded the anti-feminist and anti-Semitic tendencies that from the 1900s onward merged more and more

<sup>29</sup> For more on the term “self-geniusification,” Köhne 2014, 29, 50, 81, 200.

with ideologies of “Aryan” heredity and “racial hygiene” (*Rassenhygiene, Volkshygiene*, cf. Schmidt 1988, 180–237)—for example, in writings of Chamberlain, Ottokar Matura, Alfred Rosenberg and Richard Wagner. Increasingly they became entangled with intelligence research and fantasies of educational methods that would supposedly foster future geniuses or breed the ‘highly gifted’ of the ‘German Empire’ (Zilsel 1990 [1918], 189). Notably, while Zilsel clearly took distance, Hirsch indicated that he could imagine productive interfaces between his idiosyncratic program of phenography and “eugenic” ideas according to Galton and Ostwald (Hirsch 1914, 284; cf. Zilsel 1990 [1918], 186).

By the turn of the century, women and Jews were considered to be the ‘others’ in the prevailing Western genius formula, which emphasized the inherent superiority of white males. They were imagined as possessing the opposite qualities to those of so-called “great men of history” (*große Männer der Geschichte*), “eminences” (*Eminenzen*), “superlatives of mankind” (*Superlative der Menschheit*), “exceptional individuals” (*Ausnahmemenschen*), “intellectual leaders” (*geistige Führer*), “mental luminaries of mankind” (*geistige Leuchten der Menschheit*, Zilsel 1930, 59) or “male heroes” (*Männerhelden*). Indeed, the racist, anti-feminist and anti-Semitic tendencies of the greater part of the writings of the time dealing with the question of genius can be interpreted as *one* foundational component for a range of political programs fostering violence. National Socialists, among others, were to seize upon these tendencies and put them into effect.<sup>30</sup>

## 11.6 Conclusion: Insufficient Recognition

Instead of a biographical, ontological or metaphysical interpretation of the essence of “genius,” or a celebration of their extraordinary qualities, the authors of *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* and *Die Geniereligion* researched the needs of human society and its singular members, which led to an increased adoration of superlative human beings around the turn of the twentieth century (Richardson and Uebel 2007, 293). With their sociological approach they saw “genius” not as a phenomenon of natural origin but as the product of functional relations in mainly European societies. Hirsch and Zilsel stated that the belief in “geniuses” was a reaction to the generally felt and urgent vacuum of faith and traditional religiosity, which also affected the humanities and social sciences. The question of god, the main actor in processes of creation, had to be raised anew, and the “genius” took on the vacant protagonist role in the secular-sacred drama around 1900. Functions like those of god, Christ or the metaphysical in general were linked to the “genius” as a subject of biographical description or scientific research. The characteristics that were attributed to “geniuses”—the masculine, immortal, eternal, universal and at the same time the

<sup>30</sup> Köhne, Julia Barbara 2014. “Nationalsozialistische Ausläufer: Begabtenpolitik und Züchtungsphantasien,” “Kollektivieren/Züchten: Visionen eines genialen deutschen Volkskörpers.” In idem, *Geniekult*, 385–400.

individual, singular as well as “divine creative power”—were qualities that their admirers, their biographers, and scholars of the humanities also strived to identify in themselves. This hidden longing for claiming genius is what Zilsel tried to express with his notion of “transference of feelings.” The image of genius thus served, on the one hand, as a surrogate for apparently evaporated religious references. The abstract genius figure acted as guarantor and representative of the divine order in a world dominated by the increasing role of empirical, scientific research. On the other hand, it provided security with regard to the question of how people can unite even without god, and apart from social and political associations. This went so far that ideas of the hereafter were transferred to earthly geniuses, e.g., in form of the idea of transcendental brotherhood. The reinstallation and de-identification of deceased “geniuses” filled a sensitive gap in the apparently secularized saeculum.

Hirsch and Zilsel, just like their successors such as Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum and sociologist Axel Gehring (1968), treated the deification of historical personalities as a serious socio-cultural and pedagogical problem of great political relevance. The scientific and literary foundation as well as the cultural and political instrumentalization of the cult of genius, they believed, was irrational and dangerous (Zilsel considered it “a serious danger to our age,” Zilsel 1990 [1918], 234). In their opinion, human beings relinquished their agency in surrendering themselves to genius admiration, lowered their self-esteem and relegated themselves to serving as mere reflections of the genius’ glory.

The question of the divine had turned into the question of human feasibility, which, between 1890 and the 1930s was increasingly aimed at political leadership through supposed “geniuses” and the promotion and breeding of earthly creators and an “ingenious” German collective.<sup>31</sup> As subtle humanists Hirsch and Zilsel were able to anticipate in part certain political and ideological future developments that were based on racism and social exclusion. Their critical program of deconstructing the culture of genius admiration contained valuable criteria that helped to detect efforts to marginalize so-called ‘average or underprivileged intellectual capacities.’ Both wished that society would not be driven by anti-democratic structures of (self) elevation and (self)transcendancy that generate inequality and structural violence.

As indicated above, the popularization and legitimation of the genius formula had powerful political effects. They served to justify and facilitate strategies of exclusion, aimed particularly at women and Jews, while enhancing the prospect of rule by extraordinary or charismatic authority. As such, the genius discourse of the early twentieth century must be analyzed as a manipulative and ideological tool of power and a catalyst for growing racial-political power structures in the context of fascist tendencies in Germany and Austria (cf. Zilsel 1930, 59). It is above all Zilsel’s merit and his intellectual achievement that he described this socio-political trajectory in such an enlightening way. By contrast, it must be said that Hirsch affirmed certain strains of mass psychology and indicated that his “phenography” of

<sup>31</sup> Köhne 2014, 361–401.

genius might support research areas like “eugenics” and genius-breeding ideas according to Galton’s and Ostwald’s work (Hirsch 1914, 284).

Apart from that, in many respects, Hirsch can be seen as a scholar who fundamentally inspired Zilsel’s work *Die Geniereigion*. Many of Zilsel’s arguments are based on Hirsch’s earlier ideas and Zilsel disclosed this in a handful of footnotes.<sup>32</sup> However, that some degree of imitative absorption took place cannot be easily dismissed. Zilsel borrowed parts of Hirsch’s overall structure of argumentation, dramaturgical order, style of critique, thematic representation and rhetoric, as well as some of his particular genius-critical terms and theses.<sup>33</sup> How can these striking adaptations of Hirsch’s critical analyses of high-flying personalities be evaluated? What might have been the reasons for why Zilsel missed the chance to more directly and generously refer to Hirsch’s pathbreaking work that pre-formed the greater part of his own arguments? Why did he not give more credit and recognition to *Die Genesis des Ruhmes* which he, in his intellectual enterprise, trustfully could build on?<sup>34</sup>

Zilsel’s omission may be related to the general attitude, mentality and typical practice around 1900 of not citing sources, as he also refrained from referring to Jacob Cahan, Sigmund Freud, and many others. It seems as if, back then, philosophical knowledge was seen as a commonly shared domain, including its multiple interconnections, which were not made explicit. Therefore, the one-way relationship of Zilsel’s reception and adaptation of Hirsch’s thought may not have been based on rivalry between colleagues who could have been mutually supportive and engaged in an anti-academic intellectual exchange. The reasons for not quoting Hirsch may be of a more disciplinary nature and stem from gaps in the reception between different subjects. Even though their methods were highly interdisciplinary already, they clearly were not interdisciplinary enough to actually reach the other who lived in another city and country where both were working as lecturers bound to strict professional duties. In addition, of course, their intellectual enterprises hampered by reduced mobility due to the ongoing First World War, growing anti-Semitism and social marginalization as the result of the rise of authoritarian politics.

It is intriguing to speculate what could have happened if Zilsel had highlighted the other’s intellectual efforts and provided more citations of the colleague’s work, or if both had had the opportunity to fully profit from amalgamating their philosophical critique. Many synergies could have resulted from their philosophical kinship, due to shared thematical ‘universes.’ What if they had had a chance to start interdisciplinary critical genius research even more systematically, working with

<sup>32</sup> Zilsel 1990 [1918], 54, fn 3 on p. 235; 65, fn 5 on p. 235; 67, fn 11 on p. 236; 69, fn 14 on p. 236; 169, fn 42 on p. 241.

<sup>33</sup> To make this observation more concrete: in the footnotes listed (see the preceding footnote here), Zilsel explicitly refers to the following of Hirsch’s ideas: first, the quasi-religious nature of genius admiration; second, fluctuations in fame; third, the notion of transformation; forth, the irrational factors of mass psychology in afterworld judgements; and fifth, the critique of sieve theory.

<sup>34</sup> Zilsel 1990 [1918], 65, fn 5 on p. 235, here Zilsel calls Hirsch’s work an “insightful book, from which other examples could be taken.”

intertextual creativity, combining Hirsch's historical-sociological approach and Zilsel's efforts to transfer methods from natural science to the social sciences and humanities?

However, re-reading their precious works has shown that genius discourse after 1900 simultaneously reflected on the frictions between older discourses on genius, contemporary national myths and fantasies of universalization, the constitution of new scientific and cultural knowledge around 1900 and the attempt to stimulate the 'progress' of human civilization through population policy. Hirsch's and Zilsel's role was to stress that this complex nexus increased the knowledge production around the question of genius and enabled intellectual and cultural self-affirmation, but it also raised the risk of hubris and political imbalances. In this respect, regarding today's renaissance of (self)praising-cultures in debates on academic excellency (Köhne 2020), it might be necessary again to repeatedly remind ourselves of what the 'brothers in spirit,' Hirsch and Zilsel, sagaciously wrote about and what they warned of one hundred years ago.

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## Chapter 12

# The Religion of Genius Taken Seriously. Edgar Zilsel’s *Die Geniereligion* (1918) Reviewed as a Critical Philosophical Treatise

Bernadette Reisinger

**Abstract** In this paper I analyze Edgar Zilsel’s genuinely philosophical critique of the epistemological and ethical claims manifested in the so called “Religion of Genius”. For this purpose, I suggest a rereading of *Die Geniereligion* (1918) in connection with and in analogy to its philosophical roots and contexts in the historical Enlightenment discourse. I try to point out that Zilsel not only considers the “Religion of Genius” as a rather dubious socio-cultural phenomenon of his time but also as a threat to philosophy itself and to his own logico-empiricist approach, which he earlier developed in the *Anwendungsproblem* (1916). I demonstrate that going beyond an intentionally destructive critique, Zilsel also uses the concepts of the “Religion of Genius” as a negative foil to present and further elaborate his own logico-empiricist program of rationalization, including his ideal of objectivity and an existential ideal of the “objective craftsmen”.

**Keywords** Edgar Zilsel · Geniereligion (religion of genius) · Genius · Depth · Program of rationalization · Late enlightenment · Ethics · Objective values

### 12.1 Introduction

With the “religion of genius” Edgar Zilsel – very sensitive to the ideological tendencies of his time – addresses a highly explosive and strange hodgepodge of phenomena which the *zeitgeist* brought forth in Europe, especially in the German-speaking world. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, scholars (of the humanities), artists and intellectuals, in print but also in everyday life through

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