

The Forbidden Book: An Interview with Guido Mina di Sospiro

By David Metcalfe

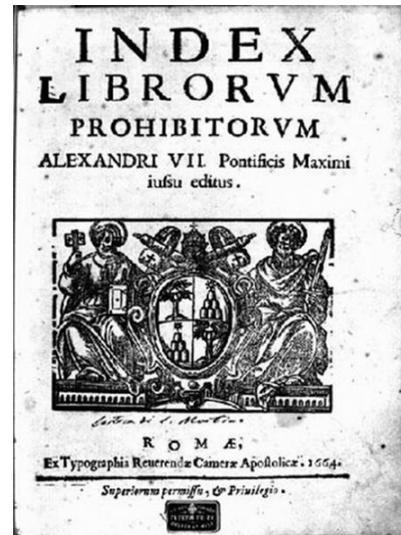
Created 08/21/2012 - 08:03

Feature

"When man was created, he could not help being jealous of the birds. Flying along invisible lines, they soared higher than he could see, and migrated to distant lands he could only imagine. Since he could not fly, he started to dream. In time, he began to build temples. But a more compelling drive was inside him.

He became a pilgrim.

His necessity to integrate the cosmic course made him contemplate, consider the flickering course of the stars. The very words say it: contemplate, from con-templum (a space for observing auguries); consider, from con-sidera, with the stars.



Solar in his conception of the sacred, but also seeking the complementary lunar principle, all he needed was to align his path with the invisible tellurian forces along which shrines of all types have been erected down the ages." -- Guido Mina di Sospiro, Western Culture 2000 AD

"To look at these symbols as pictures is to understand something that commentators rarely point out. They will tell us what the various creatures or figures symbolize, but if that were sufficient, there would be no need for an illustration: it could all be put into words, like philosophy. Why draw so many images if all they mean is that there is a relationship between "soul" and "spirit"? The reason is that these symbolic landscapes and their inhabitants are to be brought alive through the imagination.... □ For those of us who cannot or would rather not "rise in the planes," the symbolic world of Hermetic

philosophy still affords a unique combination of visual pleasure and spiritual meaning." □ □ --Joscelyn Godwin, *The Silent Language: Symbols of the Hermetic Philosophy*

There are novels that deal with magic, and there are magical novels. Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin have co-authored a work which stands masterfully at the center of both traditions. *The Forbidden Book* [1], recently released by Disinfo Books, now part of Red Wheel / Weiser, is a fantastic bit of fiction whose narrative takes us into a world of esoteric intrigue and initiation, while it is, in itself, an esoteric text worthy of unraveling.

With Gnosticism, magic and esoteric philosophy once again breaching the surface of mainstream thought, collaborative efforts like *The Forbidden Book*, which combine scholarship with narrative verve, allow us to explore the implications of a Western initiatory culture that, for all of its influence, remains hidden behind the scenes.

For audiences in the U.S. this is a special gift, as the richness of the tradition, and the diversity, is not something that has been fully expressed in the American media. If one is looking for a suitable guide into this world, there are few as genteel, observant and impassioned as Guido Mina di Sospiro.

Through e-mail correspondence, Mina di Sospiro was kind enough to discuss his collaboration with Godwin, his theories of imagination and play, and also to explore in more detail the implications of Hermetic Alchemy, that most rare, and excellent Art, as it applies to cultural expression and personal creativity.

When did you develop an interest in Hermetic philosophy?

Cervantes, German Romanticism, Nietzsche, Rilke, Herman Hesse, *The Bhagvad Gita*, Scriabin, John Coltrane, the Canterbury Scene: as a boy I managed to assimilate some extra-canonical notions, though I didn't think of them as such then. I also and inevitably became conversant with the Aristotelian/Euclidean/Cartesian/Newtonian/Darwinian Weltanschauung that is inculcated into us at school and remains the mainstay of western civilization -- but it never appealed to me. That's a euphemism: I hated it for being so pedestrian, with nothing transcendental in it. During the university years first in Pavia (one of the oldest universities in the world), then in LA at USC, between classes I'd go to one of the libraries on campus and read -- voraciously -- the Encyclopædia Britannica at random. Everything interested me but ultimately nothing satisfied me.

By the time I graduated I was already delving well beyond the canon we're assiduously fed in the western world. I suppose the first mentor was C.G. Jung. Most of us well-versed in scholarly esoterica realize Jung's shortcomings and tend to dissociate ourselves from him. But as a gate-opener he was very effective. Sufism, Taoism and Zen also appealed to me as they rely on story-telling to convey a logics-defying thinking of the non-linear sort. And it was wonderful to discover that three fourths of Newton's output

had to do with alchemy, a far cry from the rigid mechanistic universe we associate him with.

Non-Euclidean geometry was another wonderful surprise, as were quantum physics and the theory of chaos. I also chanced on Adam McLean and his phenomenal *oeuvre* in alchemy, and on Rupert Sheldrake's earliest book, *A New Science of Life*, which made me aware of the existence of a scientific priesthood and the dogmas it upholds in the face of genuine scientific enquiry. Rupert and I have since become good friends.

In these early years I owe much to Phanes Press, David Fideler's glorious publishing house, now part of Red Wheel / Weiser. It was on Phanes Press that I first encountered Joscelyn Godwin. We began corresponding, then meeting here and there, and eventually we wrote *The Forbidden Book* together. Temperamentally I've always been addicted to knowledge, and it was good to chance on a clearly brilliant mind, classically trained like me, but who, also like me, had long realized that the canon was not all that interesting.

How did you begin working with Joscelyn?

The motivations for writing this novel together were many and manifold, not least the... play element. Both Joscelyn and I have been trained as musicians since our early years.

While Joscelyn continues to play all sorts of instruments, from the harpsichord to the *viola da gamba*, and I have essentially stopped, we approached the writing of *The Forbidden Book* not as writing but as playing. Which explains why we've never argued, and never will.

Joscelyn and I wrote mainly via electronic mail. The anticipation experienced before receiving each other's bits put all the fun back into writing: we were, really, playing. Sometimes it felt like opening not a new e-mail, but a Christmas gift when we were children. Every time a piece arrived, it was a minor celebration.

Occasionally we waited for the most propitious time to read one's new contribution. Then we would pick up the phone and discuss whatever needed elaboration, then edit each other, send, re-write, re-discuss, etc. The idea of writing sequentially was never realistically entertained (does anybody still write sequentially?): we kept jotting down whatever inspired us that day and then we'd put it "on the shelf," as Joscelyn would say, to be used whenever we needed it.

From time to time, we'd connect the dots and fill in the gaps. Our bits blended into one another and by now we couldn't quite distinguish who wrote what. Working together was not working and writing together was not writing -- it was too much fun, we were playing. Of course, there was a lot of editing, revising, rewriting, etc., but neither one of us knew that writing could be so much fun. We became a symbiotic duo, putting down ideas constantly and at the oddest times. Our friendship, which was solid before our project together, has grown tremendously. It's been an adventure.

Joscelyn is not only a brilliant mind and a great scholar -- we all knew that already. He is also, and maybe above all, an artist, and as such he has contributed many highly creative ideas to the plot, characterization, dialogue, etc. He's also supremely unassuming and, in short, a wonderful and very special man, one of those rare persons whose presence and activities make the world a better and more interesting place.

How does musicianship and play relate to writing a novel?

A duo of musicians welcomes each other's contributions. One knows when to take the lead and when to listen and accompany. And, last but not least, it is all play.

Mankind's heavily repressed urge is no longer sex, but... play. An urge as irresistible as it is seemingly inexplicable.

We humans have been optimistically classified as *Homo sapiens*, knowing man. Judging from the history of our proud species, one would think that *homo in-sapiens* might be more fitting, unknowing man. But the establishment, with the cultural canon it implements, works ever so assiduously at persuading us that evolution has been a great success, while the honest ones among us may suspect otherwise.

Therefore one wonders if the official name that science has assigned to us, or the unofficial one, its opposite, should not be exchanged for something more descriptive and encouraging: *homo ludens*, i.e., playing man.

Sapiens in this sense is usually attached to tool-making, technical ability, and so on, and other mechanistic traits. Do you see the emergence of culture differently?

Homo faber is man the maker as opposed to *homo sapiens*, knowing man. Neither model represents us fully, I suspect. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, author of the seminal book *Homo Ludens* on the role of playing in culture, wrote: "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing." Indeed, *homo ludens*, playing man, free from the superimposed and abstract aspiration of being the brilliant result of an extraordinarily long evolution, would be able to delight in the most harmless and fun of all activities: play.

Such a simple notion, if properly conveyed, would give all school children reassurance that, once they grow into adults, the activity that's most dear to their heart -- play -- shall never have to cease. Like Huizinga, I too believe that it's possible for play to be the primary formative element in human culture.

This brings to mind the pictures of Ecstatic play is, in some ways, the height of cultural experience then?

Yes, but we're taught differently. It's as if the insatiable craving for play displayed by children were superseded by the equally insatiable craving for sex that, according to what

we're told, will last until our senility, and then some. But it could be argued that repressing the very human urge to play has consequences as pernicious as repressing the very human sexual urge, as denounced by Freud when he was first exploring libido.

This concept of play, explained as you have, is essential to writing and art, however some people may not see how this applies to alchemy. How do alchemical symbols provide inspiration for a novelist?

The alchemical motive of *ludus puerorum*, child's play, was very present in our minds as Joscelyn and I wrote *The Forbidden Book*. Esoteric writings on alchemy often state that once the primitive materials of the Philosophers' Stone have been obtained, the rest of the Great Work is a simple labor, or "child's play."

As a wink to the erudite, in fact, we mention child's play in the novel in as many words. In Ch 19: "Leo, therefore, would take the ceremonial way. Immediately he noticed the sculpted figures on the banisters. Their attributes mimicked the garden sculptures of the Villa Riviera and, from what he could remember, they had the same inscriptions, but they were all *putti*, cheerful toddlers aping the gestures of their elders. Was this a way of saying that the Great Work was nothing but child's play?"

And again in the same chapter: "Feeling ready for anything, and wishing that he'd been this bold hours before, he entered the north range and passed through the dining room and kitchen. His heart leapt as he came to a corridor, with a door leading inwards. Perhaps it was child's play, after all, he thought as he entered the dark room." Leo is risking his life but above all he's trying to find and rescue Orsina, the woman he loves, who may well be more in danger than he is.

Having never been a man of action, he's incredulous that he should be doing well, and the notion of play, child's play, in fact, keeps coming up though he couldn't be more serious and terrified. And toward the end: "'Like that,' thought Leo, 'no customs, no immigration, no passports checked. Child's play.' The popular understanding of play differs from the one of the alchemists. We think of it as something puerile and harmless. In fact, it couldn't be more serious, and knows no age.

This isn't your first novel. While Godwin is best known for his musicology work, and scholarship on esoteric philosophy, you're already a critically acclaimed author. Your work *The Story of Yew* is perhaps your best known novel, and presents another unique approach to narrative.

The Story of Yew is the memoirs of a two thousand year old female yew tree told by the tree herself. Set in Ireland, it is at once imaginative and yet grounded in scientific fact. To research the material, I availed myself of the collaboration of the greatest botanists in the world. Two peculiar men stand out.

Allen Meredith was also researching ancient yew trees in the UK. At first he met me with diffidence. He took me to see "Druid's Grove," an impressive avenue of ancient yew trees

apparently planted by druids and still standing. But he *blindfolded* me as he drove me there, because he didn't want me to know where the grove was in England.

Only once inside the grove was I allowed to take off the blindfold. The avenue of age-old yews was otherworldly, sublime -- but Allen fell to ground, convulsing and writhing. Quite a pickle to find oneself in: I had no idea where I was and my "guide" may be passing out or worse at any moment. Eventually he composed himself, put the blindfold back on me, walked me out of the forest and drove me away. Later on he said that an immense force had seized him, and he'd been helpless before it. The story of this man has been told in the book *The Sacred Yew: Rediscovering the Ancient Tree of Life Through the Work of Allen Meredith*.

The other great character is Sir Ghillean Prance. At the time I met him he was Director of Kew Gardens. In his illustrious career, he has worked extensively in Brazil, and many species he has discovered bear his Latinized surname (which, taking the second declension singular genitive, becomes *prancii*, like *Trichogonia prancii*, for example).

Ghillean is as magnificent a man as Joscelyn, and that rare find: an eminent scientist who is spiritually gifted. Indeed, as a young man he began experiencing glossolalia. The first time this happened he was still a student.

With some classmates he had climbed up Mount Ararat, in Turkey. Once there, he began speaking in tongues. Of course in the Judeo-Christian tradition Mount Ararat is where Noah's Ark came aground. There is something extremely serene, almost seraphic about Ghillean. Like Joscelyn, he must be an old, very wise soul. Both are gifts to humanity.

Do you think about the writing process itself in alchemical terms? How does the allegorical description of the alchemical process in hermetic texts compare to fictional descriptions in a book?

This is a terrific question and, *in nuce*, the whole point about writing *The Forbidden Book*. Joscelyn and I find that Robert Schoch has given a very good answer in his review of our novel, when he writes:

A still deeper layer of meaning occurs at the level of allegory, and this in turn brings out another core theme of *Il Mondo Magico*. *The Forbidden Book* is among the latest in a long list of literary works in which the Hermetic tradition, the mental work, the Great Work (spiritually), the alchemical search for the Philosophers' Stone, is enciphered. A modern succinct key to such allegories is Roy Norvill's *The Language of the Gods* (Ashgrove Press, Bath, 1987).

Norvill admirably introduces the subject: "The mind of Man is capable of a certain, deliberate act of will, the successful application of which results in his being elevated to a higher state of consciousness, a realm of beneficence such as he has often dreamed of but never considered a reality. . . . attainment of this much desired goal places at one's disposal powers [...] that, if misapplied, can adversely affect the lives of others . . .

Accordingly . . . the initiates devised a form of advertising which, while open to all eyes, would be understood completely only by those in whom the sense of intuition was greater than ordinary reason" (p. 9). . . . "Commonly, this method of encipherment is known by the term 'allegory', but in due deference to the wholly spiritual world to which it really refers, the initiates chose to call it the 'Language of the Gods' " (p. 10).

Whether consciously and intentionally, unconsciously (perhaps due to their heavy involvement in the subject), or simply coincidentally (perhaps it is synchronistic) on the part of the authors, *The Forbidden Book* is a sublime allegory of the mental work of which Norvill writes.

Of course, it was deliberate on our side, but then at times synchronistic, too.

Sexuality becomes very central to the theme, but along two parallel lines. What is the alchemical importance of sexuality?

Mysterium coniunctionis, hierosgamos, the alchemical theme of union between the moon and the sun, love, in plain words, is, perhaps surprisingly, a driving force in the novel.

Suffice it to say that had he not been in love with Orsina, Leo, the hero, would never have come to Italy, taking her up on the invitation to study an indecipherable text from the Seventeenth Century. Borges wrote somewhere that a novel without a romance is not a novel -- and in fact in French "novel" is "roman", in Italian, "romanzo".

You also deal with a more mechanical view of the alchemical process. How does the Baron's pursuits differentiate his practice?

In the novel, Baron Emanuele Riviera della Motta, realizing that, contrary to the expectations implicit in being a Riviera della Motta, he is *not* a naturally-gifted magus, resorts to sexual alchemy, which requires the "friendly cooperation of a Hebe." At the end of the book, in the Afterword, we list some of the sources we have used for such passages.

I hasten to add that writing them was... unsavory, and whenever either one of us is asked about them, the reply is, "Oh, he wrote the naughty bits." The Baron violates every taboo and acts in a way that is shocking even for 21st Century readers. But in his mind he probably doesn't see himself as sinister, obscene, or outright repugnant. And least of all, ignoble. Far from it, he is very conscious of his nobility, and it's because of it that he behaves as he does. A "nobility" divested from any moral connotation, but rather intended as bloodline.

The Baron probably perceives himself as solar, carrying out the fate for which he was chosen. That's the other disconcerting general characteristic of the Royal Art: it is not "beyond good and evil"; it is not amoral or pre-moral; it is, simply, like electricity -- it flows, and carries, along with power, its internal logic.

Julius Evola, the 20th Century Italian esoteric philosopher, looms large in the novel. Some readers may not be aware of his place in the 20th century history of ideas, but his mythographic work was praised by scholars like Mircea Eliade, even while his political involvement with various Fascist groups during the Second World War put him at odds with contemporary philosophy. What was it like working with the image of such a complex historical figure?

A review of *The Forbidden Book* in [Egregores](#) [2] draws the line between our novel's Baron Emanuele and the real-life Baron Julius Evola, citing the latter's handicapped condition for the last thirty years of his life and straightened circumstances, as opposed to "our" Baron's physical vigor and opulence.

It's a point well taken, and certainly Evola's late works, particularly "Riding the Tiger" and "Men among the Ruins" are "survival manuals for aristocrats of the soul" rather than incitements to war. But the fact remains that in Italy Evola is perceived as the "cattivo maestro" (the bad teacher), i.e., the putative father of the ultra-right, and indeed his influence, even as an impoverished cripple and even *after* his death, was strong enough to inspire, among several others, some ultra-right terrorists belonging to the NAR (Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari) who bombed the railway station in Bologna back in 1980, a terrorist act that killed 81 people and wounded hundreds.

While Evola is phenomenal and prodigious in his output and in the depth and breadth of his erudition and original ideas, the "forbidden philosopher" must be taken *cum grano salis* and is best enjoyed once the reader has reached... maturity. Of course, Evolian scholars have labored to extricate the philosopher from any involvement in terrorist acts, and while it is certain that Evola had absolutely nothing to do with them, this is the man who in his younger years, wrote "Il fascismo visto da destra" (*Fascism Seen from the Right*) and who, during WW II, collaborated with the SS.

Some equally qualified scholars, it must be added, have taken a more balanced approach: Piero Fenili has, probably in spite of himself, authored three articles entitled "The errors of Julius Evola" on *Politica Romana*; the American scholar and Evolian expert Dana Lloyd Thomas has made various discoveries in Italy's Central State Archives of which he writes in his book *Julius Evola and the Racist Temptation. The lure of Pangermanism in Italy*. Finally, my co-author himself, Joscelyn Godwin, has published the essay *Pro and Contra Evola*.

Once more it must be stressed that Evola's most extreme ideas should not be fed to young, impressionable hotheads. But in our novel, "our" Baron does just that, and not only through words, but also through acts of sexual alchemy...

Returning to Baron Emanuele, in a sense the Baron takes the play of love, and twists it into a mechanistic tool to ignite a political event that will seal his attainment of the Philosophical Mercury. The admonitory note to this practice becomes obvious in the novel, while in society much of our lives are built on mechanized emotion.

That's a very good point. And yet, playing is frowned upon in the adult world. Think of the cautionary tale *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. In it, the fictional location The Land of Toys, renamed in the Disney film adaptation *Pleasure Island*, serves as a haven for wayward boys, allowing them to act as they please and play all they want without any recrimination.

However, the truer and more sinister purpose of *Pleasure Island* is eventually revealed as it begins physically to transform the boys into donkeys. The message, here, is straightforward: boys and girls, beware of play -- it will turn you into donkeys!

Julius Evola often used donkeys as a symbolic representation of Christ. Is there perhaps a hidden meaning in the story of Pinocchio, or an echo? If we all follow his advice to be as little children, we would be in constant play.

The Greek myth of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child, has been co-opted so as to discredit adults who are as keen on playing as when they were children. Analytical psychology uses as an example of the eternal child *The Little Prince*, by the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a story so well loved by the whole world, indeed one of the bestselling books of all times, one wonders if being a *puer aeternus* could be all that bad?

How does play related to your use of language in *The Forbidden Book*?

The Danish literary critic Thomas Harder writes in his review of the Danish edition: "*The Forbidden Book* is witty and full of atmosphere and gives the reader a pleasant feeling of being in the hands of competent people with a thorough knowledge of not only religions, the Church, occult matters and esoteric circles, but also of Italian matters in general." He is, as chance would have it, a highly respected Italianist, and in his country, and Scandinavia by and large, he enjoys the status of, say, Umberto Eco.

He is right: ours is such first-hand knowledge that we can allow ourselves nuances and telling details. For example, the following passage:

"...but a minor palace. Painted in the faded yellow color of polenta, grand and genteel, it gave a feeling of ease."

If you want to paint the outside of a house that specific yellow, in Italy they really say "yellow polenta," "giallo polenta." We are playing, here.

Not only are we using the exact Italian nomenclature to give, quite literally, a taste for the place, but we are also playing on the unmentioned word "giallo", which in Italian fiction and film history stands for, in essence, a murder mystery, which will shortly intrude in the narrative. The Italian publisher Mondadori published successful mystery novels that all had trademark yellow (*giallo*) covers.

Shortly after in the text, another note of color:

"... Was this Orsina? The beauty was all there, in its full impact. Her long, wavy hair of the red hue Titian favored in his paintings, and her sunny green eyes. ... "

We need to resort to a circumlocution so as to explain that to English readers, but in Italian instead of red hair one can just say Tiziano hair -- yes, the name of the painter has been adopted for general use in Italian when describing that hair color.

This is the kind of complex word play that Fulcanelli points to in *The Mysteries of the Cathedrals*, what he refers to as 'cant.' It seems this kind of thing is an important aspect of the Hermetic Art, as well as any form of esotericism.

Indeed language is uppermost in my thoughts. I begin the essay "The Art of the Novel" as follows:

Language, the very fabric of all literature, is strangely taken for granted by the vast majority of contemporary writers. It is not only a case of that deplorable "one-size-fits-all" (non)style to which we have willy-nilly become accustomed. Not only a "vehicle" -- I dread the expression "vehicular language", but it exists, and happens to refer to the English language -- to hackneyed story lines and best-selling stardom. It is a subtler, and deeper, problem, one of which many seem to be utterly unaware.

Long ago Dante wrote a treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia*, an apologia of the "vulgar", the vernacular, the language of the people, i.e., Italian. Yet, the very treatise he wrote in Latin! Quite a paradox, but then a fitting example of how the great masters did not take language for granted.

There used to be a time in which Wittgenstein had such a profound influence on me, I couldn't pick up any text, simply because nowhere did I detect the respect and awe language ought to have inspired in its author. I must confess some of that is still with me.

Perhaps all aspiring writers ought to be fed Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* as compulsory readings before setting out on their word-searching quests. If nothing else, they would begin to apprehend the intricate, mysterious and ambiguous aspects of language, even everyday, ordinary parlance. Did they realize language could imply so much, and/or so little, at the same time? Should the complexity of philosophical linguistics not discourage them but, as it is hoped, intrigue them and "blow their minds," after Wittgenstein they might wish to consider the following.

One day Jelaluddin Rumi, one of the most learned men of his time, was sitting in his personal library, with students gathered around him for a lecture. Suddenly, a raggedy old man, Shams Tabrizi, entered uninvited. He pointed to some books stacked in a corner, and asked Rumi, "What are these?"

Rumi, thinking him an illiterate peasant, answered, "You would not understand."

As soon as he finished speaking, flames started to rise from the books in the corner. Frightened, Rumi cried out, "What is it?"

Shams replied, calmly: "Nor would you understand this," and he left the room.

That episode sanctioned Rumi's conversion from a canonical erudite to a poet of genius and a mystic.

Place, along with language, plays an important part in *The Forbidden Book* on many levels. What contact did you have with the Genius loci you invoked?

The inspiration for the villa in the Veronese came from a villa in which I was a guest during my teenagehood, owned by one of Verona's most illustrious dynasties -- the Maffei-Faccioli. You may be familiar with one of their ancestors, the *literatus*, antiquarian and humanist Scipione Maffei. The "villa-hopping" we write about in the novel I myself briefly engaged in, but back then it was harmless.

My host took me from villa to palace, in the area. Palladio among others has left his mark on the region and I must say, even though I was just a teenager, the scene left an indelible impression on me. All villas and palaces were in a state of more or less pronounced disrepair, and their gardens and parks, more or less neglected and overgrown.

This was the ancient aristocracy still holding on to their ancestral homes. Now they've mostly been sold to new money or subdivided into apartments to rent seasonally to tourists. Back then, as mentioned, the scene was innocent: no drugs or alcohol involved, just beautiful places and genteel people, the type of benign and charming aristocracy one day I should write about so as to break a lance for it (I certainly do *not* in our novel).

And there's much to say about the palazzo in Venice, too. It is a co-protagonist, along with the forbidden book itself. Joscelyn spent endless hours working with an architect to sketch its drawings, which the reader can find at the end of the book.

Lineage plays an important part in the novel, with Baron Emanuele Riviera della Motta branching out from the famed alchemist Cesare della Riviera. This is a fictional family line, however Cesare della Riviera is real. Who is the historical Cesare della Riviera?

There is virtually no background information on him. And yet Julius Evola, the towering giant of 20th Century hermeticism, deemed his work "The Magical World of the Heroes" the most important treatise on alchemy ever written and, in 1932, edited a copiously annotated modern version of it.

No background on him? But he is one of the most influential alchemical sources for certain traditionalist philosophers.

Joscelyn and I have looked for any trace left by this alchemist beyond his masterwork -- in vain. Close friends of ours have done the same -- once more, in vain.

Do you think that other authors using esoteric tropes in their work go to the same level of detail? An archival search as you describe undertaking to look for historical traces of Ceasare della Riviera requires access to public and private libraries across Europe!

Joscelyn and I wanted to react to novelists who write about esoterica without really knowing much about it. Esotericism is not something one can research as if it were, say, hydrology, but rather something that one is initiated into. Moreover, they seem to set their novels invariably in Italy, far from suspecting that Italy is not a country but, really, a metaphysical problem.

About this metaphysical problem I should one day write a book. But, briefly, to give the reader an idea of the complexity and strangeness of Italy, I could mention its origin myth: Virgil's *The Aeneid*, which was a smashing success throughout the Roman Empire.

In it, the poet had set out, yielding to Emperor Augustus's request, to celebrate the birth of Rome in Homeric fashion and, in everyone's opinion, had succeeded triumphantly. Nobody seemed to heed the epic's more ambiguous antihero implications, or its central theme of constant and woeful uprooting: Aeneas is forced again and again to pluck up roots and move on toward the destination set out for him by fate, *not* by personal choice.

Aeneas must constantly suffer. He, the uprooted hero, even becomes, for Queen Dido, a carrier of uprootedness. He leaves Troy against his wishes; leaves Queen Dido against his wishes (and she commits suicide); once in Latium, he kills the local king Turnus against his wishes, and finally founds Rome.

No origin myth I'm aware of features a hero who does everything against his wishes, including his primary mission! In addition to that, Emperor Augustus exiled to Tomis, on the Black Sea, the poet who would have been ideal for the job -- Ovid.

One goes to Villa Borghese in Rome, sees Bernini's sculptures inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and says, "This can't be matched, sculpture can't get any better than this." And indeed, there hasn't been anything nearly as good since. Then one goes to Athens, and sees anything by Phidias and is bound to correct oneself: "Actually, perfection in sculpture was already achieved -- here, in the 5th Century BC."

I suppose a prerequisite for many such epiphanies is being Italian. As an Italian aware of history, one goes to Athens and hears people speak at the corner of the street. "They must be Italians," one thinks. Then, upon approaching, he realizes they're speaking Greek.

Italy really has invented Western Civilization at least four times over, but, as mentioned, it is not a country, but a metaphysical problem. One wanders into Ancona's cathedral (from the Greek ἄγκων - Ankon), San Ciriaco, and realizes that it incorporates ten

columns from a Greek temple of Venus. Magna Græcia was not merely Sicily, Calabria and Apulia: it was two thirds of the Italian Peninsula. Pythagoras lived in the Achean colony of Croton (Κρότων). To make a long story short: if Italy is a metaphysical problem, Hellas is a metaphysical miracle. We are all her sons and daughters and any cultured Italian in Hellas walks about in a constant sense of awe.

But one wonders: what do popular writers of allegedly "esoteric" thrillers know about art? Architecture? Alchemy? Hemiticism? The history of ideas? And how all these have interplayed with one another down the centuries?

With that kind of detail though, isn't it easy to fall into pedantry? To become a list of facts without real narrative development?

Absolutely. And yet, having said all of the above regarding our background and preparation, Jan Johnson, the publisher at Red / Wheel Weiser, writes in her evaluation of our novel: "Well done! I will say, by way of high praise, the word 'pedantic' never once entered my head as I read. And, yet, look at all the material you incorporated. Again, well done!"

With the amount of detail we included, her emphasis on our not being pedantic is indeed high praise, for which we are very grateful.

What was your and Godwin's intention in writing the book?

Which brings us back to the beginning -- *da capo al fine*: our goal was that of writing an allegory of a certain mental process that can be brought into being by alchemical texts and more or less gifted and devoted practitioners. Then there was a more mundane intention -- to expose the imposture of popular works of fiction that promise magic but do not deliver it.

Having said that, we could have easily overdone it, but we exercised restraint. Why? Because it is, in the end, play, alchemical or not. Joscelyn and I would not engage in outsmarting and out-quoting one other, out-incorporating the remotest references. No, a successful music duo strives above all for balance.

While the book, as you mentioned earlier, works around a central storyline that follows the classic giallo, you've expanded on this through your and Godwin's expertise. How does this change the way *The Forbidden Book* acts as a 'popular' novel?

Our take on the esoteric or theological thriller differs from the average. Most such works exploit a public fascination with esotericism or magic, but only skirt the issue, as the mystery is routinely solved by rational means. □ □

We likewise bring back to life ancient rituals, secret societies, and so on, but then have the leading characters attempt to solve the mystery by esoteric means. Their attempts are

tentative because they are neophytes forced by necessity to take on a role which is not necessarily theirs (i.e., that of the magus).

Our originality is in working out the implications of the ancient and secret knowledge that we revive. Of course, there are rationalistic characters in our novels, e.g., in the persona of the Inspector. And indeed we play out the polarity between the rational and the esoteric.

While for the authors of esoteric/theological thrillers the knowledge is second-hand, it is not for us: in the scholarly esoteric field, Joscelyn is widely acknowledged as an authority; as for the setting, so often in Italy, and for Catholicism, also often a key ingredient of the story, I too need no research.

Moreover, we are both thoroughly familiar with the milieus we describe in our fiction. This combination of expertise lends authenticity to the novel. We are not saying that authenticity per se sells; we are saying that the readers, from the very beginning, feel that they are in capable hands, which helps very much with their suspension of disbelief.

Doesn't it tread dangerous ground to discuss political esotericism openly? How do you respect some traditions' wish to remain secret?

For what concerns magical practices, we resort only to published sources, however remotely, not to betray the trust of our magically-inclined friends. With one exception.

Triantafyllos Kotzamanis, a high-ranking initiate of various rites. He owned the publishing house Kibely, in Athens, Greece, and, as I discovered, was a revered healer and thaumaturge. He only used magic to cure the incurable, and for free, but even that took its toll, resulting in his premature death.

Sasha Chaitow, the Director of the Phoenix Rising Digital Academy, comments that "He remains a legend in esoteric circles." I remember his booming voice in Athens -- he was a big, towering man -- when he told me, "I cannot use magic to help my publishing house; I cannot!" He stopped in the middle of the road well past midnight to emphasize his point. He had seen, and partaken of, the Secrets.

But he wouldn't dare use magic, or the Art, for his limited, myopic ambitions. In our novel *Leo*, the unlikely hero, engages in vaticination (divination or prophecy), thanks to what he learns in *The Forbidden Book*, so as to see into the past, and the present and help the heroine. As compensation, he bleeds from his pores almost to death (compensation? you may wonder. Remember what I just said: the Royal Art is, simply, like electricity -- it flows, and carries, along with power, its internal logic). Exactly this -- scientifically called hematidrosis -- used to happen to the Greek thaumaturge when he healed the gravely ill.

Even with the esoteric underpinnings the novel deals with issues that are very contemporary as well. Did you intend for it to mirror some of the recent events that have occurred which bear a striking similarity to what is discussed in the novel?

Yes. In stark contrast to the esoteric theme, we imbue our stories with a very urgent and anguished background, in *The Forbidden Book* the ugly reality of Islamic extremism, with a terrorist assault first on Italian and then on Spanish soil. Later, the equally ugly terrorism of other factions, deliberately blamed on the Muslims, complicates the plot. The repercussions of these acts are felt throughout Europe, the USA and the world.

Our novel -- first published in 2007 in Spain, and then in other six countries before it was published just recently in the US -- contains a prediction. Indeed, Anders Breivik's killing spree of July 2011 comes to mind: a man who assimilates himself to the Templars, wants to rid Europe of the Islamic threat and belongs to the ultra-right, which had virtually vanished after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but has revived since massive waves of illegal immigrants, many of them Muslims, have come to Europe and settled

We hope that our other scenario -- the blowing up of a crowded major cathedral in Europe by Al-Qaida -- will remain a product of our imagination, but in fact the hecatomb with which we open the novel had in actuality been planned not once but twice by members of Al-Qaida, and thwarted, both times *in extremis*, by the police.

This too, we believe, represents a departure from the typical esoteric thriller. The problem we present is not remote or intangible, like, say, the alleged power of Freemasonry, but one before everybody's eyes and unfortunately bound to remain topical for decades to come. This is the moral dimension of our work, in that the characters show different attitudes, with which the reader is invited to sympathize, or not.

This idea of alternate identities, in the sense that Al-Qaida is using Islam to back fundamentalist goals, yet is, in itself, a heretical offshoot of Islamic practice, or with Anders Breivik his use of a Christian identity, when his actions and intentions have nothing to do with Christian piety, this also seems to come into play with Baron Emanuele's use of traditionalist Christianity as a mask for his dream of a revival of an idealized pagan antiquity.

Yes, but here too there's a lot to say, not to mention Leo's and the Baron's different and yet paradoxically similar approaches to Christianity: the former a knower and practitioner of Ignatius de Loyola's spiritual exercises; the latter, a pagan who nevertheless first tries to revive the Christianity of the Crusades so as to kick out the "invading infidels," and then plans to revert to paganism.

Why is the migration of Muslims into Europe such an issue today?

When asked about the possibility of integration for the Muslims specifically in Italy, I usually reply half-facetiously, and I must stress "half-facetiously" lest I should be crucified: "Think for a moment about Italy's national glories. Music. Italy virtually

invented western music, with notation (Guittone d'Arezzo), tonality, all the instruments, opera, and so on; well, music is forbidden by Islam, and may be used only to accompany liturgy.

Painting. Italy, once more, has brought painting to unprecedented levels of perfection -- and invented perspective, which is used to this day in figurative art of all types, including comics. Well, figurative painting is banned by Islam.

Wine. While wine was not invented in Italy (Georgia, rather, it would seem), Etruscans, ancient Greeks on Italian soil and Ancient Romans made it a staple of their cultures. The Sangiovese (literally *Sangue di Giove*, Blood of Jove), for example, is reputed to be an Etruscan grape cultivated uninterruptedly in what is now Tuscany for three millennia. Islam bans alcohol consumption of any sort.

Prosciutto, salame, and all sorts of cold cuts (*insaccati*): a culinary glory of Italy. Islam bans pork from the alimentary regimen of its followers. So, four of Italy's greatest claims to glory are outright denied by Islam. How are Muslims expected realistically to integrate in Italy if they go by the Book? Conversely, how are they expected to be Muslims if they don't go by the Book?

Do you think esoteric philosophy can provide a bridge between faith traditions? One thinks of Moorish Spain where alchemy and Kabbalah flourished, or the dreams of Bohemia under Rudolf II.

Certainly, and it already does. It's the *Philosophia perennis* -- philosophical insight that recurs universally independently of age and culture. For example, in Taoism, Te is a key concept. Roughly, it is one's integrity, not in the western sense of honor, but in the psychological sense of a full integration of who one is. Te is self-nature and, in relation to the cosmos, self-realization. The cosmic principle actualizes itself in the self. Each creature has a Te, its own expression of the Tao. Precisely this interrelationship between the Tao and the Te is the secret of the superior man, or woman.

And then there's the matter of "con-forming," that is, literally, to be with the *form*. Platonic pure form, from his World of Forms, is what one must aspire to. So, this is a universal principle, one that echoes from Plato's to Lao Tzu's words.

There are some Zen stories that find their equivalent in Sufi stories. At the source of most religions there is an esoteric movement. As the religion expands, it becomes exoteric, and loses much if not most of its original elements. That's when different sects and factions come into play, heresy, fights for supremacy, even within the same religion.

We esotericists have our work cut out: to show that the point for a spiritual connection is *not* to root for this over that faction, not at all, in fact. The point is that great esoteric traditions have much in common and already coexist. Certainly in Joscelyn's and in my mind.

Ultimately what do you want the reader to take from the novel?

Josceyn and I are fascinated by the idea of providing the average reader with all the elements of a page-turner and yet deviate from the formula, by having marinated the material, all of it, in authenticity -- from the marvelous alchemical treatise that inspires the whole novel, "The Magical World of the Heroes," down to the minutest detail of police and judicial procedures, and everything in between.

What future projects are you working on?

There's another novel with Josceyn in the works. We can't say anything about it at this stage, except a tease. One very minor character, who makes a cameo appearance in *The Forbidden Book*, will be one of the heroes in our next novel.

Guido Mina di Sospiro, August I, 2012