

The Newsletter of the
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the Study of Western
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Words from the new President of ESSWE

–*Andreas Kilcher*



Within only eight years of its existence, the ESSWE has developed into a remarkable scholarly organization with regional networks and a large variety of activities: conferences, workshops, publications, prizes, bursaries. This is the achievement not only of a few single persons but of all of us, though also owing a lot to personal initiatives. When I took over the duty of the presidency a few months ago in Gothenburg, I found ESSWE in great shape and I want to thank everybody who contributed to this, Wouter Hanegraaff as the former president and Mark Sedgwick as the secretary of ESSWE to start with, and my colleagues on the board as well as every member of the society.

I myself participated in the founding of ESSWE – I remember discussing the idea of a society in Aups, Southern France, together with Wouter, Kocku, Marco, Mark, Nicholas, Jean-Pierre. I am happy that I subsequently had the opportunity to organize the first ESSWE conference in Tübingen in 2007, during the ‘pioneer era’ of our society. At this time, my interest was – coming from the study of literature and culture – Kabbalah and its role in modern European culture. In the meantime, I extended my interest towards modern occultism on the one hand, and on the other the systematic question of the epistemology of esotericism, that is, understanding esotericism’s claims to and forms of knowledge. Being the director of the *Zentrum Geschichte des Wissens* (“Center History of Knowledge”, ZGW) in Zürich, this seems to me a very fruitful new perspective on esotericism.

Even though ESSWE is in a very good shape, we cannot relax. I am convinced, for example, that we need to broaden our approach to Western esotericism to encompass more cross-disciplinary perspectives, i.e., not only the history of religion but also the history of ideas, the history of literature and art, and the history of knowledge, which to me seems to be extremely promising for the study of esotericism. But also as an institution, ESSWE has to develop in at least three directions: geographically, culturally and thematically. Firstly, geographically: in contrast to most countries in Western Europe, in many countries in Eastern Europe the study of esotericism is still in a rather difficult situation. It is one of the challenges of ESSWE to help overcome this situation. Secondly, culturally, meaning that we have to extend and to question the Eurocentric perspective with which we started. Thirdly, I see the necessity not only of regional but, even more, of transregional thematic networks like WEAVE (Research Network for Western Esotericism in modern Art and Visual culture), which was recently founded by Tessel Bauduin, Nina Kokkinen and Christian Giudice. This can be a model for similar networks within ESSWE – and opens vast new opportunities for connecting scholars from different regions of Europe.

I am looking forward to the year 2014, which brings us many conferences and a workshop in May in Amsterdam, where hopefully many of us will meet.

Words from the editor

–Per Faxneld



It is almost Christmas again, and the Fall issue of the Newsletter arrives shortly before Santa as usual. This time, we begin with the new President of ESSWE sharing some thoughts with us members. The regular features are also all here, which means two conference reports (ESSWE4 in Gothenburg, which is accompanied by a report from the board meeting, and INASWE3 in Jerusalem) as well as interviews with a junior and a senior scholar (featuring some highly entertaining and thought-provoking answers from Jean-Pierre Brach and Dylan Burns).

Another stalwart is the Ph.D. project presentations, but this time we have only one instead of two. This is simply because it has become increasingly difficult for me to find people willing to present their projects. If you are a Ph.D. student and would like to introduce your fellow scholars of esotericism to what you are doing, please send me an e-mail. As always, I also welcome all types of feedback. You can reach me at this address: per.faxneld@rel.su.se

Speaking of feedback, some readers have complained about the file size of the Newsletter. At long last, I have now identified what it is that makes the file swell to around five megabytes every time. The problem is related to the MS Word template we use, and you can therefore expect

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to see a new template and, as a result, a smaller file size for the Spring issue. Finally, given the time of year, here is, as tradition dictates, a little Christmas poem:

The minstrels played their Christmas tune

To-night beneath my cottage-eaves;
While, smitten by a lofty moon,
The encircling laurels, thick with leaves,
Gave back a rich and dazzling sheen,
That overpowered their natural green.

Through hill and valley every breeze
Had sunk to rest with folded wings:
Keen was the air, but could not freeze,
Nor check, the music of the strings;
So stout and hardy were the band
That scraped the chords with strenuous hand.

And who but listened? – till was paid
Respect to every inmate's claim,
The greeting given, the music played
In honour of each household name,
Duly pronounced with lusty call,
And "Merry Christmas" wished to all.

–William Wordsworth, "Minstrels: A Christmas Poem"



Conference report: ESSWE 4, Gothenburg, Sweden, June 26–29, 2013.

– *Manon Hedenborg-White*

Academic conferences are liminal (or at least liminoid) experiences. In an unfamiliar city and university one is exposed to new perspectives, topics, and questions. Hierarchies are temporarily dissolved, and new alliances are formed. In liminality, old rules are disrupted, established positions are challenged, and boundaries are shifted. The 4th biannual ESSWE conference, which took place at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, on June 26–29 this year, was such an experience. During four jam-packed nine-hour days interspersed with night-time events, featuring a dizzying array of topics ranging from Agrippa to acupuncture, Crowley to cocktail culture, and Valentinian gnosticism to vegetarianism, some 150 participants gathered to be challenged, form alliances, and probe the boundaries of esotericism research.

In the months leading up to the conference, organisers Henrik Bogdan and Christian Giudice of the University of Gothenburg created a buzz around the upcoming event, even adding a countdown clock to the conference website. This hype, as it turns out, was justified, and hardly diminished during the four days of the conference. The opening remarks by Ola Sigurdson (University of Gothenburg) set the tone for this transdisciplinary event, and the generally high quality of the papers, well-organised schedule, and carefully coordinated balance between academics and distractions provided a thoroughly satisfying conference experience.

The call for papers encouraged prospective speakers to interpret this year's theme, 'Esotericism and Health', in a broad sense. The approximately 90 speakers complied. While many papers centred on more traditionally health-related topics such as the intersection of esotericism with psychology, psychiatry, medicine, alternative medicine, and medical history, numerous speakers favoured the "health in a broad sense" approach, interpreting the notion as pertaining to a more general sense of wellbeing or self-fulfilment.

Fittingly enough, this conference on 'Esotericism and Health' served as both an evaluation and testament to the vitality of the field, not least demonstrated by the quality and scope of the keynote lectures, which ranged across East and West, ancient and modern: Peter Forshaw (University of Amsterdam) on "'Medicina Hermetica': The Early Modern Promotion of a Hermetic Way to Health"; Carole M. Cusack

(University of Sydney) on 'The Enneagram: An Esoteric Model of Psychological Health' on the Gurdjieffian movement; and Mark Sedgwick (Aarhus University) on 'Western Esotericism and Islamic Studies.'

In his presidential address, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (University of Amsterdam) reviewed the current status of research on Western esotericism, predicting the advent of 'Esotericism 3.0', a new phase in the field's development and understanding of its subject matter. Hanegraaff outlined the major waves of scholarship in the field, demonstrating its remarkable progress while also indicating the challenges facing current and future generations of esotericism scholars. The sense of transition imparted by this address was emphasised as Hanegraaff himself passed the torch of ESSWE chairmanship to his successor Andreas Kilcher (ETH Zurich).

Hanegraaff's assessment and Forshaw, Cusack and Sedgwick's keynote lectures indicate the bright future of esotericism research. One of the conference highlights, which also signified the breaking of new ground in the study of Western esotericism, was the extremely well attended session on "Occultist women". Allison Coudert (University of California, Davis) spoke about the unconventional thought of Frances Swiney; Jimmy Elwing (University of Amsterdam) explored gender and sexuality in Ida Craddock's spiritual system; and Elizabeth Lowry (Arizona State University) discussed the reclamation of agency in Dion Fortune's *Psychic Self-Defense*. Given the lack of scholarship on the subject, drawing attention to female occultists' work is important to remedying the gender bias in esotericism research. Coudert, Elwing and Lowry's papers as well as Marco Pasi's (University of Amsterdam) talk on the sexual magic of Lady Caithness is certainly a step in the right direction. While I am unsure whether separate panels grouping together three very different occultists on the basis of their sex (imagine, if you will, a panel on "Male occultists") is the most effective way of challenging the notion of men as the norm and women as anomalies in the field of esotericism, I was pleased to see so many attendees taking an interest in female occultists.

Sedgwick's lecture and the two "Islamic perspectives" sessions indicate an increasing interest in the subject among esotericism scholars. This is welcome, as the area is relatively under-explored and broadens the horizons of esotericism research. The need for more insight into the intersections of Islam and Western esotericism was highlighted by a member of the audience who wondered aloud whether the three papers in one of the "Islamic perspectives" sessions were really suitable for an esotericism conference. While the quality and relevance of the talks likely left little doubt in most of the listeners' heads regarding the importance of the subject to research on Western esotericism, the question still indicates that much remains to be done when it comes to introducing the subject to a wider audience.

An entire session of the conference was devoted to Aleister Crowley. Despite his centrality to modern occultism, Crowley has remained relatively neglected by scholars until recently. The papers by Johan Nilsson (Lund University), Damon Z. Lycourinos (University of Edinburgh) and Shawn Gray (University of Exeter) provided different perspectives on the tensions between psychology, magic and embodiment in Crowley's ideas. While all three contributions held a high quality, Lycourinos' paper on the ritual body in Crowley's system of sexual magic stood out as particularly innovative, indicating the wealth of under-explored approaches to research on occultism.

Needless to say, the many mention-worthy papers presented at a conference of the magnitude and quality of ESSWE4 cannot be adequately covered in this limited space. I faced similar difficulties at the conference, having to make many tough decisions regarding which sessions to attend. I particularly regret missing the "Late Antiquity" session, which was rumoured to have been excellent, and featured papers by Dylan Burns (Universität Leipzig) and Matt Twigg (University of Oxford).

The generally superb quality of the papers and keynote lectures notwithstanding, many equally interesting exchanges and boundary-crossing experiences took place in more relaxed settings. The conference dinner was held at the local Masonic Hall. For a young female scholar such as myself, being invited into this exotic and wholly unfamiliar

domain was eye opening. The conclusion of the conference also enhanced its boundary-crossing flavour, linking music, art, magic and academia. The last feature of the programme was a panel discussion and subsequent Q&A session with pandrogynous music legend Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, and Carl Abrahamsson, musician, author, and editor of the journal *Fenris Wolf*. Later that night, Genesis P-Orridge and Abrahamsson with his band White Stains provided a suitably mind-widening conclusion to the conference by performing live in the basement of a local club.

Liminality is followed by reintegration. The metaphor is, admittedly, flawed, as conferences are not exactly rites of passage. For many newcomers to academia, however, they can be just that; being the first experience of belonging to an international research community. As noted above, this conference on 'Esotericism and Health' seems to have proven the health of esotericism research, which was not least evidenced by the high number of students and young scholars in attendance and the quality of their contributions. ESSWE4 gave a taste of what research on Western esotericism can be if we, as scholars, dare to venture into the unknown and bring new people, subjects, and perspectives to our work. I sincerely hope that everyone who attended was enriched by the experience, and will continue the quest of revitalising the field.

Photos by Punita Miranda.



Report from the ESSWE board meeting

–Mark Sedgwick, Secretary

The Board of ESSWE meets every year. In 2013, it met in Gothenburg, immediately after the ESSWE conference there. The report below gives details of decisions taken at that meeting, and of related decisions made at the Meeting of Members that was also held in Gothenburg.

Board membership

The term of Wouter Hanegraaff as President of ESSWE came to an end in 2013, and Andreas Kilcher was elected new President at the Meeting of Members. Boaz Huss was then elected new Vice-President. At the later Board meeting, Professor Hanegraaff was elected to honorary membership of the ESSWE in recognition of his services to the field. Demetrius Waarsenburg resigned as Treasurer of the ESSWE in 2012, and Egil Aspren, formerly Vice-Treasurer, was appointed by the Board to replace him as Treasurer. Marco Pasi was appointed the new Vice-Treasurer. At the Meeting of Members, Sophie Page was elected to the Board as a new member, and four continuing members were re-elected by acclamation: Henrik Bogdan, Jean-Pierre Brach, Marco Pasi, and Gyorgy E. Szonyi.

Coming workshop

It was decided that the 2014 workshop would be held in Amsterdam.

Thematic networks

One new research network was accepted: WEAVE, a network for the study of Western Esotericism in modern Art and Visual Culture. Their website is networkweave.com. It was decided to invite three other organizations to become affiliated networks of the ESSWE: the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM, Russia), the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE, USA), and Politica Hermetica (France).

Prizes and bursaries

The ESSWE thesis prize was awarded in 2013, and three travel bursaries were awarded to allow members from the former Eastern European bloc to attend the Gothenburg conference. There were, however, no applicants for the Homan Essay Prize. The Board decided that the 2014 prize would be announced more widely.

Administrative matters

The Board decided that the current website is outdated and needs to be replaced, and set up a task force to look into this.

Conference report: INASWE (the Israeli Network for the Study of Western Esotericism) 3rd annual meeting, May 27, 2013, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

– Boaz Huss

The topic of this year's conference, which was organized by Dr. Reimund Leicht of the Department of Jewish Thought, was "Methods in the Study of Esotericism." The meeting included lectures by INASWE members from most Israeli Universities (Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, University of Haifa, and Ben-Gurion University) as well as by two distinguished guest lecturers, Professor Mark Sedgwick from Aarhus University, Denmark, and Professor Jeff Kripal from Rice University, U.S.A. The first session of the one-day conference was dedicated to historical perspectives. Mark Sedgwick presented a lecture entitled "Plotinus to Perennialism: The *Longue Durée* in the Study of Esotericism," in which he weighed the benefits of such an approach against the risks, taking his current work on the transmission and impact of Neoplatonism as an example, and concluding that the benefits outweighed the risks—though the risks were real. Yossi Schwartz, in his lecture on "Methods in the Study of Christian Kabbalah," showed that Christian Kabbalah was the first systematic attempt to modernize and vernacularize the Jewish medieval and early modern Kabbalistic canon, in which Jews, converts and Christians were involved. The complex relationship between the original Kabbalistic speculations and their adaptations developed into a fascinating game of mirrors. Schwartz argued that in order to achieve a full account of such historic phenomena new methodologies must be used, transcending disciplinary borders and turning away from well-known figures in order to study further circles of reception and absorption.

The second session of the conference discussed contemporary perspectives of esotericism. Tomer Persico presented his research on meditative practices in Jewish mysticism. He offered a phenomenological typology of mystical experiences and techniques, and suggested to use a variety of interdisciplinary methods in order to advance the research of Jewish meditative practices. Jeff Kripal's paper,

entitled “Big Sur Real: Henry Miller's Preternatural Oranges and the Glowing Orbs of Big Sur,” looked at folklore and reported experiences of conscious balls of light around Big Sur, California, particularly in the work of the eroticist Henry Miller. Kripal used these narratives to challenge some of the academy’s ontological commitments, mostly to materialism and strict contextualism.

The third session was dedicated to Kabbalah and Western esotericism. Yoni Garb discussed “Shamanism and The Secret History of Modern Kabbalah.” In his lecture he presented the hidden tradition alluded to in modern Kabbalistic texts (from the generation of the expulsion from Spain to the present) that is now surfacing to a greater extent. Garb argued that it is justified to regard this tradition, which describes a descent into the infernal realms in order to hasten redemption, as “shamanic.”

In the last lecture of the conference, Yossi Chajes and his research associates Eliezer Baumgarten and Menachem Kallus presented the comprehensive “Ilanot” research project funded by the Israeli Science Foundation. The lecture, entitled “Seeing the Forest, Seeing the Trees,” discussed the methodological approaches that Chajes and his team use in the research project that studies elaborated graphic representations of Kabbalistic doctrines. The annual meeting was concluded with a lively discussion, moderated by Reimund Leicht and Boaz Huss.



Photo by Mark Sedgwick

Ph.D. project presentation

Scarlet Harlot: The Goddess Babalon and Discourses of Gender in Western Esotericism

– *Manon Hedenborg-White, University of Uppsala, Sweden*



In the stereotypical dichotomy of Madonna and whore, the former is more often revered. Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), however, saw matters differently: in his religion Thelema, the sacred harlot Babalon is one of the principal deities. While Crowley appears to have been inspired by the Whore of Babylon from Revelation (17: 3–5), he reinterpreted the figure as an independent goddess whom he connected to a high level of initiation and saw as a symbol of fully liberated (and particularly feminine) sexuality. Babalon has a central role in the teachings of British occultist Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), and even more so in the philosophy of American rocket scientist and occultist John Whiteside “Jack” Parsons (1914–1952). The goddess is still an important icon in contemporary Thelema, and she is revered by a modest number of practitioners of other esoteric traditions.

The purpose of my thesis is to map out and analyse the images of Babalon from 1904 until today from a gender perspective. One of the main objectives of my thesis is to highlight the dynamic nature of esotericism and therefore a significant part of the study will consist of ethnographic fieldwork, primarily with Thelemic groups. I will also analyse written sources, both historical and more recent, in order to understand how the Babalon figure has developed over time.

Issues of gender have largely been overlooked in previous research on Western esotericism. Exploring how magic and divinity are gendered as well as gender performances in ritual and socialisation is essential to understanding how power and identity are negotiated in esoteric traditions. Utilising feminist theorist Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, my thesis will indicate the complexity and ambiguity of gender constructions in 20th and 21st century occultism. Although Babalon is mainly described as a metaphysical force rather than a corporeal being, she is consistently regarded as a highly sexualised female. Moreover, the goddess is often connected to notions of female emancipation and sexual liberation. Thus, the Babalon discourse reveals attitudes towards gender in the esoteric milieu, and I aim to demonstrate how it also indicates more general themes and paradoxes in the area of Western esotericism, gender and sexuality.

Crowley’s view of Babalon was shaped by his antagonism towards sexual conservatism. In the wake of the sexual revolution, the ideals he connected to the goddess have become more normalised. Rather than rendering her obsolete in the eyes of esotericists today, however, these societal transformations appear to have resulted in more diversified constructions of the figure. Esotericists have developed their own interpretations, a potent example being how the socialist Parsons recreated Babalon as a harbinger of egalitarianism and gender equality. Similarly, numerous contemporary writers have formulated their own views of the goddess in opposition to Crowley’s alleged misogyny. This demonstrates how notions of the divine in Western esotericism are constructed in an intricate, politicised, and mutable web of contradictory discourses of gender and sexuality.

Scholar interviews

—Per Faxneld

In every issue of the newsletter, a senior and a junior scholar of Western esotericism are interviewed. They are asked the same questions, and we will be able to partake of both their personal perspectives and insights gleaned from their up-and-coming or nestorial position in the field, respectively.

Professor Jean-Pierre Brach, École pratique des hautes études, Paris, France.



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

My interest in Western esotericism came after a period of inquiry into esoteric Buddhism (Tibetan and otherwise, *not* A. P. Sinnett's variety) and Hindu Tantra, which happened to be very much in fashion in France (as well as throughout Europe and the USA) in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Alongside my studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, I read G. Tucci, A. Wayman, A. Bharati, etc. and managed to attend Rolf A. Stein's College de France seminars on the

Shingon mandalas (as a matter of fact, I still keep my notes from those lectures).

All this stemmed from a typical post-adolescent unease with my own Calvinistic upbringing and also from a general, albeit very confused attraction to symbolism and the "occult" in general, which I fondly imagined at the time were only being taught and practiced competently in India or the Far East, mostly because I couldn't make head or tail of the Western material I had come across earlier.

What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

In my opinion, and quite summarily of course, these challenges are at least four-fold:

1) Developing the academic study of contemporary Western esotericism, as recently pointed out in Gothenburg by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (it goes without saying that the August 2012 Stockholm Conference and the appearance of volumes such as *The Devil's Party* or *Contemporary Esotericism*, not to mention certain studies by Marco Pasi, H.-T. Hakl and others, constitute major stepping stones in this direction).

2) To continue overturning the highbrow attitude (which still retains far too much currency in certain countries, including France) to the scholarly relevance of the historical study of Western esotericism within the humanities. Such criticism seems of course objectively reinforced by a general economic situation which inevitably suggests that such studies "are too costly and lead nowhere anyway", so that they should no longer be pursued—or even funded—in the present context.

3) As the issue of our students in the field finally securing positions is of course central, academic networking becomes essential, and developing local branches of ESSWE (such as those already existing in Israel or Scandinavia) is an important part of the effort. Easier said than done, though, as I know from my own experience.

4) In obvious relation to the previous points, we must be careful to avoid projecting ourselves as "specialists in everything" provided it falls under the banner of Western

esotericism as such, in order to be able to retain a legitimate field of specialization *and* present a credible academic profile to the scrutiny of scholarly institutions and educational authorities (whose outlook on this point is definitely at variance from one country to another, as we all know).

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field?

The hilarious (and mostly unconscious) arrogance of certain occultists for whom it has nowadays become fashionable to try and obtain an academic degree in our field, for purposes of their own (please note that I have nothing against practitioners entering the academic field – it’s an entirely different question).

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

Inasmuch as I have any time left at all (a common complaint!), the company of good friends, good wine and good music; an art exhibition, here and there. Ah, and a nice trip out in the country – not necessarily mine. I just love woods, in particular (walking the dog, you see).

What are the worst things about having this as your speciality?

Witnessing that an interest in Western esotericism continues to be associated, now and again, with right-wing ideological leanings (which is WRONG, for Heaven’s sake!). Uprooting this attitude could rank as a fifth challenge, in the question above.

What are the best things about having this as your speciality?

The certainty that there is so much left to do, investigate and develop in our domain.

The growing attraction to our field of many young, bright students, curious and open-minded, often with strikingly original perspectives fueled by devil-may-care enthusiasm for learning (and beer, and rock music, and... you name it). The occasional colleague who acknowledges changing his/her mind about the intellectual relevance of our studies (a rare treat). And last, but perhaps not least: my own enduring fascination with the study of Western esotericism!

Dr. Dylan Burns, Universität Leipzig, Germany.



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

It was always around at home. My parents are ex-hippies who became Zen monks, and while they were not into Blavatsky herself, the legacy of the Theosophical Society continues to loom over the culture of American Buddhism. My dad read me *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* and Krishnamurti when I was a kid, and like lots of little boys I was drawn to things magical and spooky. As a teenager I frequented the local occult bookstore (the “Metaphysical Bookshop” in Boulder, Colorado) and listened to cult bands like Psychic TV, but actually, probably because of my parents, I was more drawn to East Asian culture and art - I remain a recovered Otaku.

I got into studying something associated with “esotericism” when I was in my second semester of university. For scheduling reasons I had to drop my Japanese course, which made me very upset. The only class I could fit into the empty slot was on “Worlds of Early Christianity,” taught by Michael E. Foat. This was definitely not Japanese. My thinking changed completely at the end of the second week of lectures, which brought us from the Gospel of John to the beautiful and bizarre Apocryphon of John. I recall very distinctly drinking a smoothie in the mensa afterwards and realizing that I was finished with Japan. I wanted to devote myself to the study of Gnosticism! The lesson of this story is: if you need to rebel against your parents, but they are permissive, leftist Buddhists, become a Church Historian. They’ll really freak out then.

What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

Despite much ink already spilled, there continues to be plenty of debate as to what constitutes “Western esotericism” - i.e., how to define the field of study at hand. This is healthy, but the endless conversation over semantics sometimes can distract our attention from the primary sources. Conversely, if “Western esotericism” is going to become an accepted (or simply useful) object of academic study, scholars of it must demonstrate that it is not simply handy but necessary to address problems in other fields, e.g. philosophy, religious studies, etc. This means being not only capable of articulating what “Western esotericism” is, but articulating it in terms comprehensible and useful to scholars in other fields. So a scholar of esotericism must also be a scholar of other disciplines, produce work in those disciplines, and simultaneously work in esotericism and be able to explain why that is a desirable thing to do. So on the one hand, the discipline needs more internal methodological clarity, but we also need to continue to embed ourselves and work in other disciplines external to “esotericism.” It’s a real balancing act.

A few years ago I saw a prominent scholar of Western esotericism claim in a lecture that what the field needs is more specialists in “Western esotericism,” not people who primarily work in another field, and dabble in “Western esotericism.” I think that’s dead wrong. Students of Western esotericism ought to be able to make it in other fields and work in Western esotericism at the same time. In fact, if they want to get a job in the academy, they will very probably have to.

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field?

Aside from each second I spend in the same room as Julian Strube or Kennet Granholm, a week at Esalen in 2007 stands out as a particularly riveting experience. I roomed with Kocku von Stuckrad in Carlos Castaneda’s old quarters, talked about Gnostic cinema with Jeff Kripal, gave a controversial paper on the ancient statue-animation, enjoyed some hot springs the like of which I will probably never see again... The best part was when, in proper Socratic fashion, a man over three times my age drank me completely under the table as we discussed the wisdom of the Greeks.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

I spend most of my time reading and thinking about things that people said and did 1,500–2,500 years ago in what today would be considered the Near East and Southern Europe. Like anybody, I’m into music and the movies, but I’m more fond of deluxe Japanese green tea than probably

anyone you have ever met. Gyokuro, anyone?

What are the worst things about having this as your speciality?

Escaping professional marginalization is always a challenge. One has to be an apologist at times. This can be unpleasant. I once told a circle of German Egyptologists at a reception that I would soon attend a meeting of ESSWE and explained what sort of topics would be covered at the meeting, and was met with a round of laughter, because in the German academy, “Esoterik” is something you make fun of, not try to understand. Then I patiently explained why it is that Egyptologists could learn quite a bit from scholarship on Western esotericism (i.e., reception-history). To their credit, they got it. The kicker is that one of them later confessed that they had become interested in Egyptology in the first place via a youthful fascination with... Esoterik.

What are the best things about having this as your speciality?

Knowledge of scholarship on Western esotericism allows you to begin to articulate and answer questions that are often very difficult to address with more “conventional” approaches to history and culture. Try, for instance, to explain the existence (much less popularity) of a band like Current 93, which sings psychedelic Christian folk-rock in Coptic and Akkadian for crowds packed with readers of Crowley - this would be a daunting task for your average rock historian or even a scholar of New Religious Movements, but C93 presents a relatively comprehensible set of threads for the student of Western esotericism to separate. And yes, the people are the best. I wouldn’t give up the network of friends I made through ESSWE for the world.