

The Newsletter of the
European Society for
the Study of Western
Esotericism

ESSWE Newsletter

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Words from the Editor

– *Chris Giudice*



Welcome to the Summer 2016 *Newsletter*. It is a great honour for me to carry on the work of our previous editor: friend and colleague Dr. Per Faxneld. The format of the Newsletter has not changed, and some of the most popular sections, such as scholar interviews and conference reviews, have been kept unaltered. It is a truly exciting moment for the field of Western esotericism: conferences and workshops dedicated to the subject have been constantly increasing in number, the publication of books by ESSWE members appears to be on the rise, and, as with the case of Dan

In this Newsletter

- *Welcome from the Editor (p. 1)*
 - *Two new publications (p. 2)*
 - *Reports from networks (p. 3)*
 - *Scholar interviews (p. 5)*
 - *Conference reports (p. 7)*
 - *News from the Ritman Library (p. 10)*
 - *New projects in the field (p. 11)*
 - *Homan MA Thesis Prize (p. 11)*
 - *Upcoming conferences (p. 12)*
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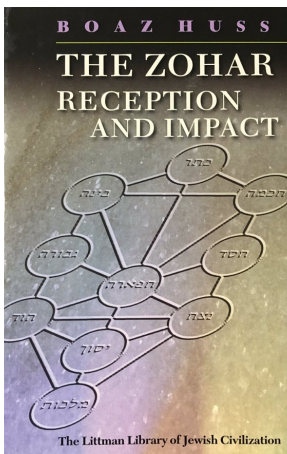
Brown and his recent donation to the Ritman Library, the field as a whole seems to be attracting more attention by the mainstream. As new editor of the *ESSWE Newsletter*, I will do my best to keep you readers updated on the many developments within the field. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you think that something should be added to the next issue or if you are organising an event that could be of interest to the membership of ESSWE. The next issue of the newsletter will be sent out in December. ♦

Two new publications by ESSWE members

Professor Boaz Huss

The Zohar: Reception and Impact

(Newark, NJ: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016)

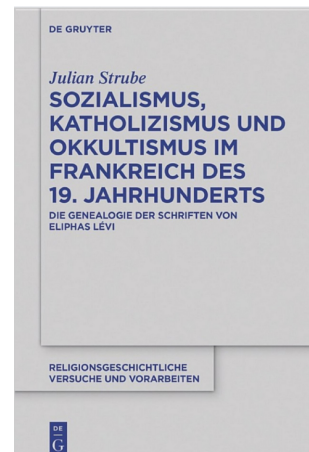


The Zohar, a collection of Kabbalistic writings, which were probably in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, became one of the most venerated, authoritative, and influential books in Jewish culture. *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* examines the formation of the Zohar, the different ways in which the Zohar has been received by its readers, the fluctuations in its status and value and the impact it has had on Jewish culture. This dynamic and multi-layered history throws light on many aspects of Jewish cultural history over the last seven centuries.

The book describes the reception and canonization of the Zohar as well as its criticism and rejection from its inception to the present day. The underlying assumption is that the different values attributed to the Zohar are not inherent qualities of the text, but rather represent the way it has been perceived by its readers in different cultural contexts. The book considers not only the attribution of different qualities to the Zohar through time but also the people who were engaged in attributing such qualities and the social and cultural functions associated with their creation, re-creation, and rejection. *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* considers the social conditions that stimulated the veneration of the Zohar as well as the factors that contributed to its rejection, alongside the cultural functions and consequences of each approach. ♦

Dr. Julian Strube

Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi
(Berlin: De Gruyters, 2016)



Eliphas Lévi is one of the most influential figures in the history of modern esotericism. He coined the term *occultisme*, inspired thinkers such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky or Aleister Crowley, and remains one of the most-read esoteric authors. Although it is well known that the man behind the Hebrew pen-name, Alphonse-Louis

Constant (1810-1875), was a notorious socialist writer in the 1840s, this background has usually not been related to his occultist writings. This is mainly due to the circumstance that occultist narratives, which have been developed at the end of the 19th century, have been adopted by later scholarship. According to those narratives, the socialist Constant vanished after the Revolution of 1848 and gave way to the occultist Eliphas Lévi, who allegedly had performed an ideological U-turn and founded an authoritarian “occultism on the right” (Godwin 1994).

Quite on the contrary, this study argues for a continuity of Constant’s socialist and so-called “neo-Catholic” ideas, which formed the very basis of the *occultisme* he began to propagate since the 1850s. It can be demonstrated that Constant developed his concept of “magic” in a decidedly socialist-magnetist context, and that his traditional understanding of Kabbalah resulted from neo-Catholic ideas as they were represented by famous thinkers like Félicité de Lamennais. Not only did Constant explicitly identify occultism, Kabbalah, magic, and Catholicism in his occultist writings, but he also resumed, after a political change of climate, to openly propagate his vision of a “true” socialism based on that identity. Consequently, Constant’s occultism allows for deep insights into the continuity of early socialist ideas in new religious movements after 1848. This not only questions widely accepted concepts of secularization and modernization, but also opens up new perspectives on the history of socialism, Catholicism, and esotericism. ♦

Reports from ESSWE Sub-Networks

REGIONAL NETWORKS

SNASWE: Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism

- Jesper Aagaard Petersen

In 2015, SNASWE implemented a clean-up of our public profile by cleaning up the Facebook page and the link to ESSWE. At this juncture, SNASWE works as a channel for the sharing of relevant information (including conferences, books, and job opportunities in the region) and a springboard for networking activities. The process towards building a full network with a proper board of directors is currently on hold; the need for such a restructuring seems to be minor in the SNASWE community of members at this time. Nevertheless, this could be a goal for 2016 and 2017. 2015 also saw the realization of a couple of big projects involving SNASWE members: The anthology *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* (edited by H. Bogdan and O. Hammer) was finally submitted to Brill (and published in April 2016); the anthology *Handbook of Nordic New Religions* (edited by J. R. Lewis and I. B. Tøllefsen) was published by Brill in June 2015; and the monograph *The Invention of Satanism* (J.R. Lewis, A. Dyrendal and J. Aa. Petersen) was published by OUP in December 2015. As former director, Prof. Henrik Bogdan, is now chief editor of Oxford's new esotericism series, we anticipate more activity in the future. This also includes a more active SNASWE presence in seminar and conference organization.

INASWE: Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism

- Boaz Huss

The main activity of INASWE is our annual conference, which was held in 2016 at Haifa University, and was organized by Yossi Chajes. His report on the conference appears on p. 8. We have decided that next year the conference will be held at the Open University, probably at the end of January. It will be coordinated by Tzahi Weiss.

CEENASWE: Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism

- Gyorgy Szonyi

It can be confidently claimed that the CEENASWE is a vigorous network and so far has been active and successful. A volume of selected essays from the first Budapest conference (2014) has been edited and submitted to the Central European University Press (Budapest/New York) and the publisher has expressed a preliminary consent to bring out the volume. Presently the peer reviewers are working on the manuscript. It has also been confirmed that there will be a publication presenting the most important papers of the second conference. The manuscript first will be offered to the Belgrade University Press.

CEENASWE has an active website and a Facebook page. The members are in active contact with each other and there is a systematic planning of the themes of conferences. In Belgrade literature was in focus, while in Olomouc esotericism and the visual arts will be highlighted.

THEMATIC NETWORKS

Contemporary Esotericism Research Network (ContERN)

- Egil Asprem

The ContERN network continues to maintain an online presence on several platforms and facilitates meetings at ESSWE conferences as before. No new initiatives were launched in 2015, but a network meeting was held during the Riga conference at which time plans were made to publish a special issue of *Correspondences* within the coming two years.

WEAVE: Western Esotericism and the Visual Arts Network

- Chris Giudice

After the organization of the First WEAVE Symposium (vide infra), the chairs of the network are working to publish the proceedings of the meeting. WEAVE plans on organizing a panel at the next ESSWE conference in Erfurt, in 2017.

Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity (NSEA)

- Dylan Burns

As in 2014, NSEA activity was largely focused on maintenance and expansion of the network's website. Although direct subscriptions to the NSEA website have decreased, the NSEA has seen a significant growth in terms of social media outreach. This reflects general trends in online engagement, which suggests that users are moving away from direct blog/website engagement to the use of social media for content consumption and sharing. Meanwhile, there was NSEA participation in the winter and

spring online workshops of the 'Mid-Sweden Seminar on Esotericism from Antiquity to Modern Times,' led by Prof. Jörgen Magnusson. The Mid-Sweden Seminar remains embryonic and provisional, but its participants were largely non-ESSWE members chiefly interested in ancient sources and NRMs. This bodes well for the development of interest in the subject. The *Aries* special issue 'Esotericism and Antiquity' also appeared in 2015. It is our hope that the publication helps spur interest in the topic and the NSEA. Finally, Sarah and Dylan are excited about planning one or more panels devoted to the problem of 'esotericism and antiquity' at the 2017 ESSWE conference in Erfurt.

AFFILIATED NETWORKS

CEEEO-UNASUR: Center for the Study of Western Esotericism of the Union of South American Nations

- Juan Pablo Bubello

Our Center has developed an intense academic and research activity last year. One of our main objectives has been achieved. CEEEO members have written the first collective book on the history of Western Esotericism "in and from" Latin America, which will be published this year jointly by the Universidad de Buenos Aires and Universidad Autónoma de México. Its title is *Estudios sobre la historia del Esoterismo Occidental en América Latina: enfoques, aportes, problemas y debates*. It was edited by Juan Pablo Bubello, José Ricardo Chaves and Francisco de Mendonca Junior and, currently, is in press. Moreover, our main academic researchers issued seminars and conferences on various topics related to our field at universities in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina.

ASEM: Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism

- Sergey Pakhomov and Stanislav Panin

The Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism held two conferences in 2015: "Psychotechnics and Altered States of Consciousness" in Saint Petersburg in March and

"Phenomenon of Alchemy in the History, Philosophy and Culture" in Smolensk in November. During these conferences, scholars from different parts of Russia from Moscow to the Urals, as well as from Ukraine, performed more than sixty lectures covering different aspects of esoteric studies. The association has also published a new issue of its online journal *Aliter*. The issue consists of ten entries, including five research articles (three in Russian and two in English) and three translations. In the end of 2015, a special issue of academic journal *Research in Religious Studies* dedicated to the study of esotericism was published. The issue was edited by ASEM board member Stanislav Panin and included both articles of ASEM members and texts from independent scholars, as well as extensive interview with Glenn Magee. In 2015, the board of the association performed a lot of work dedicated to official registration as a non-profit organization in Russian Ministry of Justice. These efforts resulted in completion of the procedure of registration in early 2016. The association has also reelected its board in 2015. As a result, Evgenii Kuzmishin was elected as a board member instead of Vadim Zhdanov. Also on February 1-4, 2016 ASEM together with colleagues from Moscow State University held in St. Petersburg the Winter educational school "Esotericism and Mysticism: History and Modernity" for young researchers in this domain. ♦

Scholar Interviews

- *Chris Giudice*

In every issue of the *Newsletter* one junior and one senior scholar of Western esotericism are interviewed. They are both asked the same questions.

**Michele Olzi, PhD Candidate,
Department of Biotechnologies and Life
Sciences, Universita' dell' Insubria,
Varese, Italy**

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

In 2007, when I was completing my first BA in Philosophy, I saw that in the compulsory bibliography for an exam on History of Philosophy a book stood out, *Spirituelle Meister des Westen: Von Rudolf Steiner bis C.G. Jung* by Gerard Wehr. I was currently reading all of Jung's works and I was honestly curious as to how the Swiss author could be associated to the (new, for me) categories of "esotericism" and "occultism". During the same year it was suggested to me that I write a dissertation on the similarities and differences between the esotericism of Fernando Pessoa and that of Aleister Crowley. Not only did I discover the writings of Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff on Western esotericism, but I got in touch with Yvette Kace Centeno and Marco Pasi, who helped me greatly with my dissertation.

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

Trying to make people understand that the field of study concerning Western esotericism and European hermeticism has its own value and richness. In Italy, various scholars from the most varied branches of the Humanities (in a historical-religious, a philosophical, a philological and a literary background) have endeavored to research and publish within this field of studies, however it has not yet received the importance it deserves. There need to be more study courses, PhD positions linked to the historical events and themes related to the context of Western esotericism. This is the challenge for the present and the future.

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

Amongst my fondest memories, I can clearly recall my first ESSWE conference in Riga. Honestly, I was not expecting such an enthusiastic and enjoyable *convivium*: scholars of all ages, coming from around the world and confronting



themselves on their own personal experience and topics of study. It was a unique cultural and social chance to meet likeminded people.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

The category of Western esotericism, along with History of Ideas, allows us to delve transversally through disciplines that touch many other subjects, discourses and interests. Among these, surely, there are the history of artistic avant-garde movements (mostly Dadaism, Cubist-Futurism, Surrealism), Russian literature (Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Merezhkovsky), the history of Russian emigration to Europe. One of the subjects which allowed me to jump into more than one of these fields was my research on the life and works of Russian poet Maria de Naglowska.

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

Often, scholars of Western esotericism are isolated, or at least misunderstood, by the academic community. Until the field of research is more appreciated and taken seriously, the resources and opportunities for research in this field will remain limited.

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

I have the chance to explore new and original subjects and themes. To retrace the history of initiatic groups or of the

bigger movements such as the Theosophical and the Anthroposophical Society, or the currents and elements of neo-gnostic currents in the contemporary period allow us to find fragments of untracked history, the value and charm of which are immense. ♦

Prof. Mark Sedgwick, School of Culture and Society – Arab and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

My PhD was about the spread and development of a Sufi order called the Shadhiliyya Ahmadiyya from Mecca across the Islamic world. While I was working on that, someone told me that the Shadhiliyya Ahmadiyya had a branch in Milan. It turned out that these Milanese Sufis owed a lot to the French esotericist René Guénon. They gave me a biography of Guénon, which I read on the train from Milan to Geneva, and that was how I discovered Western esotericism. I didn't realize at first quite how big the phenomenon was, however. I learned that when I found CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, on the internet. At first I couldn't believe my eyes. Then I attended the CESNUR conference in Amsterdam, in 1997, and listened in fascination to almost every paper—everything was new, everything a minor or major revelation. CESNUR introduced me to other dimensions of the phenomenon, and to other scholars who were working on it, but it wasn't really until I met the scholars associated with the foundation of ESSWE that I finally learned that what I was interested in was called “Western esotericism.” And then, of course, I found that I had actually often encountered Western esotericism before I met the Milanese Sufis, but without realizing what it was.

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

One major challenge is what to do about the “Western” in “Western esotericism.” With Sufism in Milan and yoga in Cairo, I'm not sure there is a distinct “West” any more nowadays. Historically, before globalization, there was certainly a region where scholarship was conducted in Latin and another region where scholarship was conducted in Arabic, but even then there were major crossovers, as I discovered when working on a new book that is coming out in October, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age*. I once thought that the most important origins of Western Sufism were in the Theosophical Society, but actually it turns out to go back not just to the Abbasid



Caliphate, but even to late antiquity. And in what sense were the Neoplatonists of Alexandria “Western”? Very often there is just esotericism, not particularly Western or Eastern esotericism. So one challenge is to broaden our understanding of esotericism, but without losing sight of what we have only recently begun to see clearly.

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

I have so many fun memories of the marvelous people I have got to know during fieldwork. When I interview people about esoteric groups they are involved in or have been involved in, I also ask them about themselves and their own lives. You can get to know people very well very quickly under these circumstances. You are both interested in something very special that most people are not interested in. People tell you about things that have been really important in their lives, things that they are used to other people not being able to understand, that they have perhaps told hardly anyone. And you do understand those things, and they matter to you too. Of course there is also a sadness attached to these memories, as sooner or later you have to put away your notes and say goodbye, and you probably never see the person you have been interviewing again. But the memories remain.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

My job title says I do Arab and Islamic Studies. Esotericism is central to some of the aspects of Arab and Islamic Studies I work on, like Sufism and of course Western Sufism. For other aspects, like terrorism and radicalization, esotericism is not central, though actually it does turn out to be relevant sometimes. And then there are some aspects of Arab and Islamic Studies I work on, like the “output legitimacy” of Arab regimes, for which esotericism is not relevant at all. I also have some non-academic interests, of course, as well. I have a family. I like to watch movies, to walk by the sea—Denmark has some amazing coastline—and to visit the world’s greater and smaller cities.

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

I’m not sure there are any really bad things about having esotericism as a specialty, especially if one has some better known specialty as well. There are not many jobs around for

people who only work on esotericism, but there are plenty of jobs in areas such as history, the study of religion, and area studies, and plenty of room to work on esotericism within these areas. At one point I used to say I worked on “sects,” and that led to some misunderstandings if I was not enunciating clearly enough, but nowadays I say “esotericism.” There are bad things about working in academia anywhere these days, but that is another story.

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

Apart from the people one meets, colleagues as well as research subjects, the best thing about working on esotericism is how easily entirely new landscapes open in front of one. Things like “output legitimacy” are interesting too, but the most one can really hope for with them is a new perspective, as many people have been working on them for ages. But in the study of esotericism it is easy to find oneself looking at something entirely new, in astonishment and delight. Not many other fields offer that possibility. ♦

Conference Reports

Eight International Conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM), 24-26 March 2016, Saint Petersburg, Russia

- *Henrik Bogdan*

The eighth international conference organised by ASEM, with the support of ESSWE, was held at Saint Petersburg during three days, 24-26 March 2016. The theme of the conference was “Mystic and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice: Mysticism and Esotericism in the World of Technologies”, which proved to be a very interesting theme. There were five parallel sessions, consisting of over 30 papers in total. Russian scholars presented the majority of the papers, but there were also foreign speakers from Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ukraine. Most of the papers dealt with topics related to esotericism and technologies, such as Sufism on the Internet, technology in Miguel Serrano’s writings, Neo-Sannyas and the Internet, and the notion of electricity in the history of Western esotericism. Other topics included an historical analysis of the “Akashic Records”, the concept of science in the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors, and electronic bibliography as a method in the study of Western esotericism. The three keynotes were

delivered by Andreas Kilcher (“Soul-Machines, Modern Occultism and Media Technology”), Wouter J. Hanegraaff (“Astral Daguerrotyping: Photography and the Theosophical Imagination”), and Henrik Bogdan (“The Study of Comparative Religion as an esoteric Practice: The Case of the Universal Brotherhood”). All of the papers and keynotes were recorded and can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJM0tVbQE3ubV NQQSFYEqA68ho1JR-MCe>

The conference was very well organised, and special mention should be made of Sergey Pakhomov, the main



organiser. Since many of the participants did not speak Russian, simultaneous translation was offered throughout the conference. In addition to the sessions and keynotes, the programme included several additional items, such as a reception for the participants, a walking tour through the city, and the presentation of a Russian translation of Wouter J. Hanegraaff's *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, which included speeches by W.J. Hanegraaff, B. Menzel, R. Svetlov, G. Cheredov, A. Rychkov, and S. Panin. In sum, ASEM's eighth international conference was a success, both in terms of its organisation and the high quality of the papers. I therefore strongly urge members of ESSWE to participate in the forthcoming, ninth conference. ♦

“Esotericism, Literature and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe”, 27-28 June 2016, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Serbia
- Gyorgy Szonyi



Two years after its foundation in Budapest, CEENASWE, the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism held its second conference “Esotericism, Literature and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe” in Belgrade between 27-28 June, 2016. The event - co-organized by the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade - was a great success with 39 high quality papers, the authors of which ranged from Gdansk to Crete, Amsterdam to Moscow, Aarhus to Sofia, including all the

Central European countries and many more. The event also featured Yuri Stoianov's keynote lecture on "Esotericism and Visionary Mysticism in Medieval Byzantine and Slavonic Orthodox Pseudepigraphic and Heretical Literature". The abstracts of the conference can be seen on CEENASWE's

website: <https://ceenaswe.wordpress.com/conferences-3/current-conference/abstracts/>. We find it important that the scope of this conference reached much beyond Central Europe both towards the West and to the East, especially Russia and Ukraine.

The conference was concluded by a members meeting of CEENASWE where it was restated that membership in the network depends on ESSWE membership and it has been decided that at the following conferences no registration fee will be charged for ESSWE members, however non members will have to pay a fee. The meeting also decided about the next two conferences: Olomouc (Czech Republic in 2018) and somewhere in Poland (in 2020). ♦



Sixth Annual Conference of the Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism, 2-3 June, 2016, Haifa, Israel
- Yossi Chajes

On 2-3 June, 2016, the Sixth Annual Conference of the Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism was held at the University of Haifa, Israel. After a welcoming by the host of this year's gathering, Yossi Chajes, and the Vice President of ESSWE Boaz Huss, Egil Asprem delivered the opening lecture. Egil argued for a reassessment of the “sociology of the occult” and raised some methodological issues to which other speakers referred in their subsequent presentations. The opening session was followed by one devoted to science and demonology, in which two leading medievalists, Ayelet Even Ezra and Yossef Schwartz, discussed the place of scientific explanations of demonic illusions in the writings of Roland

and Albertus. The early afternoon session was given to early modern esotericism, with Theodore Dunkelgrün and Raz Chen speaking respectively on the “Critical Edition as Practical Kabbalah” (on early bible printings) and on the reforming of astrology in early modern Europe. After lunch, the remainder of the day was dedicated to *Sefer Yezirah*. We began with an hour-long informal reading and study session of the iconic work. This was followed by presentations from two scholars who have recently published cutting-edge research on the historical background of the work, Ronit Meroz and Tzahi Weiss. Their presentations were considered in the respondent’s remarks of Yossef Schwartz, who also provided a succinct summary of the reception of *Sefer Yetzirah* in non-Jewish western esoteric circles. On day two, the first session featured papers by Assaf Tamari and Elke Morlok. Assaf suggested that the esoteric renaissance of sixteenth-century Safed be understood as related to the status of the town on the periphery (relative to the main urban centers of Jewish life). Elke spoke on Isaac Satanow, the 18th century enlightenment figure, and his treatment of light, optics, and sefirotic colors. Our final session featured papers by Shinichi Yamamoto on Japanese Zionism qua mysticism, and Andrea Gondos on the representation of the occult in the work of the Hungarian

novelist Maria Szepes. The intimate gathering—the first two-day event in the history of the Israeli chapter—allowed for meaningful, challenging, interaction amongst the participants. ♦

First WEAVE Symposium: Occultism, Art and Gender Identities, 15 June 2015, Göteborgs Universitet

- *Chris Giudice*

To celebrate the birth of the new ESSWE thematic network dedicated to the intersection between Western Esotericism and Visual Arts, a symposium was organised, in order to discuss about future activities of the network and to present some papers, which could offer new perspective on this exciting interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter. The talks were varied and focused on a period of time spanning from the fin de siècle to contemporary art and occultism. The keynote speaker was Pascal Rousseau, Professor of History of Art at the Sorbonne University, who delivered a very interesting paper entitled “Queer Mysticism: Hilma af Klint and the Utopia of Third Gender”. This talk was followed by a PhD student from the Sorbonne, Flaurette Gautier, who presented a talk on Mondrian and the concept of “Spiritual Hermaphroditism”: although an avid reader on anything concerning Mondrian’s work, this paper really stood out, presenting theories and ideas I had never encountered before, thus representing one of the highlights



of the day.

After a short break, Professor Henrik Bogdan offered a groundbreaking analysis of the work of Steffi Grant, painter and illustrator to most of her husband Kenneth Grant's writings, and Dr. Viktoria Ferentinou followed with a presentation on Surrealism and the Androgyne. After the lunch-break, I offered a talk on gender identity and characterization in the paintings of Aleister Crowley, while Caroline Levander raised very interesting points on gender

construction in art and esotericism in the nineteenth century. The symposium was capped by two interesting papers: Manon Hedenborg-White's "A Tigress Woman Clad with Sin: Babalon, Orientalism and the Femme Fatale" and Johan Nilsson's extremely interesting "The Devil, Phallic Religion and the Art of Felicien Rops". The symposium ended in the afternoon, and all those present expressed the wish to extend next year's meeting into a bigger event, with more speakers and, perhaps, an exhibition of occult art. ♦

News from the Ritman Library

Author Dan Brown Donates to Digitalise Esoteric Texts

- *The Ritman Library*

Novelist Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*) has donated € 300,000 to the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam, to digitize and preserve part of its priceless collection, including Hermetica, alchemy, mysticism, Rosicrucians and Kabbala.

Thanks to Brown's donation, the public will be able to access the core collection of some 4,600 ancient books online in the near future. Brown is a great admirer of the library (widely known as The Ritman Library after its founder Joost R. Ritman) and visited on several occasions while writing his novels *The Lost Symbol* and *Inferno*. "I consider it a great honor", the world-famous author said, "to play a role in this important preservation initiative that will make these texts available to the public." The Dutch Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds is also contributing to the digitization project, to the amount of € 15,000.

The comprehensive digitization project will be carried out by Picturae, a company specializing in making Dutch cultural heritage digitally accessible. It is expected that the core collection of The Ritman Library will become available online in the spring of 2017.

The Ritman Library's collection comprises some 25,000 works: c. 4,600 manuscripts and printed books before 1900, c. 20,000 books printed after 1900, unique archival collections and a collection of prints. The collection is regarded as world heritage, being one of the finest private collections of rare books in the world. Director Esther Ritman: "It has always been our dream to connect this treasure house with the community and make it Hermetically Open to all. Thanks to Dan Brown we can digitize our core collection. I am thrilled to see this dream becoming a reality." ♦



Esther Ritman and Dan Brown in front of the Huis met de Hoofden in Amsterdam © Ritman Library, 2016

New Projects in the Field

- *Karolina Maria Hess*

I am happy to inform that the largest so far project devoted to the field of Western Esotericism, entitled *Kultura polska wobec zachodniej filozofii ezoterycznej w latach 1890-1939* [Polish Culture in Relation to Western Esoteric Philosophy, 1890-1939] has just been launched in Poland.

The director of the project is Professor Monika Rzczycka from the University of Gdańsk, who is also the head of the Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality at the Faculty of Philology UG. The project group involves 19 academics from several Polish universities and a further group of invited experts.

The main aims of the project are reconstruction of the development of esoteric groups and belief systems belonging to the history of Polish culture, and, in close connection to this, systematization of information concerning available source material – including creation of a map of private and public archives containing documents relevant to Polish esoteric milieu.

Research within the project is organized into six research groups assigned to main areas of interest, divided according to the object of study: (1) Theosophy, (2) Anthroposophy, (3) Spiritualism and Spiritism, (4) Masonic and Para-Masonic organizations, (5) Other esoteric formations, and individuals outside institutional structures, (6) Opponents, polemicists and sympathizers – esotericism in the public debate. A very interesting part of the project is also the creation of an online lexicon of Polish esotericism, which will bring together the material collected over three years by all the research groups.

The project is financed in the Ministry of Science and Higher Education's "National Programme for the Development of Humanities" for years 2016-2019 (NPRH 0186/NPRH4/H2B/83/2016).

Karolina Maria Hess
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Homan MA Thesis Prize

- *Sophie Page*

The 2015 Homan MA Thesis Prize was awarded to Ellen Randolph for her thesis "Gnosticism, Transformation, and the Role of the Feminine in the Gnostic Mass of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.)." In addition to the prize, Ellen Randolph also received a book from the Aries book series, courtesy of Brill. We are grateful to Brill for offering to support Homan prize winners in this manner.

Ellen Randolph writes: "I am a recent master's graduate in Religious Studies (2014) from Florida International University. I specialized in Western Esotericism (at least in my own mind) and initiation and/or esoteric orders, usually from the perspective of pilgrimage, transformation or gender. I have a second master's degree in

Library and Information Science, with a speciality in archives management. I am currently the head circulation librarian at the Boca Raton Public Library (Florida) and an online adjunct instructor in World Religions at several institutions. I was previously the rare books librarian at Florida Atlantic University and created several rare books and manuscript exhibitions, including one on Renaissance Science, Medicine and Magic. From 1993 to 2005, I was the owner of two bookstores, one a metaphysical bookstore with religion and spirituality books, classes, and community events. I have been reading scholarly sources in Western Esotericism and participating in related study as opportunity presents since 1995." ♦

Upcoming Conferences

Trans-States: The Art of Crossing Over, University of Northampton, 9-10 September 2016, Northampton, England

An unabashed play on words, a trans-state is, among other things, a *coincidentia oppositorum*. An alchemical wedding that defines the fixed place, where boundaries are actively transgressed. In many ways, this very undertaking is where the role of the magician, mystic and artist collide. Down at the crossroads, where possibilities are collapsed into actualities, by the wondrous act of a conscious decision: there lies the place of suffering and surrender; of realisation and redemption.

This is a transdisciplinary conference that will explore representations in contemporary visual culture of boundary crossing, liminality and queerification with specific reference to occultism, mysticism, shamanism and other esoteric and spiritual practices. The proceedings will feature academics, independent scholars, practitioners and artists.

Keynote speakers will be:

- Marco Pasi, Associate Professor in the History of Hermetic philosophy, University of Amsterdam (UvA).
- Richard Kaczynski, Author and research affiliate, Yale University.
- Patricia McCormack, Professor of Continental Philosophy, Anglia Ruskin University Cambridge.
- Alan Moore, World-renowned author and artist. ♦

Imaginatio et Actio: Imagination in Esoteric Traditions, Jagiellonian University, 20-21 October 2016, Krakow, Poland

The Polish Society for the Study of Western Esotericism and the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, invite contributions to the international conference “Imaginatio et Actio – Imagination in Esoteric Traditions”, that will take place in Kraków, Poland.

During our conference we would like to reflect on the way in which esotericism conquers the imagination, how it forms it, expresses it and how it engages it. Thus, we would like to look at the contents and meanings which are often hidden deeply in iconographic riddles, in textual symbolism, in allegories of tradition. We intend our analysis to facilitate our access into a world founded in myths and stories of initiation, as well as ritual practice. We are also interested in a reflection on the manner in which imaginary esoteric worlds and actions function in a common mental space.

We invite anyone interested to submit papers on the following topics:

- the creation of esoteric worlds,
- creative imagination,
- esoteric mythologies in action – the past and present,
- transforming reality through esoteric practice,
- the institutionalization of action and imagination,
- esoteric sources of imagination,
- esoteric art, its inspirations and symbolism,
- the space of the imagination in esoteric rituals,
- esoteric initiation in the perspective of imagination,
- the image of the world in esotericism,
- the derealisation of the world in esoteric imagination.

Languages of the conference are Polish and English.

Abstracts should be submitted before June 30th 2016 (but the deadline may be extended, please check the website), only via the online form.

For more details, see the conference website: <https://imaginatioetactio.wordpress.com> ♦