

BOOK REVIEW

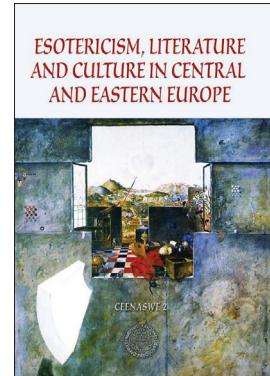
LITERATURE IN AN ESOTERIC KEY

Nemanja Radulović (ed.) *Esotericism, Literature and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe*. Belgrade: Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, 2018. 285 pp.

The study of Western esoteric traditions and practices, pioneered in the early 20th century, has been a growing research field since the 1990s, and over the last twenty years it has become an academic field in its own right. The last two decades have not only challenged the engrained perception that esotericism was not worth of scholarly research, but have also well established its place within academia. The wide range of related ideas, movements, and currents of thought covered by the umbrella-term “Western esotericism” are today explored by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, such as religion, history, ethnography, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, theology, literature, art, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, etc. As esotericism has never been too precise, “overflowing its boundaries on all sides” (Faivre 1994: 3), similarly its study does not fit clearly within any particular discipline, making it a trans-disciplinary field par excellence.

Nevertheless, there are already a handful of universities with academic chairs in the subject, as well as several networks dedicated to the advancement of the academic study of this trans-disciplinary field, and to securing its future development, most of which operate under the auspices of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. The year 2014 saw the official constitution of a network meant to embed Western esotericism into the particular space frame of Central and Eastern Europe, namely the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (CEENASWE). The present volume brings before the reader the papers presented at the second conference organized by CEENASWE at the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade in 2016, under the heading *Esotericism, literature and culture in Central and Eastern Europe*.

What the book does is to propose a different, philological perspective to the study of Western esotericism, as opposed to the dominant ones, deriving from the study of religion. Traditional as it may seem, being partly dedicated to tracking sources and establishing the literary-historical context, in which esotericism came into contact with literature, the approach is a most necessary one, as it fills the gaps in literary historiography and promotes the acknowledgement of esotericism as one of the prominent literary sources in this part of the world, in spite of its belated reception. The twenty papers of this consistent volume coagulate around a rather debated (and debatable) spatial reference point, Central and Eastern Europe, which during time has been known under several names: Slavia Orthodoxa, Slavia Romana, Mitteleuropa, the Byzantine commonwealth,



the “other Europe”, etc. As the time frame was not set, the authors could freely move from the pre-modern forms of Eastern European esotericism up to the modern and contemporary period, proposing the reconsideration of literary sources and histories and revealing considerably broader cultural dynamics, which shows that esotericism has followed certain wider cultural movements.

In spite of the volume not being clearly structured into chapters, around topics or historical periods, which is one of its major drawbacks, the beginning at least seems to follow a chronological order. Hence, the volume opens up with two essays which link the heritage of antiquity to the early modern forms of esotericism in the Eastern Orthodox context. More precisely, the first one looks at esotericism and visionary mysticism in medieval Byzantine heretical literature and backs up the need to integrate the medieval Christian dualism into the comparative scholarly study of Western esotericism (Yuri Stoyanov), while the second one revisits the image of the scientist-magician in the Eastern Orthodox environment, supporting the thesis about the existence of an esoteric discourse in this cultural milieu, despite its being a fragmentary heritage (Vitalii Shchepanskyi).

The second set of papers switches the focus from the Orthodox to the Catholic environment, with alchemy and the figure of the alchemist being the topics around which it gravitates. Jiří Michalík’s essay evaluates the very beginnings of the reception of Paracelsus’ works in Bohemia and in Czech alchemy, on the basis of Czech alchemists’ writings from the 16th century, while György E. Szönyi discusses the Hungarian reception of a novel on alchemy during the Enlightenment, contextualizing the work of the translator in the vivid network of Hungarian and Austrian Rosicrucian and Freemason culture. In his turn, Rafał T. Prinke focuses on the figure of the alchemist, present in many European literary genres, and shows how the popular Polish alchemist Michael Sendivogius has always been presented as an anti-hero.

The Freemasons’ contribution to the establishment of journals in Central Europe in the 18th century is the topic of another informative and insightful paper (Martin Javor), while the publishing and cultural activity of Russian esotericists in Yugoslavia in the 1920s–1930s is thoroughly reviewed and analyzed in another (Konstantin Burmistrov). Several other essays consider the influence of occultism and esotericism on the works of particular Central-European authors, which open up new perspectives in the history of literary influences in both Orthodox and Catholic cultures. Thus, for example, Nemanja Radulović puts forward the provoking idea that the canonic Serbian Romantic poet Petar Petrović Njegoš was inspired both by the Balkan medieval heterodox movement of Bogomilism and by Orthodoxy. Eugene Kuzmin discusses the prominent role of Russian poet Valery Bryusov in spreading occult ideas, as part of his epistemological theory, which may be defined as a special kind of Satanism, while Ruggiero writes about the Czech poet Otokar Březina, caught between symbolism and esotericism. Jan Miklas-Frankowski brings to the forefront a neglected collection of essays by Czesław Miłosz as an example of esoteric inspiration, and Sergej Macura examines the underground esoteric currents responsible for the decision of one of Pynchon’s fictional characters.

Another consistent section of the book focuses on the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet milieu: the esoteric poetry in the late USSR (Stanislav Panin) and the influences of Western esotericism on Russian rock poetry of the turn of the century (Pavel Nosachev).

Kateryna Zorya puts forth the hypothesis that the most important religious affordance that enables fictional texts to be perceived as religious is neither their fantastical nor their religious elements, but the ability to interface with existing religions, offering the reader an engaging study about a role-playing game in the former Soviet territories fueled by Tolkien spirituality.

A separate, shorter section is dedicated to the influence of esoterism in arts. Spyros Petritakis maps out the networks of Theosophists in pre- and interwar Athens through a series of specific case studies, while Massimo Introvigne shows how the influence of Theosophy is expressed in different artistic currents and trends in the present-day Czech Republic and Slovakia. Nikola Pešić's essay concludes that various New Age ideas from the domain of healing and personal growth have significantly informed the artistic practice of Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović, from the beginning of her career in the 1970s to the present moment.

Last but not least, Ewelina Drzewiecka, in a case study on migrating ideas in the modern Bulgarian tradition, examines the views of the Bulgarian esotericists who represented the two main esoteric schools in this country at the beginning of the 20th century: Dănovism and Theosophy, while Olaf Stachowski explores the possible Hellenistic roots of the popular goetic practice.

The twenty essays of the volume, as diverse as the field itself, testify, from different perspectives, that the reception of esoterism in literature and arts largely overlaps with the shift of influences as formulated by classical literary history. Furthermore, they show that the migration of esoteric ideas through different areas of culture found a most fertile ground in Central and Eastern Europe, proving thus that the editor's concern, expressed in the introduction, that this particular spatial framework might not be appropriate, was not founded.

Finally, following on Stausberg's traces, who stated that the "ingredients" for the development of the new academic field of Western esoterism were basically three – first, the very topic, which resonates with the general interest or the *Zeitgeist*; second, smart and enterprising scholars and welcoming universities; third, sponsors and publishers who are ready to invest in the nascent field (Stausberg 2013: 219) – one must acknowledge the indisputable merits of Nemanja Radulović, the editor of the volume. Over the past couple of years, thanks exclusively to his commitment and dedication, the study of Western esoterism in Serbia has made significant steps forward, placing Belgrade on the map of important world centers which are able to support the advancement of this prolific field.

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- Stausberg, Michael 2013. What Is It All About? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*. *Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 219–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2013.767612>.