

The Newsletter of the
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the Study of Western
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ESSWE Newsletter

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Words from the editor

—Per Faxneld



Welcome to the spring 2013 Newsletter. All the familiar features (Ph.D. project presentations and scholar interviews) are here, along with an interesting interview with Sergey Pakhomov, editor of *Aliter*, the new Russian online journal for Western esotericism. This has been contributed by Christian Giudice, and if anyone else would like to provide similar help for future issues, please let me know.

In this Newsletter

- *Words from the editor* (p. 1)
- *Ph.D. projects of ESSWE members* (p. 2–3)
- *Scholar interviews* (p. 4–6)
- *Interview with Sergey Pakhomov* (p. 6–7)
- *Upcoming conferences* (p. 7–8)

Many of you readers will no doubt be attending the ESSWE conference in Gothenburg later this month. I hope that you will not hesitate to approach me and let me know if you have any comments or suggestions regarding the Newsletter (since my narcissism prompts me to put a photo of myself on the first page of every issue, you should know what I look like by now). As always, those of you not able to physically grab hold of me to make your demands, lavish your praise or sharply criticize editorial choices are more than welcome to contact me via e-mail (per.faxneld@rel.su.se). ♦

Ph.D. projects of ESSWE members

Angelheaded Hipsters: From the Birth of Beatnik Antinomianism to Psychedelic Millenarianism

—Christian Greer, University of Amsterdam



The conventional narrative concerning the transformation of the 1950's "Beat Generation" into the religious awakening of the North American "Counterculture" of the 1960s and 70s is grossly inadequate. Against the stereotypical accounts of the religious and spiritual inclination of the "beatniks," "hippies," and "yippies," as well as the "Counterculture" in which they flourished, my dissertation will provide a precise historical account of the development, divergence, and overlap of a particular cluster of influential esoteric discourses perpetuated by a cabal of cultural elites. Focus on Alan Watts, William S. Burroughs, and Timothy Leary, as well as secondary reference to Allen Ginsberg and Brion Gysin, will illuminate how their work constituted a major, but also limited, influence among the heterogeneous forces that coalesced in generational disaffiliation that challenged the status quo in Post-WWII North America up to the 1970s.

My investigation will explain the esoteric discourses of these figures in relation to the legal branding of their work as "obscene" and "dangerous", the ensuing censorship of it, and the governmental reprisals they faced as a result of

producing it. It is crucial to note that before the work of Burroughs and Ginsberg was accepted into the canon of literary genius, it was banned in the US. Similarly, Timothy Leary's evangelization of psychedelics got him branded the "most dangerous man in America" by President Nixon, and subsequently earned him a 95-year prison sentence as a result of a minor legal infraction. The nuanced esoteric discourses in the works of Ginsberg, Watts, Burroughs, and Leary, and likewise the reprisals they endured, merit individual attention; however, it should suffice to say here that within the dialectic between the criminality and popularity of their work lies the familiar yet complex interplay of "forbidden knowledge" (a term Burroughs and Leary used to describe psychedelics) and "higher knowledge" that characterizes a structural dynamic in the on-going construction of Western identity.

Additionally, my dissertation analyzes the esoteric discourses in these men's work in the light of the publishing innovations they spurred, as well as the underground publishing enterprises that catered to their illegal work. As Burroughs' most popular work *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) were both subject to seizure at the US border at the time they were published, both men played prominent roles in the creation of transnational underground publications and networks. Published across a spectrum of DIY ("Do it Yourself") mediums including mimeographed journals, Xerographical chap books, and "zines" (short for "fanzine" or "fan-made magazine"), Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Leary were early proponents of amateur desktop self-publishing, which would become the most dominant medium for the dissemination of avant-garde and dissident writings and act as a template for the underground newspaper boom of the 1960's and 70's. Further, above-ground demand for their work transformed small independent publishing houses such as San Francisco-based City Lights Books into epicenters for the underground literary avant-garde and esotericism, thereby fostering a confluence of the two that remains to this day.

The third aim of my dissertation regards the formulating of a coherent "history of the present" for certain unrecognized and poorly understood trends in North American esotericism. The profound influence of these figures on a diverse variety of esoteric currents, including Chaos Magick, psychedelic spirituality, and Deep Ecology, will be made apparent. Likewise, the hitherto unmentioned origins of a number of contemporary esoteric movements based on these discourses will be elucidated, including Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the post-modern literary genre known as "Neuromanticism" or Cyberpunk.

Occultism in the Context of European History of Religions: Reason, Religiosity and Science in the 19th Century

—Julian Strube, University of Heidelberg



My dissertation reconstructs the emergence of occultism in the broader context of the history of religions and sciences. It will focus on 19th century France and revolve around Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810-1875), who is well known under his pseudonym Eliphas Lévi. While several studies have contributed to the understanding of fin-de-siècle occultism and its relevance to Western culture, the period of the 1850s and 60s, when the signifier *occultisme* was popularized by Lévi for the first time, has received surprisingly little attention. This is mostly due to the fact that Lévi is often seen as a mere *renovateur* of an older tradition of occultism.

Some scholars have demonstrated that occultism should be regarded as a distinctly “modern” phenomenon, and that it can only be understood in the context of the emergence of modern sciences, psychology, the study of religions, and general post-revolutionary socio political developments. It remains unclear, however, how exactly the genealogy of occultism before and during the 1850s can be

contextualized. My initial appraisal of Constant’s/Lévi’s sources, and the reconstruction of all included references, made clear to me that the development of his ideas should be seen in a different light from than in which it has been understood so far.

Constant’s shaping in early socialist circles is well known, but only some isolated aspects have attracted scholarly attention. In addition to discussing early socialist discourses about religion, society, and science, I will demonstrate the importance of both reactionary and liberal, progressive Catholic traditionalism that would remain a significant influence on later occultists. Taking into account several other factors, such as the emerging study of religions, mesmerism, and spiritualism, I will contextualize the genealogy of Lévi’s occultism in socialist and “neo-Catholic” networks. This will, among other aspects, help to understand whether and to what extent there has been a diachronic relation to earlier esoteric traditions, and how the occultism of the 1850s influenced its fin-de-siècle successors.

I will demonstrate that the genealogy of Lévi’s occultism is illustrative for the contemporary attempts of numerous individuals to find a place for religion in post-revolutionary society and to come to terms with modern sciences. In an often surprising way, Constant/Lévi is involved in basically all the relevant discourses about those pressing issues. This genealogy of *occultisme* is not only of crucial importance for the understanding of esotericism since the 19th century, but also for comprehending general developments in the European history of religions.

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 in both their personal perspectives and insights gleaned from their up-and-coming or nestorial position in the field, respectively.

Allison Coudert

Professor of Religious Studies, University of California, Davis.



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism? To tell you the truth I had no idea that I was interested in the field of esotericism until I found myself labeled as an esotericist and unable to find a job! That occurred when I returned to the US in 1974 from England, where I had done my PhD at the Warburg Institute with Frances Yates and D.P Walker. The subject of my PhD dissertation, Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-98), was an alchemist and committed scholar of the Kabbalah, and that was apparently enough to make search committees doubt my qualifications as an early modern historian. And it didn't help that I was also interested in witchcraft—but as part of the Scientific Revolution and not antithetical to it. All this seems so odd now that esotericism is a fairly well recognized field of scholarship.

What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future? I still do not think the field has the recognition it deserves. But with associations like ESSWE and ASE and the academic programs at the University of Amsterdam and Essex, more scholars and scholarship is emerging, which substantiates the importance of Esotericism. I was happy to be involved in writing the proposal to get Group Status for Western esotericism at the American Academy of Religion, and that has also helped to raise the profile of esotericism.

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field? The most fun memory I have from my time in the field is the moment I got up to deliver a paper in Durban, South Africa, in a session devoted to Western esotericism at the International Association for the History of Religion in 2000. I remember vividly looking out and seeing Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Jean-Pierre Brach, Jean-Pierre Laurent, and other assembled esotericists, whom I had only just met. As I think I said in my introduction, just looking at the audience gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling that at last I had found a home among scholars who knew what I was doing. It was a wonderful experience to be so clearly among new friends and colleagues.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism? My primary interest is in the relationship between religion and science, a subject that we now know cannot be discussed without taking into account esoteric thought. I am also interested in Jewish-Christian relations and interactions and gender issues.

What are the worst things about having this as your speciality? The worst thing was finding it hard to get employment, but mercifully that didn't last too long, so I will move onto your final question...

What are the best things about having this as your speciality? My answer would be the sheer pleasure of

watching the rapidity with which the study of esotericism has developed and reading the work of new scholars entering the field. The history of science has been radically changed by the emergence of the Esotericism. I remember reading George Sarton's three volume *Introduction to the History of Science* when I was an undergraduate at Vassar College and noting his exhortation that no self-respecting scholar of science would consider studying magic: "The historian of science can not devote much attention to the study of superstition and magic, that is, of unreason, because this does not help him very much to understand human progress. Magic is essentially unprogressive and conservative; science is essentially progressive; the former goes backward; the latter forward." The problem is, of course, that the history of science is filled with what might be described as magic as I found out when I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the early members of London's Royal Society. It is a gratifying experience to see how important the study of magic has become, not to mention witchcraft, alchemy, and all the other fascinating areas of investigation that fit under the rubric of esotericism.

Venetia Robertson

PhD candidate, Department of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

Esotericism has long been a part of my life, even in ways I did not realise until much later. My mother was brought up in a magnificent Victorian house, known as the Abbey or one of the 'Witches' Houses of Annandale', built by John Young, architect and Freemason, in the late 1800s. While growing up I knew little of the occult history of the many Masonic decorative features of the house, but the gargoyles, gothic alcoves, and cosmic frescoes (not to mention about twenty cats) certainly inspired a sense of magic about the place. My maternal grandmother, a brilliant seamstress amongst other things, ensured I had an enchanted childhood. Halloween was always my favourite time of the year, and my family were always kitted out in head to toe costumes, courtesy of her artistry. As if the gothic mansion wasn't enough, my family has always had a touch of the Addams Family vibe. My sister and I had a mild obsession with fantastic creatures. The flower fairies of Cicely Barker decorated our rooms, and dragons, mermaids, sphinxes, chimaeras and centaurs occupied our imaginations. My bedtime stories were *The Odyssey*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and tales of good witches like Mem Fox's *Guess What*.

In my early teenage years I spent most afternoons browsing the local pagan shop, buying my first books on astrology, palmistry, aromatherapy, and the practice of witchcraft. My friends bought me an Ouija board and when we weren't watching supernatural horror films (*The Exorcist* being the favourite, followed closely by *The Craft*) we conducted homemade spells and tried to conjure the spirits of the dead. Even after my spiritual interest in magic passed, I remained nonetheless enthralled by what is said to exist beyond the veil. After the deaths of my maternal grandmother and my mother's stepfather, and the passing of the Abbey out of our hands, I inherited a fraction of their collection of arcane books. My re-introduction into esotericism came from this sudden acquisition of a small library of works on Kabbalah, Theosophy, Gnosticism, Alchemy, the Occult and, of course, Freemasonry, but perhaps more significantly, the discovery that in the 1970s my grandmother, along with my uncle, had authored a series of books on the zodiac: a reminder of what feels like an inborn interest in the esoteric realm.

I came to university to study Classics, but was enticed into Religious Studies by the opportunity to look at mythology in not only an historical tense, but in its modern context as well. My studies currently focus on the manifestation of metaphysical ideas concerning human and nonhuman identities in contemporary subcultures.

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

It's my opinion that esotericism studies suffers from being too insular. Esotericism needn't be so esoteric! Admittedly, that's part of its appeal— to be able to recognise and interpret occult

currents, which are ubiquitous and yet so unnoticed, is certainly a fun skill. However, I'm a big supporter of cross-disciplinary studies and international exchange and I feel as though there is not enough of either in the field of esotericism. The field is also so closely guarded, even occupied, by a centralised group of scholars that other disciplines are likely discouraged from engaging with this important area. Further, the subject area feels, for a non-European such as myself, *geographically* centralised. Having said that, there are so few religious studies departments in Australia that it's hard not to feel isolated.

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field? I had sensational fun at the first conference for Contemporary Esotericism in Stockholm last year, and it was an honour to be a part of such a momentous occasion. Kennet Granholm and Egil Asprem did a great job at making it interesting, informative, and enjoyable. I made some excellent friends, not to mention professional connections with individuals whose work I have followed since the start of my career. Networking is tiresome for some, but the sensation of academic and personal *camaraderie*, particularly with people who live across the globe from you, are the kinds of positive experiences that keep me going in a field of study that is so undervalued, and relatively unheard of. As a PhD student, my work is a massive part of my existence, and if I can combine my scholarly interests with my social life, then all the better!

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism? My thesis has certainly expanded my areas of academic interest, leading me to study gender, somatechnics, and theories of embodiment, ontology and the construction of identity, digital cultures, human-animal cultures, popular culture, occulture, alternative spirituality, and modern myth-making, to name a few of my recent passions. I love to learn, and I love to teach; having the opportunity to lecture and tutor at the University of Sydney has been a wonderful way to do both.

Outside of work (on the rare occasion that such a thing happens) I enjoy taking advantage of the cosmopolis that is Sydney – getting dinner with friends, seeing a show or a movie, having my mind expanded by good conversation. I spend a fair amount of time online, as I'm fascinated by the discursive and cultural elements of virtual space. I go to yoga a few times a week and satisfy my creative urges with experimental vegetarian cooking and paper-craft such as collage, scrap-booking, origami, and card making.

What are the worst things about having this as your speciality? I am both attracted and repulsed by the same things when it comes to esotericism. It's difficult to study, infinitely complex, elitist, sexist, sometimes sex-obsessed,

solipsistic, tediously taxonomic and hierachical yet also fluid and polymorphous. There is something seductive about such a whirlwind of contradiction! Studying esotericism is certainly a challenge, but a challenge well worth accepting.

What are the best things about having this as your speciality? As above, so below.

Interview with Sergey Pakhomov, editor of *Aliter*, the new Russian online journal for Western esotericism

– *Christian Giudice*

Aliter is the official journal of the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM): what are the aims of this journal, and what does it offer the reader content wise? Yes, it is our official journal. Its main aim is the publication of articles (with a scholarly approach, of course) devoted to esotericism and mysticism, and also critical translations of different esoteric texts with commentaries by specialists. We publish not only texts about Western esotericism, but also ones about Russian and Eastern esoteric and mystical subjects. In Russian society there is a strong interest in this topic, but there are not many academic journals treating it. I think we are the first. Since we have published only two issues, we can't but be proud of the vast quantity of material received, but we are striving to select the best. For example, we published a translation into Russian of an article by Wouter Hanegraaff, "Western Esotericism: The Next Generation", and there are also articles about Masonry (Russian, Western), the French occultist Eliphas Lévi, research on "The Cloud of Unknowing", Turkish magic, the myth of Mahatmas in theosophy, and so on. Also, we publish reviews and scholarly reports. Our material is mainly in Russian, but there are also English texts, and further there are lists of contents, summaries and information about the authors in English. We'd like to develop contacts with our foreign colleagues and invite them to publish in our journal too.

Western esotericism is a growing field of research, with the study of 'rejected knowledge' receiving an ever-increasing attention: what is the current state of research in Russia, and what are the strongest and most vibrant expressions of esoteric thought? In Russia too, we have a growing field of research of Western Esotericism. Different Russian specialists study Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Alchemy, Kabbalah, Masonry and so on. Many

of them know about Hanegraaff's idea of "rejected knowledge", but they don't always use it. Methodological reflection in this field isn't very popular in Russia: my colleagues prefer to study different esoteric topics in their own narrow domain, and not in a wider context (this is true not only in regards to Hanegraaff's definition). Usually esoteric doctrines are considered in the context of "secret knowledge of initiates".

To date, ASEM has organised five conferences under the title "Mystical and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice." Have you noticed an increase in interest on behalf of the general public, and is the attendance by Western European scholars increasing? It is true that attendance by Western European scholars is increasing. The last conference in Moscow, the sixth (in April 2013), drew ten foreign participants, from Germany (Menzel), Netherlands (Hanegraaff, Ritman), Canada, UK, and Serbia. Five foreign participants wanted to come, but weren't able. The previous conference in St. Petersburg (2011) also drew foreigners. It shows their increasing interest in our conferences. As to the interest of the general public, it has also increased. Local mass media cover these events, and many occasional listeners attend these undertakings. People like our academic approach to the subject.

What do you think are the major challenges that ASEM, *Aliter* and the field of esotericism in Russia will have to face in the future? Owing to the condition of the Humanities in general, we have many "major challenges" in Russia. Unfortunately, scholarship isn't very appreciated in modern Russia, that's why we constantly have to concern ourselves with the permanent financial problems. We develop "esoteriology" not owing to, but rather despite, the unfavourable contemporary situation. The second important problem is a demarcation from non-academic approaches, which are very strong in our country. Often the public doesn't understand our position and confuses us with esoteric practitioners. The third problem is a disunity of the scholarly community. Our researchers are great individualists and unwilling to combine themselves into any joint projects. Our organization, ASEM, strives to correct this problem. I think these issues will be present during the coming 5–10 years.

Thank you very much for your time. Is there something you would like to add? I would like to add to my answers an extract from my editorial in *Aliter*: The virtual pages of the journal will touch upon a variety of topics. They will include historical aspects of the formation and development of mystical and esoteric traditions, both Western and Eastern (and separately Russian); analytical reviews of contemporary mystical and esoteric movements, centres, schools and specific personalities; philosophical and methodological matters in the study of esotericism and mysticism, and other questions of academic interest. The journal provides an

opportunity for experts to express their views, all different, yet united in their strict adherence to academic standards. As an academic journal, *Aliter* leaves the personal positions of its authors outside of its scope of interest, requiring only that the published texts are written from neutral, scholarly positions. Materials written in any esoteric, emic style, save for critical studies of esoteric and mystical texts, are not accepted by the editorial board. Let's note that the translation of the Latin word "*aliter*" means "otherwise", the name of the journal emphasizing the special role of our research object, which has often played alternative and even marginal roles in the history of spiritual culture in different ages and countries. Studying esotericism and mysticism in a scholarly manner is not only possible, but indeed necessary.

Upcoming conferences:

ASE 2014

The Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) holds its annual conference in alternate years to those of the ESSWE. The next ASE conference will be at Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York, from June 19-22, 2014.

For information on the ASE and on previous conferences, see <http://www.aseweb.org/>

A Call for Papers and further details will be announced in due course.

Visions of Enchantment: Occultism, Spirituality & Visual Culture

International Conference University of Cambridge, 17-18 March 2014

Organized in association with the ESSWE.

This two-day event is jointly organised by the Department of History of Art, University of Cambridge and the Arts University Bournemouth. The conference seeks to investigate the formative role that occultism and magic have played in Western and non-Western visual and material culture. It aims to present original research in this field as well as to establish a productive dialogue between both senior academics and current and recent graduate students with a particular research interest in occultism and visual culture.

We invite proposals from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, provided that they present innovative insights into visual, symbolic or material aspects of the esoteric tradition.

Acceptable topics may include, but are by no means limited to, the following areas:

- Alchemy and Hermetic symbolism;
- Astrology and astrological illustrations;
- The iconography of the tarot game;
- The visual and material culture of divination;
- The visual and material culture of witchcraft, black magic and sorcery;
- Talismans, totems, fetishes and other apotropaic objects;
- Occult and spiritual aspects of Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Hindu art and architecture, including sacred iconography, sacred architecture, manuscript illumination and the material culture of worship, ritual performance and festivity;
- Theosophy and modern visual culture;
- The visual and material culture of other occult movements and societies, including Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Mesmerism, Spiritism, the Salon de la Rose+Croix, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and New Age Spirituality;
- Surrealism, alchemy and the politics of the occult;
- The influence of occultism and the spiritual on other avant-garde movements, including Symbolism,

Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, Dada and Abstract Expressionism; • Occult art, counter-culture and radical/subversive politics;

- Women artists and the occult;
- Gendered, sexual and 'queer' ramifications of esoteric art;
- Photography, spiritism, séances and automatic drawings/paintings;
- The supernatural in performance, cinema,

experimental film and video-installations;

- Art-theoretical discussions of the spiritual, the numinous, the sacred and the uncanny;
- Occultism and magic in contemporary visual culture.

Papers should be 20 minutes in length and will be followed by a 10-minute Q&A session. Panels will be chaired by senior academics within the Department of History of Art, University of Cambridge. Abstracts of no more than 500 words and a short bio-sketch of no more than 150 words should be sent as a single Word.doc to enchantment2014@gmail.com by 31 October 2013. We plan to publish the proceedings of this conference. Please indicate therefore whether you would be interested in further developing your paper for a publication of collected essays after the event. Confirmed keynote speakers include Dr Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam), Dr Sarah Turner (University of York) and Professor Marjorie E. Warlick (University of Denver). Early applications are strongly encouraged.

The Conference Committee

Judith Noble (Arts University Bournemouth), Rachel Parikh (Magdelene College, University of Cambridge), Daniel Zamani (Trinity College, University of Cambridge).