

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

# ESSWE Newsletter

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## Words from the editor

–Per Faxneld



I shall keep this editorial brief, and turn immediately to the Christmas poem that has by now become a tradition for the Fall Newsletter. This year, it is "Mistletoe" (1913) by Walter de la Mare (1873–1956):

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Sitting under the mistletoe  
(Pale green, fairy mistletoe),  
One last candle burning low,  
All the sleepy dancers gone,  
Just one candle burning on,  
Shadows lurking everywhere:  
Someone came, and kissed me there.  
Tired I was; my head would go  
Nodding under the mistletoe  
(Pale green, fairy mistletoe)  
No footsteps came, no voice, but only,  
Just as I sat there, sleepy, lonely,  
Stooped in the still and shadowy air  
Lips unseen - and kissed me there.

Best wishes for 2016 to all from the editor!

## Conference Report

### Esoteric Modernism: The Role of Esotericism in Modernist Culture, University of Aarhus, October 22-23, 2015.

–Sasha Chaitow

Voices calling for interdisciplinary discussion and collaboration between scholars of esotericism, scholars of religion, and their disciplinary neighbours have increased in recent years. The conference on "Esoteric Modernism" addressed the relatively neglected area of the intersection between esoteric scholarship, literary scholarship, and the history of art, offering a rare opportunity for scholars from diverse backgrounds to explore key questions regarding their respective fields and the possibility for cross-fertilization between them.

The opening lecture by organiser, Associate Professor Henrik Johnsson of Aarhus University, set the tone for the rest of the conference by highlighting theoretical and methodological issues in the interdisciplinary study of topics falling within the purview of both esoteric scholarship and their counterparts in the humanities. The questions raised touched on matters of terminology and its usefulness depending on the disciplinary context – whether, for instance, the term "occultism" is more useful when addressing literary scholars despite the objections raised within the field of esotericism – and noted the need for closer exchange of ideas between these fields.

The range of disciplines and scholarly perspectives represented fell into two broad categories: those concerned with the extent to which disciplinary boundaries and preoccupations may sometimes hinder, rather than facilitate, the

understanding of a given cultural artefact or current, and those providing clear illustrations of this issue. Almost all of the arts were represented and discussed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives; with Professor Benedikt Hjartarson (University of Iceland) and Dr Kristoffer Noheden (Stockholm University) focusing on film, Professor Gisli Magnússon (University of Iceland), Patrik Hultin MA (Stockholm University) concentrating on literature, Associate Professor Giuliano D'Amico on poetry, Dr Sasha Chaitow (University of Essex), and Dr Victoria Ferentinou (University of Ioannina) on the crossover between art, literature, and esotericism, Flauette Gautier (PhD candidate, Sorbonne) on esoteric influences on Cubism, Dr Tessel Bauduin (Amsterdam University) and Dr Per Faxneld (Mid-Sweden University) on esotericism and cultural concerns. Of these, Bauduin, Chaitow, Gautier, Ferentinou, and D'Amico in particular echoed the concerns raised in Johnsson's opening lecture.

The intimate nature of the conference provided a valuable opportunity for extended discussion sessions, during which the concerns aired in the lectures were explored more deeply, metamorphosing into something of a constructive brainstorming session during which it became possible to understand one another's perspectives. A key point to emerge was the difficulty encountered by literary scholars and art historians when attempting to integrate the priorities of esoteric scholarship with those of their own discipline, the relative ignorance – or even interdepartmental politics that sometimes hinder such integration, and equally, the frequent indifference of scholars of esotericism to these problems. One notable example was the question of aesthetics vis-à-vis historical significance of a given cultural artefact; whereas within literary scholarship (or art history) the evaluation of the aesthetic value is key, it is far less significant from the perspective of a cultural or esoteric historian. Equally, the significance, and even the methodology for providing meticulous



historiographical detail when dealing with esoteric material is unclear and often a hindrance to the literary scholar whose main priority is placing an author, poet, artist, or artefact within a given aesthetic current (such as Modernism); exploring the esoteric influence on their work from a literary, and not a historiographical perspective; or, as has been my own experience, attempting to contextualise the esoteric features of a given body of literature when constrained by disciplinary priorities. The result of the current situation is that art historians or literary scholars are not able to fully expand on the esoteric content in cultural material, while esoteric scholars often dismiss the artistic or literary characteristics entirely. In both cases, a disservice is done to the very material we are attempting to shed light upon.

The consensus reached was that much closer collaboration and openness between fields is necessary in order to begin to "translate" those disciplinary concerns and priorities that may appear obvious to members of a given field (I shall refrain from a pun regarding emic knowledge), but which the focus on intense specialisation has not made available to their neighbours across the corridor. Learning about, and hopefully borrowing from each others' methodological toolboxes in a spirit of openness may be the most fruitful way forward. To this end, an anthology of the conference lectures is in preparation, with further meetings and publications planned for the future. ♦





## Scholar interviews

–Per Faxneld

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

**Professor Henrik Bogdan, Department of Religious Studies, Gothenburg University**



*How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?*

My interest in Western esotericism started as an undergraduate when my professor suggested that I should write my BA thesis about the Hiramic legend of Freemasonry. Although I was already interested in subjects that I would later call esoteric, I had no idea that I could actually write a thesis on these subjects. Being able to approach Freemasonry, for instance, from a scholarly perspective was like a revelation – I knew what I wanted to do, and I've been doing it ever since. This was in the mid-1990s, and there was actually very little scholarly literature about

Freemasonry and Western esotericism available. It was around this time that I discovered Antoine Faivre's *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994), which had a huge impact on me – finally a definition and theory of esotericism!

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

Although the study of Western esotericism in many ways has been successful in establishing itself as a recognised field of research, there are still many problems that we need to solve. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of positions devoted to Western esotericism. There's an increasing number of scholars with a PhD in esotericism, but since there are no new positions devoted to esotericism it is difficult to keep them interested in the field. We need more MA programs in esotericism, more post.doc positions, more funding opportunities, and more permanent positions, but in order for this to happen, I think that Western esotericism as a field needs to integrate even more with other scholarly disciplines and fields of research. As it is now, non-experts on esotericism (still) tend to regard Western esotericism with suspicion, as a highly specialised sub discipline with little or no relevance for the broader questions of the humanities.

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

I have many fun memories, but one that stands out is when I met Antoine Faivre for the first time. This was back in 1998 and I had just started to work on my Ph.D. thesis. I wrote to Antoine asking to meet him, and he invited me to his home in Paris. I was struck by his generosity and kindness – he had never heard of me and I was a total stranger, but he showed an interest in my research and took me seriously, despite the fact that I was newcomer on the scene with very little knowledge of esotericism. I would say that Antoine's generosity is quite characteristic for scholars in the field. Most of them are not very protective and competitive (in a bad sense), but on the contrary seem keen on encouraging more junior scholars.

*What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?*

I'm also doing research on Freemasonry, New Religious Movements, and Neopaganism. Although these three fields of research to a certain extent overlap with the study of esotericism, they have established themselves as independent fields of research with conferences, journals, and books series of their own. It is interesting to compare the development of these fields of research with the study of Western esotericism, and it is clear that they are facing similar problems and challenges with lack of available positions etc.

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

Although I am one of the lucky ones with a permanent position that allows me to devote myself to esotericism, I would have to answer that the worst thing about esotericism is the lack of positions. There are far too many brilliant scholars out there who struggle to get a position or funding, and I sincerely fear that it will become difficult to continue to attract so many good scholars if they don't see any future for themselves in the academia.

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

First of all, the fact that what we do, actually matters. The study of Western esotericism has the potential of deepening our understanding of Western culture, from antiquity to our present times, in a profound way. Not only does esotericism help to provide a more complex view of religion and social change in the West, but it also reveals a lot about the self-identity of Western culture, why we think we are who we are, and how that self-image has been created throughout history. In other words, Western esotericism as an academic discipline is in many ways essential for the humanities – or it should be. Secondly, it is the colleagues. I have been fortunate to collaborate closely some amazing scholars, who also have turned out to be fun, generous and brilliant as private persons as well. This is something that has especially become apparent to me when working closely together over an extended period of time, for instance when editing a book together. ♦

## Ph.D. Candidate Florette Gautier, Art History, Patheon-Sorbonne University



*How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?*

In 2010, I moved to Brussels to undertake a master's degree in Art History (Free University of Brussels). I decided to work on Belgian symbolist painter Jean Delville's writings (1867-1953) and I soon realised how deeply involved he was with fin-de-siècle occult currents, especially because of his acquaintance with Sar Joséphin Péladan. For two years in a row, I studied the impact of his connections to occultism and theosophy on his theoretical thinking and on his art. Both of my dissertations, completed in 2010 ("L'écriture artiste de Jean Delville") and 2011 ("Jean Delville et l'occulture fin-de-siècle"), received a warm welcome within the French and Belgian academic field, and I was lucky enough to contribute to the catalogue of the Jean Delville retrospective organised at the Rops Museum in Namur (Belgium) and at the National Gallery of Prague (Czech Republic) in 2013 and 2014.

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

One of the aspects that have not been explored yet and that would probably help our field to be more accepted within other academic fields, is to study esotericism, occultism, theosophy etc. also from an

ironical point of view. Even though it has been a major challenge to prove the importance and the seriousness of our field, especially in art history, I think we should not shut our eyes to popular and sarcastic responses and start to include, for instance, more caricatures in our approaches.

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

In September 2012, I travelled to Amsterdam to attend the first “Enchanted Modernities” conference organised by Marco Pasi and Sarah V. Turner. To be honest, I didn’t expect it to be such a huge and stimulating event. For the first time, I realised there were many scholars all over the world sharing my interests and I felt very impressed by the high quality of the papers presented during this three-day long symposium. I was only starting my PhD research at the time and it was very comforting and nurturing for me to be able to meet more experienced and open-minded scholars.

*What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?*

Having studied both literature and art history during my scholarship, it has always meant a great deal to me to keep this interaction going in my PhD dissertation. This is one of the reasons why I am now working on cubism’s critical reception (1906-1914). I am also very interested in gender studies and popular responses to modern art.

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

The worst thing about studying Western esotericism related subjects is without question being taken for some kind of activist sometimes. While organising the well-known “Traces du sacré” exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (Paris) in 2008, Angela Lampe explained how difficult it was to carry out such a project in France : “spirituality, when clearly articulated in a religious context, is well-accepted but it gets a lot more complicated when the fields are blurred”.

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

To me, the best thing about Western esotericism is for it to be an interdisciplinary field. I find it very exciting and inspiring to be part of a group including art historians, religious historians, literature scholars, and so on. ♦

## ESSWE Sponsorship Programme for Independent Scholarly Initiatives

The European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism is proud to present its new Sponsorship Programme for Independent Scholarly Initiatives – a modest funding instrument designed to help small-scale, grass-root academic initiatives get off the ground. Below you may read more about the intentions behind the programme, the application procedure, and what can be applied for.

### Aim

The ESSWE Sponsorship Programme for Independent Scholarly Initiatives seeks to stimulate new activities by allocating funds to grass-root initiatives where a little bit of money can make a big difference. Examples include the organization of workshops (for students and/or researchers), arranging lectures (e.g. in geographic areas where the study of esotericism is not well established), or setting up independent publications or other media outlets (journals, student magazines, web resources). We are especially looking to support projects that are *collaborative in nature, and likely to increase the visibility and impact of research and teaching in our field.*

### Application and evaluation procedure

The sponsorship is awarded on the basis of a submitted budget, a short cover letter explaining the plans and objectives of the initiative (1-3 pages), and a short CV of the main applicant(s) (1 page each). The main applicant must be a member of ESSWE. In assessing applications, the committee will emphasise the initiative’s potential for stimulating new activity in the field – hence it is important that the expenses listed in the budget are directly related to achieving the goals described in the cover letter. Applicants are also encouraged to seek additional funding from other sources.

In order to stimulate new projects the sponsorship may be awarded as an advance. In such cases, accounts and receipts of actual expenses must be submitted no later than the end of the granting year. Unused funds should be returned to ESSWE.



## 2016 bid: Deadlines and budget

Applications for the 2016 bid should be sent to the committee chair, Egil Asprem (easprem@gmail.com). Depending on the number and quality of applications received, a first evaluation is scheduled to take place on **January 31, 2016**. The budget for 2016 is 1,000 EUR.

### Tips for writing your application

1. The cover letter: Be specific and concise. Focus on what the project will do, who will do it, when, and where. Explain briefly how your project fits within the framework of this call, and (unless it is obvious) what sort of outcomes you expect. Please also indicate whether you are seeking additional funding.
2. The budget: List all expenses you expect for this project, even if they exceed the budget framework. The committee may propose to fund you in part rather than in full. Expenses should be clearly related to the aims of the project. ESSWE will focus on covering essential costs. For example, if it involves a workshop, the sponsorship may fund room rental or travel expenses, but not a free lunch.
3. CV of main applicant: Make it short (1 page). The committee is primarily interested in seeing evidence of commitment to the field and to ESSWE's academic values. Documenting any prior experience with the type of project that is being proposed is also a good idea.

## UPCOMING CONFERENCES

### Eighth International Conference: Mystic and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice – Mysticism and Esotericism in the World of Technologies

March 24-26, 2016, Saint Petersburg (Russia)

The changes which took place due to technical progress, always touched mystic and esoteric movements also. The influence of technology manifests itself on many levels: the change in material culture of mystic and esoteric movements, the change in forms of communication and social organization of esotericists, the transformation of esoteric practices

and last but not least, the change in the esoteric and mystical teachings by bringing technological metaphors into them.

Using various methodologies, participants in the conference will try to understand the interaction of technologies and the mystic-esoteric movements, as observed in the past and in the present. Historians, researchers of culture and religion, philosophers, psychologists, literary scholars, the representatives of scientific knowledge, all those who involves the subject of esotericism and mysticism in their studies are invited to participate in the conference.

Approximate headings of topics:

1. the impact of the technological progress on the teachings of esoteric groups;
2. the impact of mystic and esoteric teachings on the world of technologies;
3. the impact of technologies on the formation and modification of esoteric practices;
4. information technologies and new forms of communication in the esoteric community and in the representation of esoteric groups;
5. the impact of technology on the material culture of the mystic-esoteric movements;
6. the history of interaction of technologies and mystic-esoteric teachings;
7. mysticism and esotericism in the Internet;
8. general aspects of studies for transformations of esotericism and mysticism in the modern world.

Conference languages are Russian and English.

Applications for the conference are to be sent to the address of the organizing committee, esoterra.asem@gmail.com, by 10 January 2016. Please specify:

- 1) Full name
- 2) Date of birth
- 3) Academic degree
- 4) Home address
- 5) Place of work / study
- 6) Current affiliation
- 7) Contact phone
- 8) E-mail
- 9) Need of an official invitation to receive a private (humanitarian) visa for the entry into the Russian Federation (yes/no)
- 10) Need of technical equipment for your report presentation (yes (please, specify which equipment you need)/no)
- 11) Paper title
- 12) Short paper abstract (approx. 200-300 words)

The applicant should enclose also his/her photo (up to 1 Mb).

The organizing committee reserves the right to request additional information from the applicant in order to clarify some of aspects of the application. The decision on the applications will be made within a week after the deadline via e-mail.

By the beginning of the conference we are planning to form and distribute among the authors of the papers a detailed program containing the data of the participants and summaries of their papers.

The best papers will be published in the conference proceedings after the conference.

The conference fee is 60 EUR for non-residents of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) who need invitations for visas (in this case they must also send us the information about their working address, scanned form of the 1st page of the passport). The fee for those participants who plans to enter Russia with a simple tourist visa is 40 EUR. Corresponding fees for ASEM members (non-residents of CIS) are 30 and 20 EUR. The fee is to be paid upon registration (March 24, 2016), not in advance.

The Organizing Committee:

- Chairmen: Prof. Dr. Roman Svetlov (Saint Petersburg); Dr. Sergey Pakhomov (Saint Petersburg, Russia).
- Members: Prof. Dr. Andreas Kilcher (Zurich, Switzerland); Prof. Dr. Mark Sedgwick (Aarhus, Denmark); Prof. Dr. Birgit Menzel (Mainz, Germany); Dr. Yuri Khalturin (Moscow, Russia); Dr. Yuri Rodichenkov (Vyazma, Russia); Stanislav Panin (Moscow, Russia).

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