

Letter from the Book Review Editor

Egil Asprem

E-mail: egil.asprem@correspondencesjournal.com

The number of academic books published annually in the field of Western esotericism appears to be growing rapidly. While this publishing boom began in the 1990s, coinciding with the professionalisation of the field, certain developments over the past few years signal that a new rush is about to begin. Weighty titles on the subject are now being picked up by big prestigious publishers. An introduction to esotericism has just appeared in Bloomsbury's popular *Guides for the Perplexed* series. The dormant *Gnostica: Texts and Interpretations* series has suddenly been revived after moving from Equinox to Acumen, increasing its catalogue from 1 to 5 books in about a year's time. Acumen is in fact putting out exciting esotericism related titles in other series too, while publishing houses such as Routledge and Palgrave are starting to sign relevant titles as well. All of this, of course, adds to existing book series such as SUNY's *Western Esoteric Traditions*, and not least the healthy activity at Brill's *Aries Book Series* – which has produced some groundbreaking volumes recently, with promise of more to come. This steady stream of new publications makes it more relevant than ever to establish forums for critical discussion and assessment of the growing academic literature. I am therefore excited to have the opportunity of developing a new review section for *Correspondences*, starting as of this issue as the journal's first Book Review Editor.

The goals for the new book review section follow from the general philosophy of this journal, making use of its unique position in the market and its open-access policy. We will continue to receive unsolicited pieces, but

© 2014 Egil Asprem.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

now we will also start soliciting reviews of specific books and approach readers whom we deem particularly suited for reviewing them. We hope that this organised effort, combined with all the benefits of our free, online, open-access publication strategy, makes it possible to establish *Correspondences* as the first place to go for up-to-date, quality reviews of recent titles in our field.



Table 1: Occurrences of the word “esotericism” in English language books has soared since the 1990s. And it’s the academic literature that makes the difference. Image from Google nGram Viewer.

That is our ambition. We may need a few issues to get there, but the work begins now. If you are an author or publisher with a book or catalogue you think we should consider for review, do not hesitate to get in touch with me. The same, of course, goes if you are interested in reviewing a title for us.

Esotericism is a fluid concept, and the boundaries of the field that studies “it” are far from fixed. We fully acknowledge this. As a result, we are not only seeking to review books that are marketed as belonging squarely within this specialisation. We are just as interested in exploring relevant titles from other fields – intellectual history, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, media studies, etc. Neither do we feel bound to the West. We will especially look to solicit work in Middle Eastern studies, along with work on South Asian and Far Eastern contexts. We are particularly happy to consider unsolicited reviews in these areas, as the expertise of the editorial board knows its limits. Finally, it goes without saying that we are not pre-judging that esotericism is confined to a specific historical period. Thus we hope to review works spanning from antiquities through to all sorts of late-, post-, and neo-modernities. If anyone were to write on esotericism and the future, we would even (or especially!) review that too.

A few remarks on the ideal book review. There are different views on what book reviews are for, and what makes a particularly good one. I will come out openly with my own opinion on this, seeing that it will in any case guide my work with shaping this new section. The purpose of the book review is *not* to generate quotable words for flattering back cover blurbs. Such quotable words may of course result as by-products of a review, but the review's function as a genre is quite distinct from that of the blurb. The blurb aims to flatter and seduce – the review aims to criticise. It should not be an instrument for marketing, but an extension of the peer review process. Good reviews remain civil in language and tone, but they do not shy away from asking tough questions, taking arguments apart, identifying errors and inaccuracies. They make no compromises in assessing the merits of the work through rigorous criticism. The truly great review is able to do this against the background of previous work, seeing the book under review not only on its own terms, but in a wider scholarly context of existing arguments, evidence, and hypotheses. This sort of reflective criticism makes the book review into a truly integral part of the development of scholarship.

In the present issue we publish two reviews that already illustrate some of the above points. One of the reviewed volumes is part scholarship, part practitioner texts, which offers opportunities for the reviewer to comment on problematic aspects in the borderlands of esotericism studies and pagan studies. The other review is of a recent but already influential book on the interface of fiction, esotericism, and new religious movements. The book has been warmly received in a number of previous reviews – *Correspondences*, it seems, is the first to publish a more critical take, one which not only highlights crucial shortcomings, but also suggests how these ought to be fixed.

Both reviews in this issue were unsolicited ones. The organised effort to expand the section through solicited reviews of hand-picked books begins now, and should start bearing fruits over the summer. By next issue (2.2) we hope to be able to publish on a more extensive collection of recent titles in this rapidly developing field.