

Translating Esotericism: Scepticism, Optimism, Agency

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Translation is both possible and impossible – a dialectical antinomy characteristic of esoteric argument.

George Steiner¹

In recent years, a debate has emerged about whether esotericism as a domain of study should be seen as specific to Western culture or is best understood from a perspective of global history. With this special issue of *Correspondences*, we hope to contribute to these ongoing discussions by putting the spotlight on translation. Because the modern study of esotericism emerged historically in European and North American academic culture, its basic terminology is rooted linguistically in Western intellectual history, especially Greek and Latin; even though the journal *Aries* has room for four modern European languages (English, French, German, Italian) while several ESSWE networks are focused on specific linguistic domains, there can be no doubt that the field as a whole (including the journal *Correspondences*) relies very strongly on modern English as its *lingua franca*. What are the implications of this fact for scholars from across

1. Steiner, *After Babel*, 66 (part of a chapter titled “Language and Gnosis”).

the globe who participate in our esotericism research networks as native speakers in other tongues and/or are working with sources and topics in languages other than English?

Between Scepticism and Optimism

In his much-quoted textbook *What is Global History?*, Sebastian Conrad acknowledges the hegemony of English as a serious problem:

Objections to the global history paradigm are particularly powerful when they are tied to a critique of the dominance of Anglophone scholarship. This issue of language is indeed crucial. . . . Most global historians today continue to ignore scholarship written in other languages and produced outside the institutional frame of Western universities – particularly those in the United States and Great Britain. As Dominic Sachsenmaier has pointed out, such a marginalization of other historiographical traditions, even where works are available in translation, stands in stark contradiction to the inclusive and post-Eurocentric rhetoric of the global history approach.²

Conrad admits that indeed “the hegemony of English has the power to marginalize other languages and historiographical traditions,” but appears ultimately more impressed by its positive potential for enabling conversations across boundaries: “In principle, it facilitates access to scholarship hitherto arcane and impenetrable, allows broad participation in debates, and creates resonance for voices previously heard only locally.”³ It should be noted that translation is never mentioned as relevant or problematic.

Conrad’s short discussion, titled “Geopolitics and Language,” reflects a basic and unresolved conflict between two sharply opposed lines of argumentation about translation in a global context. We will refer to them as the “sceptical” and

2. Conrad, *What is Global History?*, 219–20; reference to Sachsenmaier, “Some Reflections.”

3. *Ibid.*, 220. The strategic qualifier “in principle” should not be overlooked.

the “optimistic” position.⁴ The problem is that both, although in different ways and for different reasons, would seem to undermine the very project of a global history of religion — or, for that matter, of esotericism. The sceptical perspective resists the global dominance of English. Its most radical representatives insist that a genuinely post- or decolonial academic culture requires *thinking and publishing in the original languages* of formerly colonized countries (and by extension, we might add, of other countries and linguistic cultures as well). To give one prominent example, the Kenyan academic and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argued in 1981 that imperialism’s most potent weapon is a kind of “cultural bomb” that “annihilate[s] a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”⁵ More recently, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni has taken up this argument and developed it further: even more powerful than the “first empire” of physical-political domination and the “second empire” of global commercial-military exploitation, he argues, is a third “metaphysical empire” that commits nothing less than *linguicide* and *epistemicide*:

The dehumanization of the colonized as part of the process of coloniality of being, was accompanied by theft of history so as to sustain the myth of a people without history; appropriation of indigenous people’s knowledges; outright epistemicides, linguicides and introduction of cultural imperialism. This constituted what is known as “coloniality of knowledge.” [It] unfolded in terms of systematic repression of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, and symbols constitutive of the colonized people’s indigenous knowledge systems.⁶

From such a perspective, the *de facto* hegemony of English in a global history paradigm must be seen as deeply problematic, as it assists and supports

4. For the deep structure of this conflict, see, e.g., George Steiner’s distinction between the “universal” and the “monadist” position (*After Babel*, 76-97) or Lydia H. Liu’s discussion in *Translingual Practice*, 10-20 (“What theoretical assumptions about *difference* between languages prompt theorists to raise the issue of translatability and untranslatability over and over again?” Ibid., 11; idem in Steiner, o.c., “the perennial question whether translation is, in fact, possible”).

5. Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 3.

6. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Metaphysical Empire,” 106 (partly with reference to Quijano, “Coloniality,” 169).

“metaphysical empire” by promoting Western concepts and vocabularies while suppressing, marginalizing, or wholly erasing the languages and knowledge systems of indigenous or local cultures.⁷ If we follow this line of reasoning, the unavoidable consequence is that post- or decolonial perspectives must actively resist Anglophone dominance by cultivating and promoting original intellectual or academic work in a wide variety of local languages. To give one prominent example, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (to whom we will return) insists that African philosophy requires thinking and conceptualizing in African languages rather than unreflexively adopting linguistic conventions and philosophical concepts from ancient Greece and other European cultures.⁸

We consider this a very powerful argument, in view of both the ongoing destruction of indigenous cultures and languages under the impact of global neoliberal market forces and the inherent limitations of modern English. To show its relevance even beyond post- or decolonial contexts, let’s take a quick look at our academic vocabulary for basic epistemological categories that are relevant to esotericism research. “To know” is one of the ten most common verbs in English and belongs to the fewer than one hundred words with precise translations in all the 6,000+ human languages.⁹ Its central importance to *Wissenschaft* (the business of gaining knowledge, a word that itself has no adequate translation in English)¹⁰ cannot possibly be doubted. But unlike most other modern languages, for instance French or German, English does not differentiate between propositional knowledge (*savoir, wissen*) and knowledge by immediate acquaintance (*connaître, kennen*). This limitation has far-reaching

7. Same argument in George Steiner’s remarks (as early as 1991) about “the accelerating disappearance of languages across our earth, the detergent sovereignty of so-called major languages whose dynamic efficacy springs from the planetary spread of mass-marketing, technocracy, and the media” (*After Babel*, xiv-xv).

8. Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization*; idem, “Introduction.”

9. Nagel, *Knowledge*, 6.

10. For the problem of translating *Wissenschaft* into English (which forces us to choose either “science” or “scholarship”), see Hanegraaff’s contribution to the present issue.

consequences, for instance when it comes to translating so-called “gnostic,” Hermetic or more generally Platonic texts from late antiquity: while the Greek term *gnōsis* means not propositional knowledge but knowledge by immediate acquaintance, it is easy and natural for English readers to assume incorrectly that it pertained to some kind of *wissen* or *savoir*, i.e., a “knowledge about” comparable to the scholarly or scientific knowledge with which they are familiar. This can lead to very serious misinterpretations that essentially erase or overwrite the authors’ intended meaning.¹¹ Furthermore, the faculty that allowed humans to attain *gnōsis* was referred to as *nous*, a word that usually gets translated into English as “intellect” or “mind,” although in many cases (especially those that are most relevant to the study of esotericism) it precisely does *not* mean what modern readers understand by those all too familiar words. In fact, the terminology of *nous* and *noēsis* is strictly untranslatable and must be introduced into English as a set of new words to be learned.¹²

The sceptical position concerning translation implies that the hegemony of English in the global study of religion or esotericism must be resisted and ultimately broken, because it does indeed function as a “third empire” (subservient to the “second empire” of market globalization) that systematically commits linguistic

11. This argument is central to the analysis of *gnōsis*, *nous* and *noēsis* in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, which seeks to demonstrate how post-eighteenth century philhellenic prejudice (itself part and parcel of the Western-colonial mindset), built on the presumed superiority of “Greece” (code for superior “Western” rationality and science) over “Egypt” (code for irrational “Oriental” superstition), has led to deep patterns of misinterpretation that in Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s terms could in fact be qualified as a form of historiographical epistemicide.

12. Godel, “Socrate et Diotime,” 26 with note 58; Banner, *Philosophic Silence*, 176–210; Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 12–16, 200–209, and *passim*. While “knowledge” is an obvious key term in academic debate, we could make a very similar argument for another one that often gets connected with it in contemporary post-Foucauldian discourse, i.e. “power.” Again, English does not differentiate between at least two very different meanings of the word, in contrast to modern languages such as German or Dutch, which have a word for power in the sense of domination (*Macht*, *macht*) and another one for a powerful force or energy (*Kraft*, *kracht*). To give just one example from the field of esotericism, the result is that a modern pagan author such as Starhawk was forced to build an entire book on the rather awkward neologisms “power-over” and “power-from-within” (*Dreaming the Dark*; see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 188–89).

and epistemicide. The argument is compelling and of central importance to our project. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that its successful implementation would ultimately lead to intellectual fragmentation, balkanization, or tribalization on a global scale. The “ideal” situation would presumably be one in which the representatives of each linguistic domain pursue their own projects (intellectual, cultural, religious, political, and so on – including, of course, research projects concerned with “esotericism”) on their own terms and in a voluntarily-chosen state of linguistic isolation, thus blocking access to their achievements for all those who do not master the relevant language(s) while minimizing their own ability to profit from the achievements of others and engage in fruitful exchange across linguistic and cultural boundaries.¹³ It is, of course, for this reason that (as we saw above) a standard textbook of Global History is led to pay lip service to the sceptical argument while refusing to follow up on it. However, the implied critique of Global History as a “third empire” project has not thereby lost any of its power. Certainly, the global hegemony of English enables fruitful conversation and exchange across economic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, but it does so at a heavy price, and implies that the boundary conditions for participating in the discourse are set by an international academic elite centered on Europe and the United States. As illustrated by the examples of *gnōsis*, *nous* and *noēsis* in the previous paragraph (which could, of course, be multiplied a thousandfold), entire universes of linguistic meaning and conceptual depth are bound to be simplified, flattened, distorted, marginalized, or will even vanish entirely from the new global

13. Lest our depiction of the “sceptical” position might seem exaggerated or extreme to some readers, see the powerful recent discussion by Táiwò, *Against Decolonisation*. Táiwò’s argument focuses on Africa and defends what he calls “decolonisation1” (defined as “making a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction,” *ibid.*, 3) against the currently much more influential discourse of “decolonisation2” (defined as “forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past,” *ibid.*).

discourse.¹⁴ More or less inevitably, the limits of modern English become the limits not just of what can be said, but of what can be thought and understood.

The sceptical position insists on the frequent untranslatability of key terminology and, by implication, of local cultural systems grounded in specific languages. By contrast, an alternative approach congenial to global history appears more optimistic (but also, we suggest, more naïve) about the ultimate translatability of terms and concepts into English and the possibility of intercultural communication. It assumes that we actually have a workable, good-enough solution for transcending linguistic and cultural difference: English can do the job. Those who hold to this “optimistic position” (exemplified here by the prominent case of Conrad, but implicit in all global history approaches conducted in English as their *lingua franca*) generally seem less concerned about the hegemonic and neocolonial implications of anglophone dominance – implicitly or explicitly, the message is that as a condition for being admitted into the global conversation, scholars from non-Western cultures will just have to bracket their native languages and adopt the language of the dominant powers. This perspective makes light of the intimate connection between languages and systems of knowledge, and cannot afford to be all too deeply concerned about all the nuances and complexities that might get lost in translation. The implicit message is “pity, but get over it – there just isn’t any other way.”

The Bridge of Translation

What the two extreme positions have in common, we suggest, is precisely a failure to take translation seriously enough. The sceptical position must ultimately dismiss translation altogether, as a strict impossibility that creates mere delusions of “understanding” which actually serve the interests of power

14. Another prominent example built on the same argumentative logic would be Mignolo, *Darker Side of the Renaissance*, esp. part I.

and domination.¹⁵ In doing so, its advocates risk isolating themselves from other “situated knowledges” than their own,¹⁶ thereby giving up on many opportunities for intercultural communication, mutual learning, and fruitful exchange. By contrast, the optimistic position ingrained in anglophone global history approaches tends to take translation rather lightly (too lightly, we submit), by simply accepting English as an unproblematic medium of intercultural translation on a global scale, or as a practical necessity that just has to be accepted because of the argument that no alternative exists. By doing so, and in spite of all their good intentions, its representatives must accept the risk of becoming complicit in the operations of a “third empire” guilty of linguicide and epistemicide.

We consider both positions to be equally right and equally wrong. To resolve the dilemma, it is essential to recognize that translation is exactly as possible as it is impossible.¹⁷ What do we mean by these riddles? The English word “translation” comes from the Latin *translatus*, the past participle of the irregular

15. This classic deconstructionist argument is illustrated in exemplary fashion by the famous or notorious Gadamer-Derrida encounter of 1981 (analysis in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 342-351). Its unquestionable power is evident in many discussions that are deeply informed by poststructural theory, for instance Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 1-27.

16. The reference is of course to a classic article by Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.” Haraway showed an acute awareness of this very risk, as she points out that her position of “feminist critical empiricism” needs “an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities.” Such a search for “translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality,” she usefully adds, “I call reductionism only when one language (guess whose?) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions” (*ibid.*, 580).

17. Steiner, *After Babel*, 66; cf. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Alles verstehen ist daher immer zugleich ein Nicht-Verstehen, alle Übereinstimmung in Gedanken und Gefühlen zugleich ein Auseinandergehen” (“Thus all understanding is always at the same time a non-understanding, all concurrence in thought and feeling at the same time divergence”; Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus*; Steiner o.c., 181).

verb *transfere*, “to carry across” (cf. the German *übersetzen* or the French *traduire*).¹⁸ It reflects the acute insight that what happens in any act of translation always involves a *transfer* of meaning across a discontinuous gap. And it is here that we find a way out of our dilemma: this very fact of discontinuity is not just what makes translation *necessary* (because it implies the need for some meaning to be carried across from one language to another) but also what makes translation *possible* (because if there is nothing but continuity, it is impossible for anything to get carried across from anywhere to anywhere else). It is impossible to understand translation, we want to suggest, without this assumption of a liminal middle that both separates *and* connects the ideal polarities – or, more precisely, that connects by means of separating and separates by means of connecting.¹⁹

This very same principle should make it possible to transcend the “either/or” dilemma of mutual exclusion that separates the sceptical position from its optimistic counterpart, so as to find a “both/and” solution that enables collaboration and inclusivity. Not by any coincidence, this is almost an exact

18. While the German *übersetzen* (Dutch *overzetten*) suggests a movement such as, for instance, lifting something up from a river’s shore, moving it across the water, and then putting it down on the other side, the French term *traduire* (from Latin *traducere*, composed of *trans* and *duco*) has a fascinating background, as explained by Sanda Reinheimer Ripeanu: “*traducere* in Latin meant ‘to transport,’ as broadly attested in the Italian of the first centuries and still surviving in legal terminology (It. *tradurre in tribunale*) . . . But by a false translation of *traducere* in the passage by Aulus Gellius *vocabulum graecum vetus tractatum in linguam romanam* (*Noctes* I, 18, 1), which did not mean “to transport” but “to introduce,” the Humanist Leonardo Bruni opened the doors widely for a new meaning of the word, that of ‘transporting from one language to another’ . . . ; in sum, the extension of *traducere* in its new understanding had so much power that it conquered the whole of Western Europe as well as Romania” (*Les emprunts latins* 5.1.: Polysémie des latinismes).

19. For the broader argument, see Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, especially 12–16, 311–20, 342–51. While we will not insist too much on it in this Introduction, we suggest that translation is most fruitfully interpreted as an act of *imagination*. As formulated by arguably its deepest modern interpreter, the human imaginal faculty can be defined exactly as our weird and wondrous human ability “to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is” (Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 127; but, by extension, also to *bear* in sounds what they are not, to hear them other they are, or even to *feel* in sensations what they are not, to feel them other than they are). This human ability is a very close match with Steiner’s insistence on human language as “the enemy of reality” (*After Babel*, xiv, 228, 237, 300).

definition of what the act of translation is all about: instead of saying “either your language or mine,” it says “both your language and mine” or even “your language in mine and my language in yours” (and we suggest that what is true for languages is true for academic discourses as well). Translation means building “impossible” bridges for (or in) communication; and it only makes sense as the reflection of a genuine, deep and serious interest in learning to understand other perspectives than our own.²⁰ Therefore our “translating esotericism” project is inspired by a hopeful and positive ideal of genuine global and non-hegemonic conversation across all boundaries of language and culture. As noted by George Steiner, the miracle is that in spite of all scepticism, in fact, “We *do* speak of the world and to one another. We *do* translate intra- and interlingually . . . Somehow the ‘impossible’ is overcome at every moment in human affairs.”²¹

Of course, such an agenda of cultivating translation as the middle ground between the optimistic and sceptical positions implies a certain degree of critical distance towards the inherent logic of both extremes. To give an instance of the former, Carol Gluck’s and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s edited volume *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (2009) contains important discussions of key terminology in a wide variety of languages and specific local contexts: Brazilian Portuguese *segurança* (security), Indonesian *adat* (indigenous), Arabic *ada* (custom), Japanese *sekinin* (responsibility), Moroccan Arabic *‘ilmaniyya*, and its relation to French *laïcité*, *sécularisme* (secularism), Japanese *saburaimu* (sublime),

20. Note that strictly technical procedures such as automatized computer translation fall short of this requirement; our concern is with deep understanding, not with a technical “third empire” project of establishing lexical equivalents that will erase linguistic complexities in the interest of easy translatability. By definition, the type of deep translation we have in mind will never be easy, and there is no reason why it should be. For similar reservations and critique directed at the Chomskyan project of a “generative grammar” see George Steiner’s classic *After Babel*, e.g. xiv, xvii (highlighting the strange paradox that an explicit critic of American imperialism advocates the universalist program of an “Anglo-American Esperanto” aimed at global linguistic uniformity), 112, 117.

21. Steiner, *After Babel*, 264; cf. *ibid.*, 293: “What, then, is translation? . . . We do not know with any great precision or confidence what it is that we are asking and, concomitantly, what meaningful answers would really be like.”

Egyptian Arabic *‘aqalliyya* (minority), Arabic *hijāb* (headscarf), Spanish Philippine *conjuración* (conspiracy), Turkish *komisyon*, *kurul* (commission, board), and Thai *chumchon* (community) and *thammarat* (good governance). Very much in the spirit of our “translating esotericism” project, they show in fascinating detail what happens with words in a wide variety of specific linguistic, cultural, historical, social, and political contexts. However — and here comes our point of critique — we are not so sure what to make of the subtitle of the book, which suggests that such explorations should be seen as preliminaries for the establishment of a “global lexicon.” As perceptively noted by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, in fact the volume “focuses more on the distinctive local meanings of words that would presumably interfere with their filtration into a context-transcendent ‘global lexicon.’”²² However, while we resist the (no doubt unintended) “third empire” logic of such a universal global lexicon, we also resist the sceptical counter-position that relies on standard deconstructionist logic to suggest that “translation,” “communication,” and “understanding” are simply impossible, because ultimately they are nothing but pious illusions or masks of power and domination — as formulated for instance by Roland Barthes’ claim that “to speak, and even more so to discourse, is not to communicate . . . it is to subjugate.”²³

Most certainly, this does not imply any wish on our part to deny or minimize the enormous extent to which language itself, as well as any process of translation, is always implicated with power relations and can be a tool for domination and manipulation.²⁴ On the contrary: it is precisely by highlighting the linguistic depths and semantic complexities of each different local vocabulary that we can learn to recognize, become aware of, unmask, and perhaps even neutralize

22. Moyn & Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*, 28 note 16. For this important point, see the discussion of lexical “equivalence” in Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 3–10, and also 23 for the instructive example of the late-eighteenth-century *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa* as a tool of colonial control.

23. Barthes, *Leçon*, 12. For a critical discussion of this “tragic view of language” and its theoretical foundations, see e.g. Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, 88–92.

24. E.g. Asad, “Concept of Cultural Translation,” 157–58 and *passim*; Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 20–25.

the otherwise invisible power exerted by hegemonic discourse.²⁵ Precisely in the modern study of esotericism – more strongly even than in most other fields, for reasons we are about to explain – this requires a type of critical reflection that has been described by Kwasi Wiredu as “conceptual decolonization.” He provided an oft-quoted list of words that “cry for a decolonized treatment” by means of “reviewing them in the light of indigenous categories.”²⁶ Keeping in mind that not even one hundred words worldwide have a precise equivalent in all human languages, consider this sample of words from standard English vocabulary that are central to Western philosophy and rational discourse.

Reality. Being. Existence. Object. Entity. Substance. Property. Quality. Truth. Fact. Opinion. Belief. Knowledge. Faith. Doubt. Certainty. Statement. Proposition. Sentence. Idea. Mind. Soul. Spirit. Thought. Sensation. Matter. Ego. Self. Person. Individuality. Community. Subjectivity. Objectivity. Cause. Chance. Reason. Explanation. Meaning. Freedom. Responsibility. Punishment. Democracy. Justice. God. World. Universe. Nature. Supernature. Space. Time. Nothingness. Creation. Life. Death. Afterlife. Morality. Religion.²⁷

Wiredu’s program of conceptual decolonization is of particular relevance to esotericism studies, precisely because the latter’s core vocabulary amounts to a rather exact counter-sample of terms that (allowing for a few exceptions)²⁸ have *not* been considered central to post-eighteenth-century Western philosophy and rational discourse! In other words, the two vocabularies represent two sides of the same coin of hegemonic Western and colonial discourse. Those forms of practice and thought that were rejected by the modern Western academy as “primitive superstition,” “irrational nonsense,” or “magical delusion” were precisely what the colonizing powers were trying to suppress and eradicate not just in their

25. “Quod tanto impendio absconditur, etiam solummodo demonstrare, destruere est” (“merely pointing out that which is concealed so carefully, means destroying it”; Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* III.5).

26. Wiredu, “Introduction,” 14–16, here 15.

27. *Ibid.*

28. It is instructive to compare Wiredu’s list with our list of core terms in the final section of this article. Both lists contain the terms “mind,” “spirit,” “soul,” “God,” and “supernature” resp. “supernatural.”

own societies (where we eventually came to refer to them as “occultism” or “esotericism”) but in their colonies throughout the world — all, of course, in the name of “reason, science, civilization, and progress.”²⁹ It is precisely this arrogant “civilization narrative” that gets questioned and undermined on a fundamental level not only by post- or decolonial scholarship, but also by the agenda of historical emancipation that inspired the original study of esotericism since the 1990s: to restore such traditionally rejected forms of practice and thinking to a status of cultural normality and academic legitimacy in scholarly research.³⁰ In this context, we suggest that Wiredu’s project of “conceptual decolonization” may be usefully applied to esoteric vocabulary as well. To give just the most obvious example, it is well known that the term “magic” carries an enormous amount of polemical, cultural, and ideological baggage from late antiquity up through the colonial age,³¹ including the heavily racist trope of white “civilized” males who have attained the “Light of Reason” against “primitive” black Africans still drenched in “magical superstition.” What would it mean to conceptually decolonize “magic” in, say, Yoruba or Swahili? And which terms are available in these African languages (and, of course, in many other languages, throughout

29. This is the core argument in Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism” (see esp. 64–66, with reference to e.g. Johnson, “Idolatrous Cultures”; Bernand & Gruzinski, *De l’idolâtrie*; Chidester, *Savage Systems*; Kristóf, “Uses of Demonology”; eadem, “Missionaries, Monsters, and the Demon Show”; see also 71–74 for the examples of Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl, and for the deep historical foundations of this Western colonial discourse in Christian polemics against “paganism and idolatry,” see the general argument of Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*). Its strong agenda of deconstructing dominant modern narratives of “Western superiority” is surprisingly missed by Strube (“Towards the Study”; “Theosophy, Race”), who turns it on its head by suggesting that it somehow implies *support* for an imperialist narrative of Western superiority; unfortunately, similar misreadings abound in Finley, Gray & Page, “Africana Esoteric Studies.”

30. With reference to a recent argument by Bakker and Roukema in this journal (“10 Years of Correspondences,” 240 note 13), it is relevant to point out that the academic climate of the 1990s was extremely different from that of the early 2020s, and hostile toward esotericism to an extent that may be hard to imagine for younger scholars who never experienced it: even for political-strategic reasons alone, then, the project of restoring esotericism as a legitimate field of scholarship did require an explicit “empirical-historical” commitment to neutrality and objectivity.

31. Otto, *Magie*, 1–132; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 164–77; idem, “Magic.”

the world) that might help us replace the still-ubiquitous term “magic” by more adequate etic concepts in our field?³² If we are serious about globalizing the study of esotericism, such questions must be taken seriously, and must be pursued systematically for all the terms in its standard vocabulary and in a wide variety of European and non-European languages.

And that, precisely, is what our “translating esotericism” project is all about. We hope to have made clear that it will have to be understood as just a modest first contribution to the much larger enterprise, which we hope will be taken up and carried forward by others, of questioning and destabilizing standard assumptions about the field’s core vocabulary and its intellectual or political implications. The intention is to show how many things that are simply taken for granted in standard English scholarship may not be quite so obvious, or might even look completely different (sometimes subtly, sometimes more radically) once they are seen from other linguistic and cultural perspectives than the anglophone standard. We hope that this will eventually inspire new, hopefully more inclusive and nuanced concepts and frameworks for analysis across the boundaries of language and culture.

The Agency of the Translator

Finally, we want to call attention to the importance of human agency in translation.³³ How does the translators’ cultural, social, and intellectual situatedness affect actual processes of translation, and how does their vocabulary influence general processes of cultural transfer in historical and contemporary contexts? Looking back at the history of modern translation studies from the vantage point of 2005, Eva Hung observed that

32. Important new insights about such questions may be expected from Bernd-Christian Otto’s ambitious research project “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective” of Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

33. Kinnunen and Koskinen, eds., *Translators’ Agency*. See their useful minimum definition of *agency* as “willingness and ability to act”: in studying the agency of the translator, we must pay attention not just to her “particular internal states and disposition” but also to “constraints and issues of power(lessness), highlighting the intrinsic relation between agency and power” (ibid., 6).

until the 1970s the theoretical explorations [concerning translation] were all along the lines of linguistic theories. One of the main concerns was to establish the exact mechanism of linguistic transcoding/transference so that the task of translating could be both understood and carried out smoothly and flawlessly. The belief that understanding the process of translation would lead to the unveiling of the secrets of “the translator’s black box” (i.e. her mind) is still with us as part of the process-oriented approach in translation and interpreting research. This belief assumes that if the precise process and procedures can be mapped, analyzed and replicated, then trainees need only be taught how to replicate the process for them to become fully competent translators and interpreters. Even more importantly, perhaps, precisely replicable processes will facilitate the development of programmes for computer translation which will produce texts that are qualitatively comparable to those done by the best human translators, but at much quicker speed and less cost.³⁴

But instead of looking at translation simply as “a job to be done,” she continues, we should be aware that the actual impact of translations depends primarily on “how they were *conceived* prior to the translation act and how they were *received* after it.” If we look at translation from a socio-cultural and historical rather than from a technical-linguistic perspective, we realize that “the idealized concept of a ‘good translation’ . . . bears no direct relationship to the impact a translation has on its host culture.” The fact is that many influential translators were (and are) “much more interested in how the work fit into their own agenda than how it functioned in its original culture.”³⁵

This means that translations must be assessed not just for their technical merits but in view of how they actually *function* in specific cultural, social, or economic contexts. To do that, we must know where the translators are coming from — that is, what kinds of worldviews and experiences, whether personal or collective, have informed their work and their approaches to translation. A translator’s motivations and attitudes toward the task of translation are often colored by specific intellectual or political agendas that will inevitably affect her translations. But can we gain access to the “black box” and actually know about

34. “Editor’s Preface,” in Hung, *Translation and Cultural Change*, vii.

35. *Ibid.*, viii.

the translators' minds, backgrounds, and agendas? We believe it is possible to a considerable extent, at least indirectly, because translators leave "footprints" — for instance in the form of introductory remarks, strategies for selecting the translated works, annotations within the texts, or footnotes.³⁶ Such footprints or traces, of course, are the essential stuff of historical research on textual-philological foundations.

Let us illustrate the importance of agency by giving an example. The technical-linguistic approach to translation as "getting the job done" is exemplified in our current moment by the rise of AI as a tool for translation. Clearly a gigantic step forward in terms of technological advancement, Chatbots such as ChatGPT are created to help people with various tasks; but while its creators note that ChatGPT is trained for performing "dialogues" and "conversations," they admit that it may provide "incorrect and nonsensical answers" because "there's currently no source of truth."³⁷ When we asked ChatGPT to "translate 'esotericism' into Arabic," it gave two different answers on two different occasions. On 11 April 2023, it responded: "الإسوارية" (*al-iswariyya*) is the Arabic translation for 'esotericism.'" As it turns out, this word means literally "evening wear for the soul!"³⁸ Four days later, on 15 April 2023, the Chatbot opined:

36. On the importance of footnotes in a translated work for recognizing a translator's agency, see Paloposki, "The Translator's Footprints." For an excellent illustration in the field of esotericism research, see the groundbreaking work of Christian Wildberg on the textual history of the Hermetic writings, which shows how marginal notes made by copyists are often integrated into the main text by the next copyist (a process referred to as "mechanical interpolation"), resulting in major textual corruptions that are then naïvely translated as though they were parts of the Hermetic text (Wildberg, "*Corpus Hermeticum*, Tractate III"; and see his forthcoming new translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* based upon systematic identification of all these marginal notes. For a short discussion, cf. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 129–30)

37. "Introducing ChatGPT," blog post on OpenAI, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>.

38. Matthew Melvin-Koushki, personal communication, 20 April 2023. "إسوار (*iswar*) is a bracelet for a fancy night out, and the adjective إسواري (*iswari*) is used only for soirée dresses, straight from the French."

“تصوّف (*taṣawwuf*) is the Arabic translation for ‘esotericism.’”³⁹ ChatGPT did not provide any reasons for the different translations it provided on different occasions; but when pressed for an answer, on 17 April 2023, it admitted that “both of these translations have different connotations and implications, and the choice of translation may depend on the context and intended meaning of the text.” In contrast to such instances of mechanical translation, scholars of esotericism have suggested that the term “esotericism” can be translated into Arabic as *bāṭiniyya* – a translation that did not occur to ChatGPT but is grounded in historical contexts involving the agency of historical actors.⁴⁰ Without human agency and scholarly argument, how would a non-Arabic speaker know that translating esotericism as *bāṭiniyya* has greater historical justification than translating the term as *al-ʿiswariyya* or *taṣawwuf*?

Those who rely on ChatGPT for understanding (and translating) esotericism would therefore certainly be misled and directed into a blind alley. The risks and disadvantages of trusting AI as a tool for knowledge production come from the fact that machines rely on mathematical algorithms while disregarding the importance of cultural encounters among historical actors. It is precisely the translator’s agency that makes such encounters possible, and this fact lies at the heart of the bridge-building function of translation in esotericism research. Therefore we have good reasons to doubt whether AI will ever be able to replace human intelligence for translation. We should not expect that its current deficiencies will be solved by perfecting AI’s technical and self-learning abilities in the future, because the point is that translation relies strongly on *interpersonal*

39. The term *taṣawwuf* is commonly used to indicate Sufism (Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 5–7). It is used in both Arabic and Persian and is important to the history of esotericism in Asia. Interestingly, during the twentieth century a Bengali Theosophist called Sris Chandra Basu translated *taṣawwuf* as “Theosophy” while translating a seventeenth-century Persian-language text from Mughal India. See the chapter on “The Theosophical Projects of Translation” in Mukhopadhyay, “The Occult World of Bengalis” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, forthcoming).

40. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?,” 18–25. However, see also the remarks by Noah Gardiner and Matthew Melvin-Koushki in this special issue.

communication by embodied human actors in specific historical, cultural, political, or economic contexts. This is why (as indicated by Eva Hung) we need to assume a socio-cultural and historical perspective toward academic translations and consider the agency of the translators as well as of publishers who put their work into print.

Translation has played an extremely important role not just in making texts more widely accessible, but also in promoting the study of esoteric texts or of esotericism as a field of study across linguistic boundaries. To give just one simple example, many French-to-English translations of works by Antoine Faivre appeared during the 1990s, quite suddenly within just a few years. As these were the first academic publications to provide comprehensive, authoritative historical overviews and theoretical discussions of what he called *l'ésotérisme occidental* (“Western esotericism”), it is hard to imagine how the modern study of esotericism could have begun developing without them. Of key importance here is also the apparent willingness of academic publishers (in this case notably Crossroads and State University of New York Press) to take the risk of publishing such books in a new, unfamiliar, and potentially controversial field.⁴¹ This willingness, in turn, can hardly be understood without taking into account the booming First World economy of this period, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989, resulting in a climate of almost boundless (and, from our present vantage point, boundlessly naïve) optimism about the imminent future that marked the age of globalization prior to 9/11. In short, this widespread feeling of confidence about

41. Discussion of titles and dates in Hanegraaff, with Brach and Pasi, “Antoine Faivre (1934–2021),” 191–96. It should be noted that, as a topic of research, the agency of authors, translators, or publishers is not exhausted by studying their actions and initiatives but includes also what they did *not* do and what therefore did not happen (i.e., lack or absence of agency). For instance, Will-Erich Peuckert’s oeuvre in German could potentially have kick-started esotericism research already during the 1950s or 60s, but none of his books ever appeared in translation (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 315–17). Note also that while Frances Yates’s bestselling *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) put “the Hermetic Tradition” on the map of anglophone research, this title was never translated into German, resulting in an entirely different tradition of German *Hermetik* research that seems to have remained blissfully unaware of Yates.

making financial investments helps explain why esotericism as a new field of study was able to establish itself precisely during this “long decade” of the 1990s (that is, between 1989 and the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001).⁴²

The point is that translation projects must always be seen in their specific historical, socio-cultural, as well as economic contexts. They often lead to intellectual encounters and exchanges between texts and translators across cultural and continental barriers, resulting in new forms of transcultural or transnational collaboration that are important for us to study seriously. Among the most obvious examples relevant to the field of esotericism are the great translation movements from Greek to Arabic and other middle-Eastern languages during the Islamic “Golden Age” (eighth century - 1258), then from Arabic to Latin during the later European middle ages, and of course such early-modern key translations from Greek to Latin (and eventually in vernaculars) as Ficino’s translation of the Platonic dialogues and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁴³

In modern global-colonial contexts, esoteric translation ventures have been marked by close collaboration, notably between Indian and Western actors. In 1896, for instance, two Theosophists – Jagadish Chandra Chatterji (1872–1960) and George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933) – jointly published a two-volume translation of the *Upanishads* [sic].⁴⁴ In Indian and Western Theosophical circles at

42. Another evident example is the creation of the Amsterdam chair for “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents” in 1999, based on a substantial financial gift by a donor from the private sector, Rosalie Basten (Van den Broek, “Birth of a Chair”).

43. E.g. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*; Saif, *Arabic Influences*; Hanegraaff, “How Hermetic was Renaissance Hermetism?” As regards agency in the latter case, note that neither Ficino nor Cosimo de’ Medici appear to have taken action to get the *Pimander* printed: it appeared on the market in 1471 as a corrupt clandestine publication that was hastily prepared by two other humanists. In terms of Hung’s definition of agency, Ficino and his Maecenas therefore had the *ability* but apparently not the *willingness* to publish this translation.

44. Mead & Chatterji, *Upanishads*. Note that “Chatterji” is the Anglicized form of “Chaṭṭopādhyāya” and refers to the same surname. As for the addition “Roy Chaudhury” on the title page, this is an honorific title that many Bengalis received (mainly from the British in colonial times) and used as their last name. While *The Upanishads* had “Chaṭṭopādhyāya (Roy Chaudhury)” on the title page, J.C. Chatterji did not use the same in all his publications or letters.

the turn of the century, Chatterji and Mead were reputed figures because of their respective philosophical contributions.⁴⁵ Not only was their translation project an example of cooperation between a British and an Indian intellectual, but it also incorporated an arcane Sanskrit text into the international occultist discourse. This translation was important because it was the first major Theosophical translation of the *Upaniṣhads*. Of course, several translations of the corpus had already been produced during the nineteenth century by Indian and Western intellectuals, such as A.H. Anquetil-Duperron (1801/1802), H.T. Colebrooke (1805), Rammohun Roy (1816), F. Max Müller (1879), and others, and the Theosophists were aware of them, but prior to Chatterji and Mead, the Theosophical Society had not attempted to publish a comprehensive translation of the corpus.

This translation was important to the Theosophical Society because it appropriated the *Upaniṣhads* within its Theosophical discourse and created a positive impression among Western audiences about the Theosophical Society's authority regarding classical Sanskrit texts. The translation is also significant because it was one of the first instances where an esoteric movement was involved in transcontinental and transcultural collaboration to translate an ancient non-Western text into English.⁴⁶ It shows how esotericists at the turn of the twentieth century expressed interest in translating texts that were not part of the Western intellectual tradition or Abrahamic religious traditions. Nonetheless, the importance of translation has, so far, remained largely ignored in the historiography of esotericism. The case of the *Upaniṣhads* is a good example of how translation projects can become signposts of the global history of esotericism, and demonstrates why translation must be taken seriously in our field.⁴⁷

45. See chapter on "The Theosophical Projects of Translation" in Mukhopadhyay, "The Occult World of Bengal" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, forthcoming).

46. *Ibid.*

47. Another example would be the Bengali Theosophist Mohini Chatterji's (1858-1936) English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, published in 1887 as *Bhagavad Gita or the Lord's Lay*: see Mukhopadhyay, "Mohini," 184.

As already noted above, to take the topic of agency seriously in such a context, we need to look not just at the translators but also at the publishing houses that make their translations available to the public. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, publishers are in the business of marketing “symbolic goods,”⁴⁸ but while they may be motivated by actual interest in the contents of the books they publish, this is not necessarily the case. In this regard, it would be of major importance to study the agency of publishers in the history of both esotericism and esotericism research.⁴⁹ Many esoteric texts, including many translations, next to scholarly studies of considerable quality, have been made available in print not by academic presses but by publishers that were (and are) motivated specifically by esoteric or spiritual agendas. The Theosophical Publishing Society is obviously a major modern example, and we see the same phenomenon in early-modern esotericism as well – since the very dawn of printing in the fifteenth century, there is much to be said about the history of book printing by clandestine presses and the tricky business of publishing or translating “dangerous” texts.⁵⁰

It is fair to say that insofar as modern academic publishers up to the 1990s used to be informed by standard perceptions of esotericism as “rejected knowledge” (that is, as unworthy of serious scholarly attention), the result was that motivational publishers naturally tended to dominate the esoteric publishing market. As a result, their particular preferences and choices played a major role in determining which materials would appear on that market in translation. Conversely, if publications in the domain of esotericism (scholarly studies or editions and translations of primary texts) have become much more visible in academic publishing over the

48. Bourdieu, “Le marché des biens symboliques,” 49-126. Subsequently, based on Bourdieu’s theory, scholars have discussed how the circulation of translated books produced by the publishing industry is dependent on the global market. See, for instance, Sapiro, “Translation and the Field of Publishing,” 154-66.

49. For a pioneering study that unfortunately has not yet been published, see the Ph.D. dissertation about the “distribution of the literature of rejected knowledge in England during the Victorian era” by Gilbert, “Great Chain of Unreason.”

50. See, e.g., Ford, *Christ, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus*. On the exact practices of scribal transmission, publication, and translations of dissenting literature, see several chapters in Zuber, *Spiritual Alchemy*.

past few decades, this is not just because publishers have come to see them as academically relevant – often it is simply because they have become marketable and potentially profitable from a financial point of view. It is too often forgotten that many materials, including translations of primary sources, which are easily available from academic presses today, would simply not have been accepted by them just a few decades ago. As a result, often translators had no other choice than to turn to academically less reputable publishers with agendas of their own, thereby further strengthening a negative spiral of academic rejection.⁵¹

We still tend to ignore these economic dimensions of esotericism and its study. It is naïve to assume that new ventures in academic research happen simply because “scholars get convinced” about their importance by means of strictly academic argument, while disregarding how often non-scholarly agents such as esoteric or academic publishers (for whom the bottom line is commercial profit) play a key role by bringing new topics or materials to our attention in the first place. Since the modern academy is strongly connected with capitalist modes of knowledge production, we should ask ourselves how *translating* esotericism, and making its products available through commercial publishing enterprises, is also connected to *marketing* esotericism. Such questions about the profit-making agendas of powerful publishing houses can perhaps be raised a bit more easily in the pages of an independent, noncommercial, open-access journal such as *Correspondences*. We certainly hope that this special issue will encourage readers to think about translation as an intellectual exercise across linguistic spaces and beyond economic barriers as well. We would like to suggest that, in fact, it might even be an occasion for the editors and contributors of this journal to reflect upon the implications of its current status as an English-language only publishing venue.

Our Project, Its Limits, and Its Potentials

This project is conceived as the start of a collective discussion that we hope to initiate, among scholars of esotericism, about translation and translators in many

51. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism the the Academy*, 230–56.

languages across continents. Therefore we see this special issue as not just an intellectual exercise but also an initiative for community-building within the field of esotericism studies. In our present era of neoliberalism (one of the most recent and complex forms of global capitalism so far) the formation of inclusive communities should be given very high priority. We believe that scholarly outposts of esotericism research, including academic societies such as ESSWE, educational centres such as HHP, or research journals such as *Correspondences* have to shoulder the responsibility of community-building by expanding the horizon of scholarship concerned with esotericism. As indicated above, our *Translating Esotericism* project strives to build community by means of “conceptual decolonization” at the basic terminological level. As this is certainly a novel project within our field, we are aware that it will hardly be possible for us to do more at this moment than take a first step. We try to get the ball rolling with this special issue, hoping thereby to initiate a process of further reflection and research that will be carried forward not just by ourselves but by others as well.

We wish to thank the editors of *Correspondences* for agreeing, with considerable enthusiasm, to our idea of a special issue with a rather large sample of short contributions instead of the regular journal format of a small number of large research articles. Having received their permission for taking such an unconventional approach, we compiled a sample list of key terms that we saw as particularly important to esotericism as a field of study and which could therefore serve as an initial means of orientation. But while doing so, we were acutely aware of the paradox that this very selection was based on English as the current *lingua franca* in esotericism research, whereas our objective was precisely to *question* that global dominance and find ways to expand the terminology by learning from other linguistic domains and vocabularies. Be that as it may, our initial sample of key terms looked as follows:

- Esotericism / Occultism (also: Occult, Occult Science, Occult Philosophy). Secrecy, Secret Knowledge. Gnosis, Gnosticism.

- Magic, Enchantment. Religion. Science.
- Enlightenment, Illumination, Illuminism. Revelation. Vision. Mysticism. Trance, Altered States. Imagination.
- Mind, Consciousness, Spirit, Soul, Ghost (also: Spiritual, Spirituality, Spiritualism)
- Astrology. Alchemy. Theosophy. Sorcery, Witchcraft (also: Wicca)
- God, gods, divine, divinity. Spirit world, otherworld, supernatural. Demons, daimons, devils.
- West(ern), Occident(al). East(ern), Orient(al). Global(ization).

In the early stages of our project, we thought of using this sample to compile a cumulative glossary with translations of each term (or cluster of terms) in each of the languages selected for this special issue; but we eventually dropped that idea for two closely related reasons. We discovered rather quickly that such a glossary was much more difficult to compile in practice than we had imagined, and at a later stage of this project it dawned on us why this was the case. This very idea of a cumulative glossary, of course, mirrored the very concept that, in fact, we were trying to get away from – that of a global esoteric “lexicon” that will “get the job done,” as opposed to an open invitation for intense cross-cultural encounter and mutual communication in which no particular language should be privileged over any other.

Our next task was to decide which languages should be included in the special issue. We began with a very ambitious list but eventually had to shorten it considerably, not just because there were limits to how many contributions even *Correspondences* was likely to accept, but also out of sheer necessity. It was simply not always possible to find authors of sufficient academic quality *and* sufficient familiarity with modern esotericism research *and* (obviously) sufficient expertise in all the languages we wished to include. For instance, we would love to have included entries on major African languages such as Swahili or Yoruba; but while we sought advice from various Africanist colleagues, nobody could give us names

of scholars in these languages who would be familiar with what “esotericism” is supposed to mean in modern scholarship. Of course, this does not mean that such scholars do not exist, but only that we have not been able to find them. We are aware that, due to constraints of time and energy, other major languages such as Hebrew, Chinese or Japanese are painfully missing from our special issue as well.

Or at least: for now! We are happy to mention that, after further discussion, the editors of *Correspondences* have agreed to yet another experimental innovation in academic online publishing. Specialists of esotericism who are deeply familiar with languages that have not been included *are invited to contact us and propose additional articles*. If such a proposal gets accepted and the article passes the standard review process, it will be published as an addition to the present list of contributions. Each article will be published immediately in advance form, and once we have a sufficient number of additional contributions they will become part of a second collective issue of *Correspondences* devoted to “Translating Esotericism.” We hope that, in this manner, it will be possible to work towards a more comprehensive series of contributions about the problems and possibilities of “translating esotericism.”

Having decided about our sample of terms and an initial list of languages, we invited scholars to write short articles on their languages of expertise. We are grateful for the many positive and often very enthusiastic responses we have received, and it has been a true pleasure for us to work closely with our authors to achieve an optimal result. In our original invitations, we formulated the assignment in terms that were somewhat strict and precise, because we hoped to achieve a rather high level of uniformity in format and approach. We quickly discovered that this was somewhat unrealistic because different authors interpreted their task in rather different ways, often for very convincing reasons that we had not anticipated but that had to do with requirements specific to their linguistic domain. Therefore readers will find that some contributions cover a rather large number of words, while others focus on just a few; some take a more historical approach in discussing the origins of their language or its development over time, while others focus strictly on the meaning of terms;

some include an analysis of a sample text to illustrate what actually happens in translating it, while others remain on the level of separate words; and so on.

We have come to realize that this diversity of approaches and viewpoints is actually a strong asset of our project – our chief intention, after all, is to start a conversation that has been neglected in our field, and any such attempt must begin by *listening* carefully to whatever its participants have to say about the topic. Any idea of a “definitive” overview or final conclusion is simply out of the question at this time – or rather, will be out of the question at *any* time. Translation, like understanding and communication, is never a static phenomenon that can be grasped or “mastered” once and for all in terms of formal schematics or mechanics. We think of it, rather, as an open-ended process grounded in the agency of embodied humans, each of them situated in their own times and spaces but always involved in the ongoing attempt – through the mystery of language – to share their experiences with others.

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