

A Practical Turn

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In Justine Bakker and Aren Roukema’s reflection on the tenth anniversary of the journal in Volume 10, no. 2 (2022),¹ they speculate on the trajectory of the practitioner-scholar (or experiencer-researcher) divide, and mark that it seems to be softening,² pointing out Jeff Kripal’s groundbreaking deconstructions of the barrier in books like *The Flip* (2019). As such, the desire to reduce barriers between experiencer and researcher is a possible mitigation of the quasi-colonialist “social reductionism” sometimes attendant to critical distance and/or methodological agnosticism. Judging from projects in the field following Volume 10’s publication, Bakker and Roukema’s observation looks accurate. At the recent ninth conference for the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism hosted in Malmö (June 2023), the theme was “Western Esotericism and Practice,” and included a talk by Cavan McLaughlin, subtitled, “Practice-Based Research Methodologies.” The talk openly challenged the feasibility and usefulness of the insider/outsider dichotomy. McLaughlin is the main organizer of the UK-based Trans-States conference,³ a highly multidisciplinary event that actively blurs the scholar-practitioner boundary, particularly in its emphasis on esotericism as performance. Events like these provide a venue for art, music, and history to mingle, accentuating the overlap between scholarship and practice;

1. Bakker and Roukema, “10 Years of Correspondences; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Esotericism Studies.”

2. Ibid., 247.

3. See <https://trans-states.org/about/>.

other examples might include the Magickal Women Conference,⁴ the various gatherings at Treadwell's Books in London,⁵ the Occulture Conference,⁶ or La Societa dello Zolfo that offers classes and conferences on the history of magic as well as on practical magic.⁷ These interepistemological events are a clearly potent forum for disciplinary growth. All the above does not necessarily constitute a broader "turn to practice," but it certainly indicates a swell of attention to the framework of practices as a mode for challenging the insider/outsider categories.

The swell towards practice doesn't always have to challenge the scholar-practitioner boundary directly. The ESSWE 9 conference's emphasis on esotericism as a "practice" is surely in part a nod to the newly founded Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices (RENSEP), which contributed to the event. RENSEP's "Research Agenda" from their website emphatically adopts a scholarly distance, claiming that although their "praxeological approach" is focused on studies of ritual and art through direct experiment, in opposition to social reductionism, they also cannot "endorse" practitioner perspectives, and don't seem keen on consciously crossing the scholar-practitioner divide.⁸ Director of the Scientific Committee for RENSEP, Bernd-Christian Otto, co-edited a 2021 volume on esoteric literature with the title *Fictional Practice*, on which a thoughtful review by Khanim Garayeva appears in the present issue of *Correspondences*. The introduction to *Fictional Practice* advocates for a "practical turn" in esotericism studies,⁹ and stipulates "performance" as critical to the framing of esoteric practices.¹⁰

Near the end of their "Agenda," RENSEP states that "art has the potential to promote interest in esoteric practices." The language here implies that that's a good thing, which has the hint of evaluation. This is a delicate balance to strike

4. See <https://www.magickalwomenconference.com/>.

5. See <https://www.treadwells-london.com/events>.

6. See <https://occultureconference.com/#history>.

7. See <https://lasocietadelozolfo.com/>.

8. See <https://www.rensep.org/research/research-agenda/>.

9. Otto and Johannsen, "Introduction," 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 1.

between non-endorsement and non-reductionism, which is perhaps the exact balance that the field should be going for. Yet, in the inevitable failure to be perfect, on which side of the fence should one err? Reduction or endorsement?

The praxis of esotericism studies in relation to scholarly distance seems to be in a state of transition. On the one hand, there remains the strong recognition of the need for agnosticism, as noted by Manon Hedenborg White in relation to the COVID pandemic.¹¹ Scholars need disassociation in order to talk about things like anti-vaccine movements, conspirology, sexism, and racism and all of the social problems that culturally intersect with esoteric practices. The current desires to complicate the insider/outsider distance do not call for the total rejection of methodological agnosticism. But at the same time, especially when we're considering that there's theoretical interest in marginality from a multitude of angles, a praxis of advocacy could be beneficial in some cases.

If we take literary esotericism as an example, the process of establishing an esoteric canon of great English literature will reach a point when one would have to think about the esoteric as its own literary aesthetic. From the perspective of criticism, the canonization of texts with esoteric properties implies an assessment and preservation of beauty just the same as an art exhibition on Hilma af Klint. This theorization of esotericism's beauty is methodologically troubling. Esoteric practices can often be a way of achieving beauty. If doing a study on a group ritual, it's possible that the test subjects will experience beauty in the performance process. At what level do we separate the facilitation of experiences of beauty from endorsements of contingent worldviews? At what level is endorsement implied due to esotericism studies' transmission of beauty? And what of esoteric openings to "the sublime," a close connection to the beauty question? How do scholars (whether etic or emic) dilate and/or constrict these various openings? We ought not assume that methodologically agnostic studies of the esoteric can only ever disenchant.

11. Hedenborg White, "Transformations and Troubled Times," 1.

Furthermore, it's not necessarily a bad thing that esotericism can be beautiful. Perhaps grasping through direct practices would help scholars illuminate esoteric aesthetics. Perhaps endorsing esoteric practices could be a resistance to the marginalization of certain epistemologies. When to apply scholarly distance and when to invoke firsthand experience may be forever difficult to clearly ascertain, but it's a type of methodological flexibility that many are interested in at the moment.

The present issue of *Correspondences* has articles by Israel Koren, Per Faxneld, and Giuliano D'Amico, a review article by Justine Bakker, and book reviews by Antoinette M. von dem Hagen and Khanim Garayeva. Koren's article, "Rudolf Steiner's Thought as 'Philosophic Mysticism' and the Question of the Continuity between His Early and Later Writings" takes a deep look at Steiner's philosophies and his identity as a philosopher. Faxneld's "Exchanging Apples: Leonora Carrington and the Pro-Mythical Turn in Post-War Feminism" offers cogent insights into the entanglements of esotericism, visual art, and social movements. D'Amico's "The Fantasy of Peer Gynt: Ibsen and Theosophy in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland" examines an esoteric interpretation of Norway's most canonical playwright. Bakker's "White Esotericisms? - New Directions in the Study of Race and Esotericism," discusses the feasibility of "white esotericism" as an analytical category and the value of articulating race theory with religious studies. Garayeva reviews *Fictional Practice* (2021), edited by Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen, and von dem Hagen reviews *What Is It Like To Be Dead?: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult* (2018) by Jens Schlieter.

In both Faxneld's and D'Amico's pieces for this issue, an artist (Carrington, Ibsen) creates something that opens a window into the esoteric, but these artists do so in radically different ways from one another. While Carrington's personal engagements with occultism are known, Ibsen was not directly influenced by esoteric currents. And yet, esoteric readings of Ibsen, particularly in the context of both adaptation and reception studies, can illuminate the spiritual value of his works, and can expose how aesthetic practices and spirituality inform each

other dialectically. Thus, D'Amico demonstrates that seeing the possibilities of an esotericism performed via literature can strengthen critical and literary insights without sacrificing scholarly distance. The thread of performance as woven through Faxneld and D'Amico here resonates with the swell to practice we see elsewhere, and this connection is an opportunity to reflect on questions regarding the relationship of performance to beauty, performance to secrecy, or performance to marginality.

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