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New Age Kitsch or Esotericism?
Esoteric Tradition as the Key to Peter Høeg's *The Quiet Girl*

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Abstract

This article examines the Danish reception and esoteric dimensions of Peter Høeg's *The Quiet Girl* (2006), a novel widely criticized in Denmark for its spiritual themes but received more openly abroad. Drawing on Wouter J. Hanegraaff's concept of esotericism as "rejected knowledge," the study argues that the controversy surrounding the novel reveals ongoing epistemic boundaries in Danish literary culture, where secular rationalism continues to frame spiritual or mystical worldviews as illegitimate. The article demonstrates that *The Quiet Girl* is not just an expression of contemporary New Age thinking but participates in the more complex historical esoteric current. Three key esoteric motifs—gnosis, perennialism, and Jungian psychology—structure the novel's exploration of stillness as a spiritual state, synchronicity, and spiritual transformation. The article concludes that is best understood as a contemporary expression of re-enchantment that challenges dominant secular epistemologies and reintroduces esoteric modes of experience into twenty-first century Danish literature.

Keywords: Danish literature; esotericism; rejected knowledge; spirituality; gnosis

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Peter Høeg is one of the most widely read Danish authors of recent times, and his works and the reception of them are a particularly interesting case of esotericism in literature and its reception in literary criticism. Høeg's international reputation culminated in 1992 when he published the thriller *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. After the publication of the culturally critical *The Woman and the Monkey* in 1996, it would be ten years before Høeg published his next book, *The Quiet Girl* (2006). The public was very expectant due to the long silence, but the mood changed when the reviews came in. The general tenor of the Danish reviews was highly critical: several prominent critics found *The Quiet Girl* overly didactic, accusing Høeg of abandoning his artistic craft in favor of spiritual sermonizing and scholarly treatises.[1] Høeg's connection to the spiritual teacher Jes Bertelsen was also widely discussed and seemed to confirm the critics' suspicion that the author had become a kind of disciple or propagandist for a spiritual worldview.

Such reactions indicate that the controversy surrounding *The Quiet Girl* cannot be reduced to aesthetic criteria alone. To some foreign observers, the vehemence of the Danish criticism reveals a cultural tension between secular rationalism and expressions of spirituality in contemporary literature. The hostility toward Høeg's novel points to a broader phenomenon: the persistent unease, even taboo, surrounding spirituality and esoteric thought within the Nordic literary field. When a work provokes such intense reactions, it is often because it transgresses implicit cultural or epistemological boundaries — what counts as legitimate knowledge and what does not. In that sense, the study of esotericism in Høeg is not only relevant to the specific reception of *The Quiet Girl* but can serve as a case study for the marginalization of esotericism as such.

1. In a review, literary critic Jens Andersen (b. 1955) wrote: "With *The Quiet Girl*, Peter Høeg seems to write himself off as an artist" ("En forfatter på ørkenvandring," my translation). Literary scholar John Christian Jørgensen said that the book was "too much scholarship and revivalist tract — and too little narrative art" ("Høeg skuffer," my translation). And literary critic on the Danish newspaper *Politiken* Bjørn Bredal concluded: "Peter Høeg's gigantic talent is wasted in a collection of sermons disguised as a novel" ("Høegs hørelse," my translation).

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Drawing on Wouter J. Hanegraaff's analysis of esotericism as "rejected knowledge," I argue that the novel's reception exposes the limits of a secular and rationalist aesthetic regime that continues to shape literary evaluation in Denmark. Comparison with the reception, for example, in the United States, indicates that the cultural acceptance of esotericism is higher there. At least in academia. My reading will demonstrate that *The Quiet Girl* not only resonates with the thought of Jes Bertelsen but also participates in the larger esoteric tradition that Hanegraaff, Faivre, and others have reconstructed. The purpose of the article is thus twofold: first, to analyze how Høeg's novel engages with central motifs of esoteric thought, such as gnosis (intuitive or spiritual modes of knowledge), perennialism, and Jungianism; and second, to situate this engagement within the cultural history of esotericism as a marginalized current of knowledge. In doing so, the article seeks to reinterpret Høeg's controversial novel as an instance of modern re-enchantment rather than as New Age kitsch or spiritual eccentricity.

As mentioned, Peter Høeg's involvement with Jes Bertelsen was part of the controversy. Bertelsen began his career as a university lecturer, but in 1982 he founded his own spiritual center, Vækstcenteret (the Growth Center) in Nørre Snede in Jutland, Denmark. Høeg and Bertelsen have worked together on books and other projects, and Høeg explicitly thanks Bertelsen in *The Quiet Girl*. In addition, Høeg has stayed at the Growth Center for periods.

As early as 2003, Peter Høeg's most outspoken critic, Lars Bukdahl, identified the connection between Høeg and Jes Bertelsen. He wanted to review Bertelsen's book *Dzogchenpraksis som bevidsthedsvidde* (*Dzogchen Practice as Width of Consciousness*) and discovered that Bertelsen thanked Høeg for stylistic assistance in the afterword. Since the book is about a specialized form of meditative training (Dzogchen), Bukdahl's criticism of Bertelsen prefigures his criticism of the inherent worldview behind *The Quiet Girl*.

Bukdahl explicitly refers to his own postmodern worldview as the basis for his aversion to Bertelsen's ideal of spiritual perfectibility. Bukdahl uses irony

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to deconstruct the pathos with which Bertelsen presents the spiritual discourse. Whereas Bertelsen, according to Bukdahl, has an ideal of clarity of consciousness and perfectibility, Bukdahl associates his own postmodern self with a literary "dirty" (polyphonic, chaotic, cacophonous, "debasing") consciousness.[2] However, he recognizes the importance of "bright and clear moments" — privileged moments, or states of consciousness described paradoxically and with humor (and without pathos) by his postmodern heroes, the poets Dan Turéll and Peter Laugesen. Bertelsen's attempts to describe higher states are disparaged as advertising-style New Age kitsch. His allegories about progressive learning in the realm of spirituality are interpreted as "salesmanship."[3]

All the elements of Bukdahl's postmodern critique of Bertelsen are echoed in his exceptionally critical review of *The Quiet Girl*. It is accused of being spiritually edifying ("well-groomed and highly gymnastic piety"), encyclopedic, full of calendar-page *bon mots* from old masters, "trivia-action" and literary kitsch (references to high culture, especially J.S. Bach). Like the allegories of progressive learning in *Dzogchen Practice as Width of Consciousness*, the novel is interpreted as a means to sell Bertelsen's teachings. In other words, Bukdahl accuses Høeg of being a mouthpiece for a spiritual guru.[4]

The tone of Danish literary criticism was so sharp that writers from abroad defended Høeg. In the *New Statesman*, Tabish Khair cites the spirituality of the novel as the primary reason for the fierce Danish criticism of Høeg's novel: "Even less to the critics' taste, Høeg's recent novels, and in particular *The Quiet Girl*, resonate with a deep spirituality, even mysticism, that has little to do

2. A literary polyphony he associates with the character Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Bukdahl, "Hø over hø."

3. Sarcastically, Bukdahl writes that he prefers June and Sofia's pink note on the laundromat's bulletin board offering "cleansing of negative energies in your home and clairvoyance for house and pets" (ibid.).

4. "*The Quiet Girl* can be compared with a cinematic analogy to Jes Bertelsen's *Dzogchen Practice as Width of Consciousness* from 2003, filmed by a humorless Tarantino and Spielberg epigone" (ibid., my translation).

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with religion. Nothing is more calculated to disturb some people in a country [Denmark] that allows space only for mechanical religious practice, shorn of spirituality, or mechanical atheism, deprived of philosophy."[5] The Norwegian author Jan Kjærstad also remarked on the strange disgust that the novel aroused in the critics: "Some reviewers are not just strict, they are merciless. They suggest that it is a kind of bankruptcy, an artist who has written himself off, and they are disgusted by the fact that the characters in the novel make so many references."[6]

When a novel elicits such strong reactions in reviews, it is often because there is an underlying conflict that goes beyond the question of aesthetic success or failure. Part of the reason may be that the novel is difficult to categorize in the usual literary contexts (realism, minimalism, and so on). But as the quotes from Khair and Kjærstad show, the reception of *The Quiet Girl* suggests that Høeg's inclusion of spiritual themes is a problem for the critics; indeed, it seems as if spirituality and metaphysics are tabooed.

Because Peter Høeg is one of the few Danish authors to have made an international breakthrough, it is possible to compare the reception of *The Quiet Girl* in Denmark with its reception elsewhere. It is remarkable that the spirituality that is the main stumbling block in the Danish reception of *The Quiet Girl* is not problematized in the American reception of the book. To name one example, the *New York Times* review was quite critical of the book's literary qualities (and the translation), but the reviewer had no objections to the metaphysical elements.[7] It is thus possible to assume that the spiritual ideas enjoy greater cultural acceptance in the US than in Denmark.[8] Here, Egil

5. Khair, "Life on the Edge."

6. Kjærstad, "Opsang: Klovnens metoder."

7. "There's no fair reason to protest an author's decision to mingle the real and the supernatural, the savory and the unsavory, the secular and the religious." Schillinger, "Ear of a Clown," 2007.

8. The German reception of the novel is characterized by the same aversion to its spirituality and esotericism. Cf. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 March 2007; *Die Tageszeitung*, 17 March 2007; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 February 2007; *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10 February 2007; *Die Zeit*, 08 February 2007. In her article "'Doing the Secular': Academic Practices in the Study of

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Asprem's analysis of the re-enchantment of science among the educated elites is, indeed, very interesting, since it is based on American Gallup polls, and the reception of Høeg is one example of many of less tolerance towards paranormal knowledge claims in the Nordic countries than in the United States.[9]

After examining the Danish reception of *The Quiet Girl* alongside other recent novels that foreground spiritual or esoteric motifs, Knud Wentzel identified a distinct pattern: mainstream critics tend to reject or pathologize spiritual epistemologies. This tendency aligns closely with what Wouter J. Hanegraaff has described as the entrenched epistemological hierarchy of Western modernity, in which rationalist, secular-realist modes of knowing are privileged, while forms of insight connected to mysticism, intuition, or spiritual experience are systematically downgraded.

Wentzel captures this dynamic through what he calls the "minus-label" mechanism — a set of dismissive markers ("spirituality," "esotericism," "occultism") that function less as descriptive categories than as boundary-policing devices. Such labels do not engage the literary or philosophical substance of a work; rather, they signal that the text has strayed beyond what the literary field regards as a legitimate worldview. As he writes: "Though profoundly different in style and content, these spiritual books share a common feature: they articulate a form of spirituality that transcends the normative worldview upheld by the literary industry... An area that mainstream literary criticism largely dismisses with frowns and negative labels."[10] Wentzel is particularly critical of "the comfortable prejudiced attitude without substantial support with which the leading literary criticism could reject it [*The Quiet Girl*]," noting

Religion at Two Danish Universities," Birgitte Schepelern Johansen confirms the assessment of Danish academia as having a strong secular identity: "In the examples given here, the space in which the teacher and students are located is not surprisingly established as that of 'science,' and not infrequently, the term 'secular' is explicitly used as the overarching term for this space. It is a space presented not only as neutral but also as independent and unrestricted, characterized by choice, by flexibility, by the unselfish search for knowledge and by peer-relations to other researchers — and this is mainly done through its opposition to religion." 289f.

9. Asprem, "Psychic Enchantments of the Educated Classes," 335.

10. Wentzel, "To verdener," 135 (my translation).

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how the mere invocation of the industry's "minus word 'spirituality'" becomes sufficient grounds for dismissal.[11]

What Wentzel brings into focus, then, is not simply a matter of aesthetic preference but an underlying ontological intolerance. He contrasts the reception of spiritually inflected fiction with the overwhelmingly positive critical response to forms of autofiction by writers such as Suzanne Brøgger, Knud Romer, and especially Karl Ove Knausgård. The controversies generated by autofiction tend to concern ethical questions about representing real people. When novels move instead into the domain of spiritual worldviews, the axis of criticism shifts: the work is no longer judged along ethical lines but along ontological ones. Critics implicitly ask not "How responsibly does the text handle reality?" but "Is the author's worldview true or false?" The novels of Lars Muhl — *The Seer*, *The Magdalene*, and *The Grail* — serve as telling examples of works that are not realist in an atheist sense but consistent within a spiritual metaphysics and thus are particularly vulnerable to epistemic disqualification.[12]

From my perspective, Wentzel's analysis reflects a broader Nordic academic skepticism toward non-secular knowledge claims — a cultural pattern that contrasts with the more pluralistic or at least more permissive American context. The rapid resort to negative labels can be understood as a defensive gesture that protects the secular-realist consensus underlying much of Scandinavian literary culture. In this light, Wentzel's conclusion is especially pointed: esoteric and spiritual texts embody "an epistemological and spiritual world of experience that is no less serious and authentic than the literature that is served and emphasized day in and day out by literary criticism."[13] His critique thus challenges not only interpretive habits within the literary field but the deeper epistemic assumptions that shape what kinds of worldviews count as culturally legitimate.

11. Ibid, 134–35.

12. Muhl, *The O Manuscript: The Seer, The Magdalene, The Grail*.

13. Wentzel continues: "If the task of literary criticism is not only to contribute to keeping the cultivated end of the entertainment industry going, but also to deal with genre-transcending descriptions of the hidden and marginalized dimensions of existence, then there is not only a task here, but also an audience." Ibid., 136 (my translation).

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Reviewer and literary scholar Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg was among those who responded to Knud Wentzel's criticism. Although Zangenberg cites historical examples of spirituality and literature of the highest caliber going hand in hand (Meister Eckhart, Goethe, Strindberg, Kafka), he ends up resignedly stating that "that kind of literature" is difficult to understand and is typically "something for the initiated few."[14] By mentioning canonical authors with spiritual and esoteric leanings, Zangenberg undermines his own argument. Literature with a spiritual or esoteric dimension is not per se something for the initiated few.

The fact that there is also a more popular, general esoteric culture has led Christopher Partridge to speak of "occulture," which is a sociological attempt to describe the paradox that "occultural" ideas arise in relatively small environments but spread to mainstream environments.[15] In sociological terms, the esoteric can take on the character of exoticism as a popular "occulture." Another example is magical realism, which began as a South American wave but later developed into a global genre, not least after the success of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The genre's representatives include literary luminaries from all continents, including Salman Rushdie, Icelandic Einar Már Guðmundsson, Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun, Nigerian Ben Okri, American Toni Morrison, Indian Arundhati Roy, Chinese Mo Yan, and Japanese Haruki Murakami, several of whom are Nobel Prize winners and combine high literary quality with a large readership.

In Denmark, the genre has prominent representatives: Ib Michael's *Killroy, Killroy* (1989) and *Prins* (*Prince,* 1997), Hanne-Marie Svendsen's *Guldkuglen* (*The Gold Ball,* 1985) and not least Peter Høeg's debut novel *Forestilling om det 20. århundrede (The History of Danish Dreams,* 1988) are undoubtedly influenced by South American magical realism but also contribute to global magical realism. Prototypically, one can mention Karen Blixen's *Seven Gothic Tales* (1935) which

14. Krasnik, "Da kritikken mistede ånden," (my translation).
15. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West.*

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Høeg was accused of plagiarizing in his *Tales of the Night* (1990). In terms of genre, Høeg makes a shift with *The Quiet Girl* and his later books; although these have features in common with magical realism (they transcend conventional realism by containing so-called paranormal phenomena), they are even more closely tied to esoteric core ideas. Here, Høeg uses the thriller, which does not attempt to create ambivalence between realism and paranormal phenomena but is rather firmly tied to esoteric epistemology. But there is no indication that Høeg would include the esoteric and spiritual for strategic reasons. The daily press's criticism of these spiritual elements is too harsh for that.

According to Zangenberg, the explanation for the taboo towards spiritual and esoteric literature is that the universities — which educate reviewers and literary scholars — marginalize spirituality.[16] However, this is not only the case in Denmark but is part of a general trend in European intellectual history. As Hanegraaff writes in *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, the academic world has defined the esoteric current as "the Other" ever since the polemical critique of Protestantism and the Enlightenment.[17] The academic world represented a disenchanted perception of reality based on an academic identity as a rational counterpart to esoteric (and other) forms of re-enchantment, a perception that was continued by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.[18]

As far as writers such as Goethe, Novalis, Balzac, Strindberg, Rilke, Kafka and Yeats may be from Høeg stylistically, they participate to different degrees in

16. Krasnik, "Da kritikken mistede ånden."

17. "In other words, if the early Church had once needed a concept of 'heresy' (gnostic or other-wise) to define its own 'orthodox' identity, and Protestantism had needed the concept of a 'pagan' opponent (Roman Catholic or otherwise) to define its own identity as true Christianity, the newly developing academic orthodoxies created reified 'Others' more suitable to their own needs of self-definition: irrational 'superstition' based on human ignorance, credulity, prejudice, and sheer stupidity in the case of Enlightenment philosophers, 'alchemy' in the case of modern chemists, 'astrology' in the case of modern astronomers, 'magic' and 'occult philosophy' in the case of scientists in general. In this manner the category of 'the occult' emerged during this period as a conceptual waste-basket for 'rejected knowledge,' and it has kept functioning as the academy's radical 'Other' to the present day" (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy,* 221).

18. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 312.

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esoteric tradition. Certain literary movements have a particular affinity with the esoteric: Romanticism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, fantasy, science fiction, and magical realism. What these movements and authors have in common, in other words, is that with knowledge of the esoteric cultural code, one can interpret their works and the implicit worldview in an adequate manner. Thereby, one avoids falling into what Wentzel calls "minus labels" and what Hanegraaf calls "the waste-basket category of 'prejudice,' 'superstition,' 'foolishness,' or 'stupidity.'"[19] The novel (and similar novels) can be analyzed as a work in its own right and not as representative of an erroneous worldview. In this sense, the reception of *The Quiet Girl* illustrates a wider cultural tendency to dismiss or marginalize esoteric modes of thought in contemporary intellectual discourse.[20]

Both Bukdahl and Danish criticism in general seemed to lack knowledge of this larger cultural context and the cultural code behind *The Quiet Girl*. Høeg is not only in agreement with Jes Bertelsen but with a far more comprehensive current in European intellectual history, namely esotericism. The reception of Høeg's *The Quiet Girl* is a particularly good example since we here see both a lack of knowledge of the history of esotericism and an ideological dismissal of the implicit epistemology. On a terminological level, this is seen in the pejorative

19. Ibid.

20. The difficulty of the process toward general acceptance of Western esotericism as a field of research is evident in Hanegraaff's monograph *Esotericism and the Academy*. In the personal section of the introduction, Hanegraaff describes how, during his studies, he came across names like Marsilio Ficino, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Jacob Böhme, who seemed to exist in a "no-man's-land" between philosophy, religion, literature, art, and science: "And it became clear that, far from being marginal outsiders, they had been remarkably influential in their own time, and stood at the origin of large and complex intellectual traditions that could be traced through the centuries and even up to our own time." But when Hanegraaff asked his professors for advice, he was met with nothing but fear: "My interest in this domain seemed to make my teachers uncomfortable, and to my repeated request for information and suggestions, they responded by tossing the embarrassing topic on to another colleague as if it were a hot potato. Nobody seemed willing to touch it, and it did not take me very long to decide that if this were the case, then somebody had to do it" (ibid., 2).

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use of the label "New Age" which is not a precise designation of the historical background of neither Høeg nor Bertelsen.[21]

In her article "Beyond Belief," Christine Ferguson argues that esoteric literature should not be reduced to expressions of authorial belief or treated primarily as documentary evidence of occult commitment. Instead, she emphasizes the aesthetic complexity of such texts, warning against overly biographical or belief-oriented readings.[22] However, Ferguson's perspective is situated within an Anglophone scholarly context, where esotericism has to a larger degree been integrated into literary studies. The Danish reception of *The Quiet Girl* points to a different problem structure.

In the Nordic literary field, the dominant critical reflex is not an over-identification of literature with belief, but rather a *pre-emptive epistemic dismissal* of spiritual or esoteric worldviews as illegitimate. Labels such as "New Age," "kitsch," or "spiritual sermonizing" function not as analytical tools but as minus-markers that foreclose interpretation in advance. In this context, Ferguson's claim that esoteric perspectives are not marginalized in literary scholarship does not fully apply. While it is certainly true that important Anglophone literary studies of esotericism exist — some of which I have myself drawn upon

21. Religious scholar Helle Hinge has written about the Jes Bertelsen movement as New Age. She defines the main characteristics of New Age as characterized by holistic thinking, a "view of the present as a global crisis that heralds a paradigm shift and the imminent arrival of a new paradisiacal time on Earth, namely the Age of Aquarius" (Hinge, *New Age på dansk*, 112, my translation). She sees the New Age as part of the broader Human Potential Movement, whose basic idea is that human beings have a psychological and spiritual potential that has not yet been realized (ibid., 16). Bertelsen links the idea of spiritual potential to mysticism, which is compatible with the New Age movement's general interest in "non-ordinary states of mind."

22. "By paying closer attention to such gaps and absences, we have the opportunity to substantially expand the approaches and textual corpora we use to appraise the protean range of connections which link literature to occult practice, belief, and style. This expansion will in turn allow us to better understand why particular narrative gambits might serve or subvert particular religious purposes. Perhaps more importantly, it will allow us to dethrone authorial intention from its role as chief or even exclusive determinative of narrative meaning, a position that, as we will see, it continues to occupy in some veins of esotericism studies long after its displacement in literary studies." Ferguson, "Beyond Belief," 206–7.

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in earlier research — these do not alter the broader reception-historical pattern observable in Denmark, where esotericism continues to operate as a boundary-transgressing and stigmatized cultural code.

The case of *The Quiet Girl* therefore highlights a cultural and institutional asymmetry between Anglophone and Nordic contexts. Where Ferguson addresses the danger of reductive belief attribution within an already pluralistic literary field, the Danish case demonstrates the persistence of what Hanegraaff has described as "rejected knowledge": an epistemological regime in which esoteric traditions are excluded not through critical engagement but through ideological disqualification. Seen in this light, the relevance of Ferguson's literary turn lies not in contradicting the argument advanced here, but in helping to clarify how differently esoteric literature is positioned and negotiated across national and scholarly contexts.

The Quiet Girl: *A Spiritual Thriller*

The Quiet Girl follows Kasper Krone, a world-famous circus clown and musician with an extraordinary auditory sensitivity that allows him to perceive human emotions as musical tones. At the novel's outset, Kasper appears to encounter nine-year-old KlaraMaria for the first time—a girl whose profound access to inner stillness connects her to the Rabia Foundation, a modernized Orthodox Christian convent led by Mother Maria, the so-called Blue Lady. Believing the girl to have been kidnapped, Kasper becomes entangled in what seems to be a thriller-like search for her.

As Poul Behrendt demonstrates in *Den hemmelige note* (*The Secret Note*), this premise is deliberately misleading.[23] The novel's temporal architecture — shifting between one week in 2006 and the spring of 2005 (the entire second part) — conceals crucial information from both Kasper and the first-time reader. What appears to be Kasper's first encounter with KlaraMaria at the beginning of the novel is in fact his second; the therapy session that opens the book is merely "a pretext," as Behrendt notes, to inform both Kasper and the reader of her alleged

23. Behrendt, *Den hemmelige note,* 246 (my translation).

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abduction. Neither Kasper nor the reader yet realizes that the abduction is staged by KlaraMaria herself, nor that she is Kasper's daughter with his vanished former lover, Stina Claussen. The earlier agreement made in 2005 between Kasper, Mother Maria, and KlaraMaria is revealed only after more than a hundred pages, ensuring that the reader shares Kasper's limited horizon of knowledge, while Mother Maria, Stina, and KlaraMaria operate with a far broader overview.

This narrative design recalls the structure of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, where a secretive "Society of the Tower" guides the protagonist's development from behind the scenes.[24] A comparable function is performed in *The Quiet Girl* by the Rabia Foundation — a community devoted to cultivating stillness. In Høeg's novel, stillness is not merely an inner spiritual attainment but a form of metaphysical power. The twelve "quiet children" gathered at the Foundation can, through a collective "stillness synergy," influence external reality so profoundly that they are capable of inducing earthquakes.

It is this extraordinary capacity that attracts the attention of Josef Kain, the head of an investment company eager to exploit the children's abilities for financial gain by triggering an artificial earthquake in Copenhagen Harbor.

24. How parallel the structure is can be seen in the following literary-historical description of the Masonic background of the tower society in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*: "Die Logen vertreten ja … eine teilweise quer zu den stattlichen und kirchlichen Autoritäten stehende Elitenbildung, wie sie Goethe in der Turmgesellschaft in Wilhelm Meister schildert, die sich um Wilhelms Schicksal kümmert und auf ihre Weise sein Geschick lenkt, den Lehrling zum Meister erzieht, der nun selber Gutes stiften kann. Auf andere Weise als Staat und Kirche wollten die Maurer wohltätig wirken, und in der fiktionalen Welt des Romans spiegeln die immer wieder auftauchenden und hilfreichen Vertreter der Turmgesellschaft den Glauben an — oder jedenfalls die Hoffnung auf — den Einfluß der geheimen 'Oberen', die fast allwissend und allgegenwärtig scheinen und im Verborgenen eingreifen, wenn es not tut" (Jørgensen, Bohnen, and Øhrgaard, *Aufklärung, Sturm und Drang, frühe Klassik*, 46). Antoine Faivre also believes that the motif of a society of masters operating in secret derives from Goethe's involvement with Freemasonry: "This idea of a society controlled by masters who would be manipulating the destiny of certain people, in truth, was to know the success we are well familiar with. It is Goethe once more who describes this, through the Society of the Tower, in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796). The theme of an intellectual and spiritual government by hidden or secret elites is found again in a number of initiatic novels. And closer to our times, in Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943)" (Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*, 186).

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Though one of Kain's accomplices causes the death of one of the children and mortally wounds Kasper, the novel ultimately moves toward reconciliation rather than retribution. Kain, expressing remorse (and perhaps offering substantial financial support to the Foundation), is not only forgiven but integrated into the Rabia community as Mother Maria's partner. Kasper, for his part, survives and is finally reunited with Stina and their daughter, KlaraMaria.

Unlike authors such as Haruki Murakami, who establish a recognizable realist-fictional world before introducing various metaphysical elements,[25] Høeg's readers are from the very beginning forced to accept a protagonist with paranormal hearing. In Murakami's works, the readers must draw their own conclusions about the metaphysical occurrences. Høeg adopts a more direct literary strategy by allowing the metaphysical to define the narrative framework from the outset. He lets his protagonist, Kasper Krone, quote the world's wisdom traditions and continuously discuss spiritual and religious issues. Through these quotes and discussions, the reader is able to crystallize a religious and spiritual agenda that, on the one hand, includes a critique of traditional institutionalized religion and, on the other, a shift towards spiritual experience.

Kasper gives the following analysis of the conditions for spiritual experience in contemporary Denmark: "And the Danish State Church didn't really help with that; the only ones who took religious experience seriously were the fundamentalists in the Indre Mission Church, and they didn't like the circus. So some artists developed their own religion, like my father; he's a believing atheist and proud of it. Others used one of two shops, the Catholic Church

25. Strecher writes: "Over the years, as Murakami's popularity as a writer has grown around the world, scholars and critics have been drawn increasingly to his writing style, his apparent rejection of *belles lettres* (literature as Art), his probing into the human psyche, his play with the metaphysical (especially through the literary trope known as "magical realism"), his peculiar take on history, and his encyclopedic knowledge of music (particularly jazz)." Strecher, *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami,* e-book, 21/641. In Strecher's book, a chapter has the telling title: "Into the Mad, Metaphysical Realm."

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on Bred Street or the Eastern Orthodox Church."[26] This passage describes the religious landscape of contemporary Denmark as being characterized by strong atheism and a Protestant national church that is not interested in religious experiences on the one hand and Christian fundamentalism, Catholicism and the Russian Orthodox Church on the other.

However, the reader does not learn much about Catholic mysticism or the spirituality of Protestant sects, as the focus is on Russian Orthodox Christianity. The latter is positively valorized because of the emphasis placed on spiritual practice[27] and the possibility of achieving enlightenment by following the guidance of a master, a so called *staretz*. Høeg presents Russian Orthodox Christianity in two editions: a traditional version and the previously mentioned modernized version called the Rabia Foundation. The Rabia Foundation allows Høeg to show how he would like to modernize the traditional world religions. Thus, the Rabia Foundation came to function as a utopian alternative to traditional religion in the form of Russian Orthodox religion.

The Blue Lady, Mother Mary, puts it this way: "If Christianity is to survive . . . a decisive change must take place" (407). The premise seems to be that one needs to distinguish between the pre-modern organization of traditional world religions and the authentic spiritual practices they offer. At the organizational level, the reader learns that the Rabia Foundation, an Eastern Church nunnery founded in the 1920s, was excluded from the Eastern Church because they chose a woman as their metropolitan, Mother Rabia. According to the patriarchal ecclesiastical regulations, a woman cannot attain a higher rank than deaconess (260).

The pre-modern worldview behind the Orthodox Church is also illustrated by the physical location of the Russian Orthodox Church in Copenhagen: "On

26. Høeg, *The Quiet Girl*, 236.

27. In *erlebte Rede*, the virtues of the Russian Orthodox Church are described through Kasper Krone's perspective: He listened to "its discipline. Its compassion. Its stubbornness. Its deep understanding of how experiences of the Divine require training. It was like the circus. To Kasper, Luther's idea that everything is preordained had always seemed completely contrary to everyone's daily experience," 385.

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the border between Bred Street, with its traffic, restaurants, auction houses, hotels, and glittering prostitution. And a church building that leaned back toward a two-thousand-year-old tradition and a Middle Ages reality that was on the verge of disappearing forever" (ibid.). Later it appears that the same church is the gathering place for the religious patriarchs, the Catholic priests, the Catholic bishop, the chief rabbi and the royal confessor, but that only the inclusion of Mother Rabia and the imams would really renew religious life in Denmark (387). The first step towards modernizing world religions is gender equality. The novel's gender equality program is already evident on the first pages, where the masculine God is replaced by the androgynous "SheAlmighty."

The Blue Lady also represents a modernization of Orthodox Christianity in other respects. There is no doubt that she appears as an enlightened female master, a *staretza*, within the framework of Christian spirituality. However, she does not follow the orthodox ideal of asceticism associated with the behavior of traditional saints. The modern saint is in touch with both body and spirit, embracing both sexuality and spirituality.

Correspondences between Høeg and Bertelsen: Gnosis, Perennialism, and Jungian Psychology

The correspondences between Høeg and Bertelsen are most visible where *The Quiet Girl* foregrounds spiritual practice and experiential states – stillness, prayer, meditation, synchronicity – rather than doctrine or institutional belief. This is precisely the zone where Danish criticism tended to reach for the catch-all label "New Age," thereby obscuring the historical traditions on which it draws. If we want to understand what is actually being negotiated here – both in Høeg's writing and in the reception – we need a slightly more differentiated map of the esoteric coordinates at work. In the following, I therefore highlight three elements that the Danish critics largely failed to recognize, but which situate Høeg's spiritual thriller within a broader esoteric horizon and clarify his affinity with Bertelsen:

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a) Gnosis (faith–ratio–gnosis): Hanegraaff's epistemological distinction helps clarify why Høeg and Bertelsen privilege experiential insight over ecclesiastical faith and discursive reason.

b) Perennialism: the assumption of a universal, transhistorical truth at the core of the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

c) Jungian psychology: Jung as a key mediating discourse between historical Western esotericism and modern (and New Age) forms of spirituality.

Emphasis on Gnosis

Peter Høeg's modernization of religion is undoubtedly inspired by Jes Bertelsen.[28] His distinction between the (regressive) cultural side of religion on the one hand and advanced spiritual techniques on the other corresponds to Bertelsen's theories.[29] It has also been mentioned in the reception of the

28. Bertelsen's master's thesis *Kategori og afgørelse — Strukturer i Kierkegaards tænkning* (*Category and Decision - Structures in Kierkegaard's Thought*) was the expression of the existential focus of his early academic career, but from 1974 he combined the philosophical perspective with analytical psychology and yoga. Of particular interest in this context is his clear influence from Jung. His doctoral dissertation *Ouroboros — en undersøgelse af selvets strukturer* (*Ouroboros — A Study of the Structures of the Self*) attempted to combine Kierkegaard's existentialism with Jungian depth psychology. After defending his doctoral thesis, Bertelsen was awarded research funding to study at the Jung Institute. In his works on *Dybdepsykologi* (*Depth Psychology*) (volumes I-IV), Bertelsen strived to combine different traditions – very much in line with neo-perennialism. He attempts to synthesize the psychology of birth trauma (Stanislav Grof, Otto Rank, C.G. Jung) and the psychology of rebirth (shamanism, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Teresa of Avila), Western meditation (e.g. Rudolf Steiner) and Eastern meditation (yoga, tantra, Tao, Zen). From 1978 until the early eighties, Bertelsen worked with the Irish healer Bob Moore who lived in Denmark. This work resulted in the book *Drømme, chakrasymboler og meditation* (*Dreams, Chakra Symbols and Meditation*).

29. Since the 1970s, Bertelsen had been a supporter of the idea that it was possible to distinguish between exoteric religion (ecclesiastical religiosity) and esoteric (monastic) mysticism: "I have always been of the opinion that there are two sides to religion: something you might call ecclesiastical religiosity, where one relates to rituals, texts, dogmas, and belief systems. And on the other hand, a monastic spirituality. And here, in mysticism or monastic spirituality, I saw again two aspects: one that is culturally defined-for example, relating to God and the Devil, or having to be of male gender in order to experience a process of enlightenment; and another aspect that was universal. And from the very beginning I was interested in the universal aspect. Personally, I had next to no interest in the ecclesiastical religious matters of belief systems" (Bertelsen, *Essence of Mind*, 121f, my translation). Bertelsen's focus was thus on the sphere of experience (gnosis) rather than on religious belief systems.

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novel that the Rabia Foundation is similar to the Growth Center,[30] and the metropolitan of the same foundation, Mother Mary, seems to have features in common with Jes Bertelsen.

Just as Bertelsen is the charismatic leader of a spiritual community centered around disciplined spiritual practice, Mother Mary and the Rabia Foundation are highlighted as a spiritual organization that is structured in a similar way. How close the connection between Bertelsen and the Blue Lady is, is emphasized — as Poul Behrendt has explained in *The Secret Note* — by a passage where the metropolitan quotes a passage from Jes Bertelsen's *Dzogchen Practice as Width of Consciousness*. In the latter work, Bertelsen reproduces Leibniz's idea of theodicy by comparing God to an artist who takes pains with his creation.[31] Høeg's Blue Lady says something quite parallel: "In the *Théodicée* he says that God is like a kitchen maid. When she has baked a loaf of bread, she has done her best. And that includes everything. The burned part of the crust too. Evil must also be from God somehow" (323).[32]

Bertelsen's influence is most clearly seen in *The Quiet Girl's* descriptions of spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. This important motif can be linked to the programmatic shift from theology and mythology to universal spiritual experiences and insights. Here we find the reason for the novel's interest in spiritual experiences and the importance of spiritual *practice*. The central concept in this "metaphysics of experience" is "stillness," a stillness that Kasper Krone does not master himself, but which he has a sense for by virtue of his paranormal hearing.

30. In 1982, Jes Bertelsen founded the Growth Center, where he offered courses in depth psychology, dream interpretation, and meditation.

31. Bertelsen, *Dzogchenpraksis som bevidsthedsvidde*, 116.

32. Poul Behrendt even believes that Peter Høeg is the author of the passage in Bertelsen's book *Dzogchenpraksis som bevidsthedsvidde*. He is thanked by Bertelsen for his help as a linguistic consultant, and since the passage uses the artist as a metaphor, Behrendt believes that Høeg must have written it. Therefore, he believes it is an *intratextual* reference, not an *intertextual* reference. However, we can only be sure that the reference is intertextual, its possible intratextuality must be considered uncertain.

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The novel is called *The Quiet Girl*, and the girl mentioned, KlaraMaria, along with eleven other children, has mastered "stillness" to such an extent that she can influence the physical world on a grand scale. Undoubtedly, these highly spiritual children playing in complete harmony and stillness are the novel's utopian vision of the next step in the evolution of human consciousness. On the whole, "stillness" (or "silence," as it is called in the translation) is the most important spiritual category of experience in the novel. Krone himself – despite his paranormal hearing – is only just beginning to discover the depth dimension of meditative stillness. The Blue Lady is the novel's adept, who perhaps in her most mature form represents this stillness:

> For most of my life . . . I've searched for silence. Within oneself, and between people. I know it's to be found. I've never been totally within it myself, but I know it exists. You have it. You are standing in it; I can hear that your voice comes out of the silence. Also the little girl, KlaraMaria. She's close to the same silence. I want to be in there. Otherwise I'll go crazy (121–22).

But the experience of stillness is also the area that gives Høeg the opportunity to experiment the most with language. For example, he combines synesthetic visual metaphors (colors and the sphere as a spatial category) with silence as an auditory phenomenon: "Then he heard the silence. It spread spherically around the girl, reached his body, enveloped it, reached the chassis of the car; the chassis faded to a pastel color. He gripped the steering wheel as if to avoid a collision" (261–62). Later, Krone manages to experience the stillness with the Blue Lady: "He felt the silence open. Like a great hand that was preparing to pick him up" (318). In his use of synaesthesia, Høeg writes himself into an important esoteric-artistic tradition. As a stylistic device, synaesthesia is closely related to Romanticism and Symbolism, but was not only perceived as a linguistic strategy, but also as an epistemological mode.[33]

33. Famous symbolist examples of synaesthesia are Rimbaud's poem "Les Voyelles" (c. 1871) and *À rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysman. In his esoteric art theory *Ur-Geräusch* (1915), Rilke wrote that by connecting the five senses synaesthetically, the artist would be able to

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Another spiritual practice often mentioned in the novel is "prayer" or "mantra." Kasper Krone refers to prayer fifty times (and "mantra" twice), which can be seen as a strong *leitmotif*. At the beginning of the novel, he talks about "the unnatural consolation of prayer," and he is later guided by the Blue Lady in prayer as a way to give up the ego struggle. Later, he prays with his driver Franz Fieber in front of an icon. The practice of prayer is even associated with synchronicity: "For those who pray . . . the number of remarkable coincidences increases" (321). The similarities between Høeg and Bertelsen are thus so striking that they are hardly coincidental.

These examples show that Bertelsen and Høeg share an *epistemological orientation* concerned with the value of mystical experience. Here, Hanegraaff's distinction between *ratio*, *faith*, and *gnosis* offers a useful heuristic for situating both *The Quiet Girl* and Bertelsen's teaching within the broader esoteric tradition, and there is no doubt that Høeg and Bertelsen emphasize gnosis, or personal experiences of insight or "enlightenment." This emphasis on the personal category of knowledge also leads to a polemic against both scientism (ratio, or science as the exclusive access to knowledge) and traditional religion, which is believed to be based on blind faith rather than gnosis.[34] In *The Quiet Girl*, this double demarcation strategy can be observed in the emphasis on spiritual *practices* such as prayer, meditation,

clairvoyantly conquer new areas of reality (cf. Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik*, 314). Wassily Kandinsky ascribed both artistic and spiritual significance to synaesthesia. Synaesthesia was contained in the title of his play *Der gelbe Klang* (1909), which was published in *Der blaue Reiter* in 1912. In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912), the connection between colour and sound was an important element in his theory of art, where the artist appears as a spiritual innovator (cf. Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. Introduction by Max Bill. Bern/Bümplitz: Benteli Verlag 1952, 62). Alexander Scriabin was also influenced by esoteric thoughts and made use of synaesthesia in his tone poem *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1911). It is well known that both Kandinsky and Scriabin were preoccupied with theosophical thought, and both may have found inspiration in Blavatsky's *Esoteric Instructions* (1888–1891), where she writes that color and sound originate from the same substance (Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music*, 68).

34. In *The Quiet Girl*, there is a critique of academics as fragmented: "At the time, having an academic career required neurotic, biased mental overexertion. Kasper had met professors who were in the audience with Maximillian at the premier performances. They had been fragmented" (197).

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and experiences of stillness. Characteristically, the experience of deep stillness, for example, is reserved for only a few characters in the novel, such as KlaraMaria and the other "chosen" children and the Blue Lady, Mother Mary.

Jungian Psychology and Holism in The Quiet Girl

Similarly, the novel's presentation of Jungian psychology can be said to be related to the esoteric concept of gnosis.[35] As Hanegraaff writes, Jung was a modern esotericist who formed an important link between traditional esoteric currents and later esoteric currents, including New Age spirituality.[36] Høeg refers to various basic Jungian concepts that gradually became part of modern spiritual currents and the New Age in general, including "synchronicity," or meaningful acausal coincidences.[37] Thus, the concept functions as a spiritual response to the theory of the randomness of everything ("I'm a card player. I know the odds of coincidence. This is outside those odds") (277). He uses the concept humorously ("When the cosmos dishes out artificial coincidences it's nice not to have an overdose") (392), but he also links it to Jung's concept of individuation ("To meet her was magnificent synchronicity. Of the sort that Jung says happens only for those who have taken a seven-mile step toward the unknown in their process of individuation.") (141–42).[38] Individuation denotes the gradual development toward an authentic self that does not depend on social roles and external moral rules.

A third Jungian concept used by Høeg is "archetype." Kasper Krone, for example, describes a woman he meets as "the epitome of the Bad Mother archetype

35. Jung was even explicitly concerned with gnosis, which he defined as spiritual insight. Before Jung arrived at alchemy as a deep psychological world of images and thoughts, he had dealt extensively with gnosis and Gnosticism which is reflected in the so-called *The Red Book* (1914–1930), first published in 2009.

36. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 497.

37. Jung developed the theory in collaboration with the theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli. Hanegraaff summarizes the idea as follows: "[It] gives a strongly holistic account of the interdepen[den]ce of mind and matter" (*New Age Religion*, 72). Cf. Jung 1952. The work is reprinted in: Jung, *Synchronicity* along with other thematically related works.

38. Krone also speaks subjunctively of "a monumental synchronicity" (391).

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he had not yet integrated. It is extremely depressing to have turned forty-two and still be performing among fragments of your parents that have yet to be carried out of the ring" (56).[39] Changing clothes with his ex-girlfriend is what Kasper calls "an archetype with good fortune," and he draws a parallel to Beethoven's *Fidelio*, but also links the archetype to the integration of the anima and animus.[40]

As the examples show, Høeg has such a good grasp of Jung's basic concepts that he can use and combine them at will. This is not surprising in light of the inspiration he has undoubtedly received from Jes Bertelsen, who has worked extensively with Jung and even spent an extended period at the Jung Institute. But as Hanegraaff's study of the history of esotericism shows, Jung is part of a much larger context. Synchronicity, individuation, and archetypes are a natural part of the New Age discourse. The concept of synchronicity made it possible within the New Age to argue for connections other than causal relationships, including meaningful coincidences and telepathy.[41] Jung presents esotericism in psychological form and thus gives it scientific legitimacy.[42] By describing the psychological processes in spiritual terms, Jung also helps to sacralize the psyche.

Both of these concepts fit well with the New Age tendency to think holistically about consciousness and matter rather than dualistically (the Cartesian paradigm). The same Jungian anti-dualistic point is built deep into the plot of *The Quiet Girl*. Initially, the plot — in keeping with the thriller genre — sets up a battle

39. Elsewhere, the opposite archetype, the Good Mother, is mentioned: "It was the full volume of a mother's love for her child. And not just one mother. The love of all mothers for all children" (256).

40. "This here is an archetype with luck. Like in *Fidelio*. She is looking for her beloved in the underworld. Disguised as a man. As the lovers approach each other, they are pushed to explore the opposite sex within themselves. On the other side of that journey awaits the great love encounter" (341f.).

41. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 500f.

42. It was Jung's interest in esoteric and romantic ideas led to a break with Sigmund Freud. Freud tried to convince Jung that sexual theory should be a dogma and a bulwark against "the deluge of the occult" [*Schlammflut des Okkultismus*] (Jung, *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken*, 155). Freud wanted to lay the foundation for a rigorous scientific exploration of the psyche — often with a view to pathological content — where Jung, in accordance with the Romantic-esoteric tradition, ascribed creative and spiritual potential to the psyche. Cf. Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik*, 240f.

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between good and evil: the good Kasper Krone must fight the villain Josef Kain, who has apparently abducted innocent children. But as the story progresses, the relationship between "hero" and "villain" becomes less black and white.

Here, the Eastern Church appears as a "holistic" ("Jungian") framework that can accommodate Kain. Kasper Krone struggles to comprehend how the Russian sauna could remain open to Josef Kain: "How you can open the door to a fierce baboon like Kain is beyond my understanding" (393). The deacon replies: "If a place or an atmosphere is, in the truest sense, divine . . . then it can't be closed to anyone" (ibid.). This inclusiveness makes Kasper see a potential for modernization in the Church of the East: "Kasper felt he had been mistaken about the Orthodox Church. Perhaps in the end it would encompass and survive the modern world after all" (ibid.).

The sauna meeting between Kasper and Josef Kain shows that Kasper — through his egocentrism — has more in common with his antagonist than he is willing to admit. The scene begins as a comical competition in spiritual humility, but degenerates into a brawl, commented on by the omniscient narrator: "The difficulty for us is that our good intentions have a hard time tolerating situations that are a little more stressful. When it comes right down to it, compassion often proves to be just a thin layer of gold leaf over a somewhat coarser metal" (390). Later in the story, it turns out that the metropolitan and KlaraMaria, the quiet girl, are far more in league with the "villain" Kain than Kasper Krone realizes at the beginning of the novel. This is emphasized at the end when the Blue Lady enters into a relationship with Josef Kain, the highest representative of enlightenment in the novel universe and the presumed villain. The point seems to be that Kasper Krone is not as good as he thinks he is, and that Josef Kain is not as evil as Kasper Krone (and the reader) believes.

Jung used Nikolaus von Kues' (1401–1464) concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* to describe the whole as a synthesis of (apparent) opposites, and in the action plan Høeg also creates the coincidence of opposites by uniting Kain and the

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Blue Lady.[43] Høeg and Bertelsen's inclusion of Leibniz's idea of theodicy points in an anti-dualistic (holistic) direction, as noted by Poul Behrendt: "This is why the grand plan is so much harder to see through. Only on the surface is the world dualistic, i.e. divided between male and female, good and evil, subject and object."[44]

Perennialism in The Quiet Girl and The Children of the Elephant Keepers

A central element of the esoteric thought structure operative in Peter Høeg's *The Quiet Girl* is a form of perennialism. The novel mobilizes a neo-perennialist constellation of ideas according to which the world's religious traditions are assumed to share a common experiential core, accessible through mysticism and irreducible to dogmatic or institutional forms of belief. In Høeg's work, perennialism functions less as a metaphysical system than as a legitimizing framework for experiential knowledge (gnosis), combined with a critical stance toward religious exclusivism and fundamentalism. This orientation becomes visible above all in the protagonist Kasper Krone's dense network of quotations and references, which range from Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Catherine of Siena to Eastern figures like Ramana Maharshi and Milarepa, as well as modern esoteric thinkers including Rudolf Steiner, Gurdjieff, and Martinus.

The cumulative effect of this intertextual montage is not merely encyclopedic eclecticism, but the enactment of a perennialist worldview structured by the logic of concordance. Importantly, however, Høeg does not allow this perennialist posture to remain unproblematic. In his review of *The Quiet Girl*, Lars Bukdahl in particular was irritated by the many quotes from various spiritual authorities from different times and traditions, which he perceives as "calendar page bon mots from various old masters."[45] However, he does not reflect on the fact that this criticism is also voiced within the framework of the fiction by Kasper

43. Henderson, "The Coincidence of Opposites," 101–13.
44. Behrendt, *Den hemmelige note*, 266 (my translation).
45. Bukdahl, „Skindøde badutspring på yogamåtten" (my translation).

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Krone's ex-girlfriend Stina Claussen. When he starts namedropping, she says: "You were never anything but pop culture" (357) and later adds about his knowledge: "That's borrowed. Stolen. Patchwork!" (358)

An implicit criticism is also expressed when the story's (eventually repentant and "converted") villain, Josef Kain, mirrors Kasper by quoting a church father: ""Saint Symeon the New Theologian . . . writes that it's important not to attribute omniscience to a spiritual teacher. Even the greatest ones are human beings.' Kasper found it painful to breathe. Perhaps it was the steam, perhaps it was the bitterness of no longer having a monopoly on citing the Church fathers" (389).

Høeg pursues a dual strategy: On the one hand, he allows Kasper Krone to be a natural spiritual talent due to his super-hearing and openness to the world's wisdom traditions (*philosophia perennis*). On the other hand, the implicit criticism of the protagonist's immaturity and fallibility reflects on *the way* he conveys his knowledge of the same wisdom traditions. Nevertheless, Kasper Krone's many quotes from spiritual masters, esotericists, mystics, and theologians from East and West function as an attempt to counteract the exclusive approach to truth of literalist fundamentalists.

In *The Quiet Girl,* the aforementioned Russian sauna associated with the Nevsky Russian Orthodox Church is the gathering place for religious patriarchs: "Mother Maria told me about it. It's a meeting place for the religious patriarchs. The priests from St. Ansgar Church come here. The Catholic bishop. The chief rabbi. The royal confessionarius. Mother Maria says when the day comes that they also invite her and the imams, a new perspective will open for religious life in Denmark" (386–87). Despite the criticism of the lack of inclusion of women and imams, the sauna is a symbol of a possible dialog between religions.

That perennialism is important to Høeg is emphasized by the fact that it also plays a major role in his subsequent novel *The Children of the Elephant Keepers* (2010):[46]

46. In many ways, *The Children of the Elephant Keepers* is a thematic extension of *The Quiet Girl.* Høeg uses a precocious 14-year-old narrator who – like Kasper Krone – likes to quote various spiritual authorities. Much of the action takes place on the fictional island of Finø, and the

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> All the great religions have two sides to them. And if you ask me, one's dafter than the other. There's a side that faces outward. They call it *exoteric*, and it's what the vast majority of adherents relate to. Then there's the side that faces inward. That's what they call *esoteric*, and it's reserved for the chosen few. The exoteric, outward-facing side is what's practiced in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, in the Catholic Church, in mosques, temples, synagogues, and gompas all over the world. It's all about external rites and rituals comforting believers, telling them that while they might be going through a rough patch right now, everything will be all right once they're dead. The other side, the esoteric part, is for the loonies.[47]

Here, Høeg employs the well-known rhetorical strategy familiar from spiritual literature to assume the role which the "rationalists" assign to you: the lunatic. You show that you understand how it looks from a rational standpoint, but you still insist on its validity. The distinction between the outward, exoteric dimension and the inward, esoteric dimension of religion is, of course, a central feature of esotericism. Rooted in the perennialist tradition, this perspective holds that all religions share a common esoteric core accessible through mysticism, despite often significant differences at the exoteric level.

An important element in the novel's plot revolves around four terrorists joining forces to prevent the Great Synod — a meeting of the world's religions based on the experiences of mystics, aimed at exploring the possibility that something common might lie behind the great religious traditions:

> It's the first attempt ever on such a scale to open up a dialogue among madmen and mystics about the possibility of their being something unifying behind those faiths. The lunatic idea they've taken into their heads is to investigate whether their various religious understandings might share some common foundation. And to that end they've brought in neural scientists and psychologists. What the floaters are afraid of is that the different religions should discover themselves to have more in common than they thought. And if they do, fundamentalism loses its legitimacy. No one's likely to feel threatened by a person who's basically as deranged as themselves. That's what's brought them together.[48]

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intention to find a more humorous tone is reflected in the quirky names of the characters. Høeg also sticks to the thriller genre. In this case, the plot is driven by the disappearance of the parents of two 14-year-old siblings.

47. Høeg, *The Children of the Elephant Keepers,* e-book 555/684.

48. Ibid.

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In *The Children of the Elephant Keepers*, *philosophia perennis* operates as a counterforce to religious fundamentalism, to the extent that the planned interreligious gathering becomes the target of terrorist intervention.

In both *The Children of the Elephant Keepers* and *The Quiet Girl*, Høeg articulates a perennialist vision that seeks reconciliation between the world's spiritual traditions. In *The Quiet Girl*, perennialism is not merely thematic but also narratively staged: it structures Kasper Krone's syncretic engagement with Christian, Eastern, and esoteric authorities, and finds symbolic expression in scenes such as the Russian Orthodox sauna, envisioned as a proto-interreligious meeting place grounded in shared spiritual experience rather than doctrinal agreement. In a similar way, *The Children of the Elephant Keepers* stresses the importance of perennialism as a framework of interreligious dialogue. Thus, both works explore the same esoteric motif: the search for a universal, experiential core of religion that stands in opposition to dogmatism and fundamentalism.

Conclusion

The Danish reception of *The Quiet Girl* reveals epistemic boundaries in Nordic literary culture, where secular rationalism continues to frame spiritual or mystical worldviews as illegitimate. The novel's harsh critical treatment cannot be adequately explained by aesthetic criteria alone — as demonstrated by its more sympathetic international reception — but rather reflects what Wouter Hanegraaff identifies as the persistent marginalization of esotericism as "rejected knowledge" within Western academic culture.

This study has demonstrated that *The Quiet Girl* participates in the Western esoteric tradition through three key motifs: gnosis (privileging spiritual experience over faith or reason), perennialism (seeking universal truth across traditions), and Jungian psychology (linking historical and contemporary esotericism). These elements situate the novel within a complex intellectual current extending from Renaissance Neoplatonism through Romanticism to contemporary spirituality — a genealogy obscured by dismissive labels like "New Age kitsch."

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Understanding esotericism as the *tertium comparationis* illuminates the Høeg-Bertelsen relationship in new terms. While Bertelsen has undoubtedly influenced Høeg personally and creatively, the elements attributed to this influence belong to a broader esoteric movement. Both figures participate in what might be called contemporary re-enchantment: the reintroduction of esoteric modes of experience into cultures dominated by secular rationalism. *The Quiet Girl* thus represents not spiritual eccentricity but a literary engagement with marginalized epistemologies — an engagement that deserves critical understanding rather than reflexive dismissal.

The question raised by *The Quiet Girl's* reception extends beyond one novel: How can literary criticism adequately engage with works that draw on esoteric traditions when those traditions remain "rejected knowledge" within the academy itself? This study suggests that recognizing esotericism as a legitimate cultural code — alongside other interpretive frameworks — would enable more nuanced readings of authors from Goethe and Strindberg to Høeg and beyond.

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