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The Conference “Consciously Illicit: Transgression in Western Esotericism”

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On the 6th and 7th June 2018, the Department for the Study of Religions of Masaryk University in Brno hosted a conference entitled “Consciously Illicit: Transgression in Western Esotericism”. The conference was born out of an effort on the part of a group of PhD students to help integrate Brno research on Western esotericism into international academia, as one of the organizers Miroslav Vrzal mentioned in his introduction. Around thirty scholars from manifold European countries met in a quiet area of the Open Gardens in Brno to discuss an important and recurring theme in the study of Western esotericism – namely, transgression. Nineteen sequential contributions and two keynote lectures examined the diverse ways in which esotericists and magicians broke established social, intellectual and artistic boundaries in various historical periods in the West ranging from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era.

The first keynote lecture by Marco Pasi entitled “The Art of Esoteric Transgression, the Esoteric Transgression of Art” touched upon the supernatural inspiration of a number of visual artists from the 19th century onwards. According to Pasi, the romantic myth of artistic creativity, based on the originality of the artist’s unshackled individual self, created a point of contact between modern visual art and esoteric currents. Both modern art and esotericism thus share an element of the transgression of existing mainstream norms, values and canons. Furthermore, artists can claim a measure of supernatural inspiration or possession (e.g. in case of Hilma af Klint) to legitimize their norm-violating works of art. The main asset of this theoretically well-grounded lecture was, at least in my opinion, Pasi’s plea for a more complex definition of transgression, whose nature and very existence depends on the context. The need for a re-definition of the term was also emphasized during other conference discussions.

The following panel, “Attacking the Order: Satanism and Direct Transgression”, consisted of papers devoted to Satanism. It is worth mentioning Adam Anczyk’s “No Sympathy for the Devil? Isaac Bonewits’s Satanic Adventure and Other Stories from the Life of a Reformed Druid”, which provided a psychological view on Isaac Bonewits’ deconversion from Satanism and the subsequent beginning of his druidic career. By examining Bonewits’ arguments against LaVey’s Church of Satan (its alleged sectarian nature, inversion of Christianity, and lack of humour),

Anczyk interpreted Bonewits' case by applying modern psychological theories of conversion and deconversion.

Another thought-provoking contribution, “Do What Thou Wilt’: Transgression and Domestication in Twentieth-Century Esoteric Religion” by Graham John Wheeler, coming in the next panel entitled “Approaching the Ego: Ritual Practices in Addressing the Self”, concerned the history of the Crowleyan libertine phrase “do what thou wilt”, which later became an uncontroversial statement of classical liberal ethics in connection with the Wiccan rendering “an it harm none, do what ye will”. This loss of its previous transgressive character reflects, according to Wheeler, a shift in the socio-economic position of magicians from predominantly the upper classes at the beginning of the 20th century to the middle and lower classes in the second half of the century. Since an antinomian stance poses a greater socio-economic threat to the latter, the softening of the phrase is an interpretational strategy allowing this principle to be lived by without a major break from supporting social and economic structures; thus, this strategy is also another sign of the mainstreaming of esotericism.

The last panel of the first conference day, “Occult in the Heart of Europe: Insight into Czech Esotericism”, hosted, among others, a presentation about the work of the Documentary Centre of Czech Hermeticism by the librarian Petr Kalač, a current administrator of the Centre. The Centre collects and catalogues all possible material about Czech Hermeticism from the 19th century up to the present, and, by preserving sources which otherwise often escape the attention of non-specialized librarians and archivists, facilitates further research. Although his paper, “Documentary Centre of Czech Hermeticism (DCČH): Project to Preserve Czech Esoteric Heritage”, did not follow the topic of transgression at any point, it showed the possible scholarly advantages of collaboration with non-academic researchers.

The second day brought more history-oriented contributions. Participants were welcomed by Jean-Pierre Brach's keynote lecture “Illicit Christianity: Guillaume Postel, Kabbalah, and a Transgender Messiah”, in which Brach deliberated upon the life and teachings of the influential cabbalist Guillaume Postel (1510-1584). Brach examined Postel's identification of a Venetian woman, Joanna, with his ideas of a “feminine messiah” and the “lower part of the substance of Jesus Christ”, and put it into the context of Postel's doctrine of “substance” – an element of divine immanence within all creation. As Brach outlined, Postel, by means of a mystical merging with Joanna, became, in his own thought, “substantially” her son and that of Jesus Christ himself.

A historical approach was also prevalent in the following panel “The Illicit in the Past: Historical Roots of Transgression in Western Spiritual Traditions”, whose presentations were primarily devoted to the medieval world. However, this focus did not exclude interesting insights into modern esotericism, as František Novotný demonstrated in his contribution “Luciferianism: Past and Present Ideas, Fictitious and Factual Movements”. According to Novotný, the origins of the contemporary Chaos-gnostic ideal of a person supporting Lucifer in his war against God and his cosmic reign can be traced back to the 13th century and its rumours about Luciferians who aimed to help Lucifer to seize power from the Christian God and His church in this world. Novotný also connected this “medieval version of the theology of spiritual warfare” with the political climate of that time. These conceptions of Lucifer and God can thus be seen as the metaphysical counterparts of two monarchs competing over the control of territory.

In the next panel, “Social and Cultural Transgression: Identities and Behaviors”, historical methods were replaced with social science approaches ranging from social psychology to anthropology. Of the three theoretically precise papers, William Redwood’s “Totalising Transgression? Authenticity and Ambivalence in Esoteric Identities” caught my attention the most. Exploiting his anthropological fieldwork within the London magical community, Redwood examined the role of categories of magicians’ self-identification. In London, magicians more inclined towards a “darker” side of magic abhorred the category “black magician” and preferred to identify themselves with “dark magic”, a more ambivalent category allowing the commission of acts linked with both white magic and black magic. As Redwood concluded, this ambiguity gave more freedom to one’s magical actions and theorizing, resulting in the facilitation of the continual (re)negotiation of identities in a rather amorphous magical milieu.

Presentations in the very last panel, “Portraits of Transgression: Consciously Illicit in Literature and Visual Art”, were mainly factographic, although methodology was touched upon in Ivona Schöfrová’s contribution, “Transgression in William Blake’s Art”, which primarily provided an overview of non-conformist ideas and aesthetics in Blake’s *The First Book of Urizen*. According to Schöfrová, Blake’s literary mythologizing meditations on conflicts between rationality and non-rational experience have not been sufficiently studied in relation to his illustrations in the book. She therefore appealed for a more interdisciplinary approach to Blake studies.



To conclude, “Consciously Illicit” demonstrated the many perspectives (i.e. in history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, art history, literary studies, even cognitive science) from which transgression in Western esotericism can be studied. The diversity of the approaches used and the historical periods examined was most likely the biggest asset of the conference, since it provided new insights which could not be discerned via one sole approach, and enabled general tendencies in esoteric transgression to be recognised. Overall, although the quality and character of individual papers was rather variable, ranging from mere overviews that added little to ongoing research to theoretically and methodologically well-thought-out and innovative works (for example, Marco Pasi’s lecture and the contributions by Redwood and Wheeler), this did not detract from the quality of the conference as a whole, which offered an intellectually fruitful foundation for future research and scholarly collaboration.