
This is the second volume in what will be a series of three books with the same title, all of them based on Monika Neugebauer-Wölk’s pioneering efforts to get the study of Western esotericism established in the context of German Enlightenment research. The first volume appeared with Felix Meiners Verlag in 1999, and I reviewed it in *Aries* 1:2 (2001). This second volume is based on a conference organized from March 15–18, 2006, by Neugebauer-Wölk and her colleagues at the University of Halle, as one of the activities of the research group “Enlightenment in the Context of Modern Esotericism” that was made possible by a research grant of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG). A third volume is due to appear in 2012. In my review of the first volume, I remarked about Germany that ‘there is hardly another country where the well-known preconceptions about “western esotericism” may reach such a level of sensitivity’ (p. 220), largely because of this country’s political past and the influence of the *Frankfurter Schule* on how Germans scholars tend to look at topics associated with “the irrational” and the Romantic heritage. This is what made Neugebauer-Wölk’s initiative, and the DFG’s decision to finance her ambitious project, courageous and particularly important. The publication of the first volume in 1999 coincided with the creation of the first full program for Western esotericism at the University of Amsterdam, and it came well before a range of further developments in the academic emancipation of the field, such as the launch of *Aries* New Series in 2001, the publication by Brill of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* in 2005, and the creation in that same year of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE). The first volume therefore appeared in a situation where almost all the basic academic frameworks in this field still needed to be created, whereas this second one reflects a period of greater maturity, and the forthcoming third volume will be based on a conference organized against the background of a rather well-developed international scene. How far are these developments already reflected in this 2008 volume?

Similar to the case of its 1999 predecessor, only a relatively small number of contributors to this collection show an active concern for, or interest in, the underlying revisionist program and its implications. Most authors seem to have been invited simply because they happened to be doing research on topics that were sufficiently close to “esotericism” as understood by the editor, and so they simply present that research without making an attempt to discuss the
conceptual umbrella under which they find themselves (although some seem to show a kind of passive resistance against it, preferring the “safer” terminology of Hermeticism). In most of these cases we are dealing with solid historical scholarship grounded in a deep familiarity with primary sources. Thus we find a long and fascinating analysis (which would, however, have benefited from a clearer subdivision into paragraphs and sections) of “Christian Hermeticism” and fascination with the pagan symbolism of Pan and the “hen kai pan” formula in the German Enlightenment, focusing mostly on Herder and Hamann (Kemper), and equally solid discussions of topics such as Johann Conrad Dippel in relation to Hermeticism and Pietism (Hannak); Johann Salomo Semler (Geffarth, Reill); Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and palingenesis or metempsychosis (Beetz); Swedenborg and 18th-century rationalism (Stengel); Pythagoreanism and its representatives (Neumann), especially Sigmund Ferdinand Weissmüller (Hartbecke, Mulsow); Kabbalah and its influence (Coudert); the theme of obscurity or unintelligibility (Adler, Kremer); “esoteric esthetics” in Wieland, Hamann, and Goethe (Rudolph); and the esoteric symbolism of Garden architecture (Ruge). All these contributions will be appreciated by specialists on their respective topics, regardless of whether they are interested in “esotericism” as a conceptual framework.

A serious underlying problem in that regard comes to the surface in Peter Hanns Reill’s contribution (in English) on “The Hermetic Imagination in the High and Late Enlightenment”, which is in fact devoted almost entirely to Semler. Referring to Christian Gottlob Heyne’s irritated remarks, in 1788, about the fact that “magical nonsense” was spreading everywhere like a “dangerous plant”, Reill correctly notes how very small is the number of historians who have tried to explain that phenomenon. In contrast, he then mentions ‘a small, though growing group of historians, anthropologists, and literary historians’ who ‘have argued that these phenomena are part of a coherent movement, which they call esotericism’ (p. 319). In that context he mentions Faivre, Hanegraaff, Versluis, and Neugebauer-Wölck as revisionist scholars who see esotericism as ‘a real historical category’ and define it as ‘a unique phenomenon’ (pp. 319–320). His own approach is different, he continues, in that he wants to ‘blur the boundaries’ rather than distinguishing clearly between ‘esotericism and other movements’ (p. 320). Along rather similar lines, Martin Mulsow states that “esotericism” and “Enlightenment” should not be described as ‘fixed positions or currents’, and recommends historical contextualization and close “microhistorical” research as an antidote (pp. 331–332). Although my name is mentioned in the list above, I believe that Reill and Mulsow are in fact quite correct in warning against the risk of reifying “esotericism” as a “unique phe-