



**POLISH
ESOTERIC
TRADITIONS**

1890-1939



**SELECTED
ISSUES**

GDANSK UNIVERSITY PRESS

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THE VARIETY OF POLISH ESOTERICISM 1890–1939

In contemporary research on Western esotericism, the period of the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century is considered as a special time in the history of these traditions, as they emerged from an elite circle of enthusiasts and became an inspiration for different communities and social classes in a scope hitherto unprecedented. As a result, their presence became evident in many areas of culture, both in its high-brow and more popular versions. Moreover, esoteric thought and the esoteric way of looking at reality encompassed transformation, cultural, social, and even political events, becoming a kind of matrix for how to comprehend, interpret, and react to them. Polish esoteric narratives are an excellent example of this.

It should be remembered that esoteric ideas have accompanied European culture from the beginning of its existence. Their roots can even be found in the Gnostic concepts of late antiquity, whose radical overtones resulting from the postulate of rejecting the world would be mitigated or perhaps rejected over time. The period that witnessed a particularly rapid development of these trends was modernity, beginning with the Renaissance. The contemporary supporters of esoteric views, however, did not create separate communities of a religious character, standing in opposition to official social institutions, especially ecclesiastical authorities. They functioned rather in semi-formal communities of erudite people, referring to the

ancient traditions of the academy¹. They indicated the necessity for a new explanation of fundamental existential questions, and were ready to practice philosophy as a kind of specifically interpreted ‘spiritual exercise’². They expressed their outlook, *inter alia*, under the slogans of Hermeticism, Theosophy, Alchemy, Astrology, Kabbalah, and Rosicrucianism, which usually complemented each other, and at the same time built a heterogeneous space for unconventional views and symbols, not necessarily consistent with the commonly accepted image of the world.

On this extremely diverse ground attempts were also made to specify what was esoteric, and therefore exceptional, rare, and reserved for the chosen ones. Initially, however, this was not the name of just another trend, but rather an indication of a certain characteristic of various alternative concepts. It was not until the nineteenth century that the idea of esotericism began to function as a name for specific communities that proclaimed a different vision of the world than commonly accepted and that often adopted an alternative lifestyle and *modus operandi* to the universally held *status quo*. At the same time, in the second half of that century, a concept emerged for the first time, according to which esoteric teachings lost the status of wisdom reserved for just a few select initiates and became the subject of systematic popularization. The first to implement this reformatory, ‘missionary’ approach to esoteric knowledge or practices were the Theosophists. In this community, the process of rebirth, revival, and popularization of

¹ In Renaissance Europe, the movement of academies independent from existing universities and largely unofficial was a distinctive feature of modern transformations. The first and most famous—the Platonic Academy—was founded by Marsilio Ficino under the auspices of Cosimo di Giovanni de’ Medici, see: A. Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence*, New Jersey 1988; P.O. Kristeller, *Il pensiero filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, Firenze 1988 [1953]. Similar organizations may also be found in other European countries, cf. F.A. Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, London 1947.

² Pierre Hadot pointed out that since antiquity the practice of philosophy was not limited to merely intellectual considerations, but led to a specifically understood spirituality, see: P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 2002; cf. also: M. Foucault, *Herméneutique du sujet*, Paris 2001. A similar approach was represented by many esotericists, for whom Platonism, usually interpreted in the context of heterodox mythology and spirituality, was an important aspect of their world vision.

indigenous Western esoteric traditions was also most clearly manifested, along with a kind of transnationalization of this phenomenon in various forms, usually embracing local colour.

In Polish culture, too, during the closing decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, an increased interest in esoteric traditions was noticeable. Esoteric imports arriving in Poland from various origins were accepted and adapted to local realities. Furthermore, specifically Polish, eclectic visions arose—often constructed on the basis of pre-existing esoteric traditions—and were accompanied by specific actions and organizations of a more or less formal nature. Neither the esoteric revival taking place in Poland, nor the multiplicity of traditions, themes, and motifs that appeared in the narratives of Polish esotericists should come as any surprise. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke emphasizes that ‘the historical incidence and efflorescence of esoteric ideas at times when the dominant worldview no longer commands general assent is suggestive of their social construction and selection, but it also begs the question of their function’³. Defining the conditions in which esoteric traditions developed in Poland, as well as the question about their functions, may determine the specifics of Polish esoteric traditions, which—despite their diversity—have several important features in common.

This is not the place to analyse this diversity in all its entirety. We will therefore only indicate selected contexts that allow us to understand the specificity of Polish esoteric trends at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Wouter J. Hanegraaff, the spontaneous development of nineteenth-century esotericism was based on two opposing, to some extent, perspectives—romantic and occult⁴. According to this scholar, the romantic perspective was expressed above all in the quest to restore a spiritual and magical dimension of reality in an image of the world that was fading into disenchantment⁵. However, Hanegraaff writes about the

³ W. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden – New York – Köln 1996, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 411–415.

⁵ Hanegraaff uses Max Weber’s (1864–1920) concept in this description, according to which in the technological and capitalist, and, above all, systematic secularization of Western civilization, the world was ‘disenchanted’. As

occult, which stood in opposition to Romanticism, that it may be defined as a ‘category in the study of religions, which comprises all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world’⁶. In other words, according to the researcher, esotericism in the form of occultism adopts the achievements of scientific thought, although they are subject to various reinterpretations not always consistent with the postulates of science.

The fact is that all categorizations of esoteric beliefs, usually fairly fluid and defying unequivocal definitions, are subject to misappropriation. In this case, too, the opposition of Romanticism and occultism was not always necessarily so distinct. However, the presence of various romantic concepts and occult themes usually appear in different versions and forms in the space of modern esotericism. They are also noticeable in the Polish reception of esotericism in the period we studied, but their significance and mutual relations have a different character than in the West.

This difference was largely determined by the circumstances of history. The events that were most strongly reflected in Polish esoteric narratives were the loss of Poland’s independence and its subsequent recovery. Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for over a hundred years as a result of three partitions—in 1772, 1793, and 1895. The territory of Poland was divided between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Habsburg Monarchy of Austria. Poland only regained its independence in 1918, after the end of the Great War⁷. The partition suspended the operation of all structures of Polish statehood, including schools

a consequence, various movements of religion and spirituality were an attempt to return to the lost ‘magical’ image of reality.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 422.

⁷ Despite the fact that in the years 1895–1918 Poland did not exist in a political sense, in this volume we often use this name in reference to the period before 1918. We recognize that the continuity of the Polish nation’s identity was preserved, that there were many attempts to regain independence and to create Polish organizational structures. Moreover, the Poles who lived under the partition, including the esotericists mentioned in the volume, also spoke and wrote about Poland as an existing entity, albeit under foreign rule. For the

(beyond the Austrian partition it was forbidden to learn Polish) and many cultural institutions. All attempts to regain independence were met with severe repressions—the possessions of entire families requisitioned, people imprisoned, massive and particularly harsh deportations to Siberia, the persecution of Poles living under Russian rule, including in Congress Poland⁸. Therefore, the loss and then the regaining of independence marked two momentous episodes in history, which the Polish esotericists portrayed as the ‘fall’ and ‘liberation’ of Poland. They were to become the axis of reflection on the historiosophical, historical role of Poland—revived and in some way transformed through difficult historical experiences—and they also set the context that determined their character.

In this historical perspective, romantic thought and the Polish philosophy of the period, with its peculiar mythologized historiography⁹, became an important element determining the specifics of Polish esotericism. Polish esotericists repeatedly emphasized its importance, often acknowledging it as more important than Western inspiration. Ultimately, it also became the basis for the reinterpretation of all esoteric traditions flowing from the West.

Poles, Poland was a basic point of reference despite the fact that in a political sense it did not exist.

⁸ The Kingdom of Poland, colloquially referred to as ‘Congress Poland’, was a state established under the provisions of the Congress of Vienna (1814/1815). It was connected by personal union with the Russian Empire and functioned on the basis of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Poland from 1815.

⁹ Evaluations of the romantic idea of messianism are not unequivocal, also in Polish culture. For example, Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), an outstanding poet, writer, and Nobel Prize winner, wrote in the context of Poland as well as Russia: ‘The weak point of the Slavs is the mixing of religion and history, a blend which comes to fruition in strange theories about the collective role as the Messiah’ (*Cz. Miłosz, Rosja. Widzenia transoceaniczne*, vol. 1: *Dostojewski – nasz współczesny*, Warszawa 2010, p. 88). His comments also referred to the Hegelian concept of ‘historical necessity’, according to which the Absolute manifests itself in history and the resulting mission of individual countries and nations. Indeed, the course of the history of peripheral nations was understandable and took on a deep meaning: it was part of a wider divine cosmic plan. Peripherality turned out to be a mission. The inevitable fall into matter that the centre, i.e., the West, experienced was to be overcome by the influence of nations, which due to their distance from the centre and the cross of history that they bore (Poland as the Christ of nations) developed a unique spirituality.

From this perspective, the romantic idea of messianism in particular and the millenarian trends related to it took on a fundamental significance. The most important Polish context surrounding the reception of esoteric themes was the work of the Polish ‘national bards’, poets and writers Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1949), Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859), and Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), or, to a lesser extent, philosophers Andrzej Towiański (1799–1878), August Cieszkowski (1814–1894), and Józef Hoene-Wroński (1776–1853). In esoteric thought, the whole complex was treated as a prophetic testament left by the bards which, according to many interpreters, only gained an opportunity for proper reading and use in the twentieth century. It was widely believed that these ‘national bards’ were supposed to announce what had happened with the generation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and to proclaim the spiritual rebirth that would precede the arrival of the New Age. For this reason, they gained the status of spiritual masters and teachers, and their works were recognized as esoteric texts of great importance not only for Poles, but for all humanity. The message of messianism gave meaning to the historical disasters affecting the entire nation, and at the same time to the suffering of individuals. The romantic vision of the mission of the Polish nation figured in the outlook of almost all the significant people discussed in this volume, regardless of the organizational affiliation or ideological declarations of particular esotericists, and for this reason can be considered the main theme of Polish esotericism before 1939.

Within the intricate complex of romantic ideas used to convey this message, Słowacki’s philosophy of genesis deserves special attention, later identifying with the Theosophical idea of universal evolution, which became extremely popular in virtually all esoteric communities in the West. The concept of this cosmic development, manifesting in successive epochs in the history of mankind (which first falls into matter and then climbs towards the spirit), in the writings of Polish esotericists acquired additional meanings, which sometimes contradicted the views of Western authors. Significant aspects of the story of this universal transformation include sacrifice, suffering, and even historical

catastrophe, often affecting entire nations, thanks to which both humanity as a whole and people as individuals may attain a higher level of consciousness. For this reason, Polish esotericism coincided with the program of national revival, designed to prepare society for a reborn homeland. In these esoteric projects, emphasis was placed on multifaceted development—political, scientific, individual, and, finally, spiritual—that would come to pass during the upcoming spiritual age.

In Polish esoteric narratives, messianic thought was accompanied by a strongly marked millenarian theme. Social and political conditions along with the memory of recent history connected with the partition (almost every esotericist at that time had been born under the partition) encouraged reflection on the future of Poland, but always with regard to its relatively fresh, tragic past. Polish esoteric concepts that emerged in the period of interest to us confirm the thesis that ‘the intensity of millenarian-messianic hope is measured by the power of contrast between what is and what will be’¹⁰. This contrast was enormous and it was that factor that determined their basic structure. On the one hand, the esotericists drew a picture of a completely degenerate, fallen Poland and the world, yet on the other hand, they ran far into a future where the Kingdom of God would prevail on earth under the agency of a reborn Poland. Its historical role was supposed to show humanity the path towards a new, reborn, transformed reality, to lead along this road, but also to ‘imbibe’ all the evil of the world, purify it and somehow give it back in a new form in the hands of those who remained. One of the Polish esotericists mentioned in more detail later in this volume, Józef Chobot, expressed this with tremendous fortitude, writing that messianism is ‘a slogan, a calling and a national revelation, [...] a proclamation to the Polish nation of its Mission through the Providence bestowed upon it’. This entrustment of Poland with a special mission means that Polish messianism was, in the esotericist’s opinion, completely different from other messianisms—‘contrary to the Messianisms of other nations, it proclaims [...] that Poland is to be a Servant of God on earth, a Handmaid of the

¹⁰ K. Ratajska, *Neomesjanistyczni spadkobiercy Mickiewicza*, Łódź 1998, p. 10.

“Word” among Nations’¹¹—in short, Poland was to complete these final goals and lead to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

At the same time, romantic imagination became a great inspiration for shaping a magical vision of the world, inspired by folk tales, old legends, and stories found in the works of the Bards. The esoteric mythology present in Polish culture represented a rapidly developing complex of images and narratives depicting nature in full bloom, bursting with mysterious powers and magical creatures. This intense and, as it were, primordial experience of nature with a strong sense of individualism and of a specific, sometimes semi-magical—and in any case, quite freely interpreted—religiosity shaped the Polish esotericists’ identity. For this reason, all secret, or perhaps alternative, sciences and disciplines became a great passion for various Poles, not only those interested in esotericism. This was confirmed by numerous trends for the practice of alternative medicine and gymnastics, healthy cuisine and herbal medicine, to which one might add the widespread belief in horoscopes, clairvoyance, and the effectiveness of various magical treatments.

Many of these themes can also be found in Polish occultism, although it must be emphasized that the research projects proposed by Polish esotericists reached far beyond this pop culture and the *quasi*-folk layer of beliefs¹². Among others mentioned in this volume, Józef Świtkowski (1876–1942), Józef Chobot (1875–1942), and especially Mieczysław Geniusz (1853–1920) believed that a broad and universal plan of rebirth should be potentially created—for Poland and the world—*via* reference to unconventional sciences too. Józef Chobot expressed this idea, shared by many or even most Polish esotericists, with the words: ‘Whatever wherever is good should be taken and applied to our needs and circumstances’¹³. At the same time, it is worth mentioning here the scientific research work of Julian

¹¹ J. Chobot, *Mesjanizm polski. Istota, zasady, rodowód i wskazania na przyszłość*, Wisła 1938, p. 4.

¹² W. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture...*, p. 429.

¹³ Józef Chobot’s letter to Wincenty Lutosławski dated the 18th of May 1921, Correspondence of Wincenty Lutosławski, Archive of Science of Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU) in

Ochorowicz (1850–1917), who set himself the reverse task—the disenchantment of occultism (see below). He claimed that all, or at least most of the so-called occult phenomena—‘mysterious’, ‘amazing’, or ‘miraculous’, which lay at the centre of the occultists’ field of interest—can be explained by the laws of nature, although they would still require in-depth knowledge.

All these themes—messianic and romantic, at the same time referring to the messages of occultism—shaped Polish esotericism as a synthesis of practices and beliefs of a new spirituality that tied together the concept of new science as well as postulates (often utopian) of a modern and civil society. In this complex mosaic of cultural phenomena, one should also consider the causes underlying the extraordinary diversity of the esoteric community of those times. On the one hand, it was represented by people connected in a more or less formal way with organizations, schools, or trends of interpreting reality such as the broad current of spiritism, Theosophy or anthroposophy, creating a kind of ‘main stream’ of esoteric life during that period. However, they were subject to reinterpretations that gave them a local, Polish character—they became part of Polish historiography. On the other hand, many activists embarked on their own quests and implemented their own organizational undertakings.

The quests conducted by individual esotericists were, of course, not suspended in a vacuum. They usually dipped into well-established traditions such as Theosophy, anthroposophy, but made a creative and far-reaching interpretation of them, creating eclectic systems bearing the distinctive mark of their personal interests, fascinations, or life experiences. Their goal, it seems, was to transcend the mainstream of esoteric thought—to create a platform for action for as wide a group as possible of very different recipients. They wanted to adjust the esoteric worldview to the needs and capabilities of the recipient, rather than trying to shape a human being so that he would discover the advantages of the doctrines proclaimed. That the esoteric message might reach everyone was so important that in many cases this message

Cracow (Archiwum Nauki Polskiej Akademii Nauk i Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności w Krakowie), KIII-155.

was of a clearly patriotic nature, pro-independence and pro-revival. This does not mean, however, that the Polish narrations and esoteric visions of this period were uniform. On the contrary, on the canvas of Polish esotericism, numerous and sometimes contradictory dreams, hopes, aspirations, and fears felt at that time emerged, and therefore their interpretations were usually dynamic, multiple, without demarcating clear formal boundaries. Moreover, its indeterminacy seems to fit well into the Western tradition, in which organized groups only began to play an important role at the end of the nineteenth century. The Polish branches of the Theosophical and Anthroposophical Societies, therefore, embraced all those who sought this kind of tight-knit and defined structure. Meanwhile, individualists, so characteristic of the esoteric tradition, often quite radical, searched for their own paths, building only short-lived alliances. It seems that without this openness and changeability, Polish esotericism would not have left so many traces in culture, in its artistic, political, popular, and even folk sphere.

The political situation undoubtedly contributed to this diversity of the Polish esoteric world. The division of Poland between the three great powers also meant that Poland found itself within the range of intellectual currents flowing from various directions. The choice of specific esoteric ideas could also have been related to the linguistic skills of those interested in them. Representatives of the Polish gentry and intelligentsia—i.e., the groups in which esotericism enjoyed its greatest popularity—usually knew French well. Esoteric literature in this language was also very popular in Poland. Works considered to be the most interesting were translated into Polish.

Residents of the German and Austrian partitions usually had good command of German, and there was a similar situation in the Russian partition. It is necessary to mention that, with the exception of the Austrian Partition, systematic Germanization and Russification was carried out—also in schools, the main language was always German or Russian. Books written in these languages also shaped at least some of the esoteric book collection of the Poles. Items written in Russian and German or translated into these languages contributed to the shaping of the

Polish image of occult medicine, Martinism, parapsychology, and spiritualistic as well as astrological themes.

At the same time—paradoxically—even a very good knowledge of the partitioners' language did not always translate into a good reception of the ideas expressed in it, including esoteric ones. A perfect example here is Theosophy. Although the first lodges were inspired by Anna Kamienskaia (1867–1952), this movement began to develop only after Annie Besant's (1847–1933) initiative to establish an independent Polish section of the Theosophical Society¹⁴. For Polish Theosophists, the postulate of translating classical works related to this movement into national languages was extremely important. Significantly, they referred more often to Theosophical books in German, English, or French than in Russian. A similar issue was probably also related to the problems with the Polish reception of Agni Yoga¹⁵.

This peculiar situation also affected anthroposophy. Even the Polish anthroposophists themselves seem to have experienced some discomfort from the fact that they had adopted the teachings of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). In the case of anthroposophy the problem was Steiner's origin and the fact that the 'anthroposophic world' used German almost exclusively, which was perceived in Poland as one of the two languages used by the oppressors. Polish anthroposophists, mostly belonging to the German section of this organization (and formerly belonging or sympathetic to the German section of the Theosophical Society, which Steiner headed), were accused of collaboration, or at least sympathizing with the

¹⁴ For more about the beginnings of Theosophy in Poland, see: K.M. Hess, *The Beginnings of Theosophy in Poland: From Early Visions to the Polish Theosophical Society*, 'The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture' 2015, no. 1, pp. 53–71, as well as: I. Trzcińska, A. Świerżowska, J. Szymeczek, *Z dziejów polskiej teozofii* [in:] M. Rzczycka, I. Trzcińska (eds.), *Polskie tradycje ezoteryczne 1890–1939*, vol. 1: *Teozofia i antropozofia*, Gdańsk 2019, pp. 38–130.

¹⁵ A clear example is the Agni Yoga doctrine created by Helena Roerich (1879–1955). Despite many efforts, this system was not successfully transferred to Poland. The claim that the reason for this failure was language alone would, of course, be unfounded. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the doctrine was created by a Russian, the texts of the doctrine were written in Russian, and their translations into Polish were accompanied by a great deal of controversy, meaning that Agni Yoga never really took off in Poland. See also the article *Błażej Włodarz: A Proponent of Reconciliation* in this volume.

In Polish culture too, during the closing decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, an increased interest in esoteric traditions was noticeable. Esoteric imports arriving in Poland from various origins were accepted and adapted to local realities. Furthermore, specifically Polish, eclectic visions arose—often constructed on the basis of pre-existing esoteric traditions—and were accompanied by specific actions and organizations of a more or less formal nature. Messianic and romantic themes, at the same time referring to the messages of occultism, shaped Polish esotericism as a synthesis of practices and beliefs of a new spirituality that tied together the concept of new science as well as postulates (often utopian) of a modern and civil society. In this complex mosaic of cultural phenomena, one should also consider the causes underlying the extraordinary diversity of the esoteric community of those times.



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