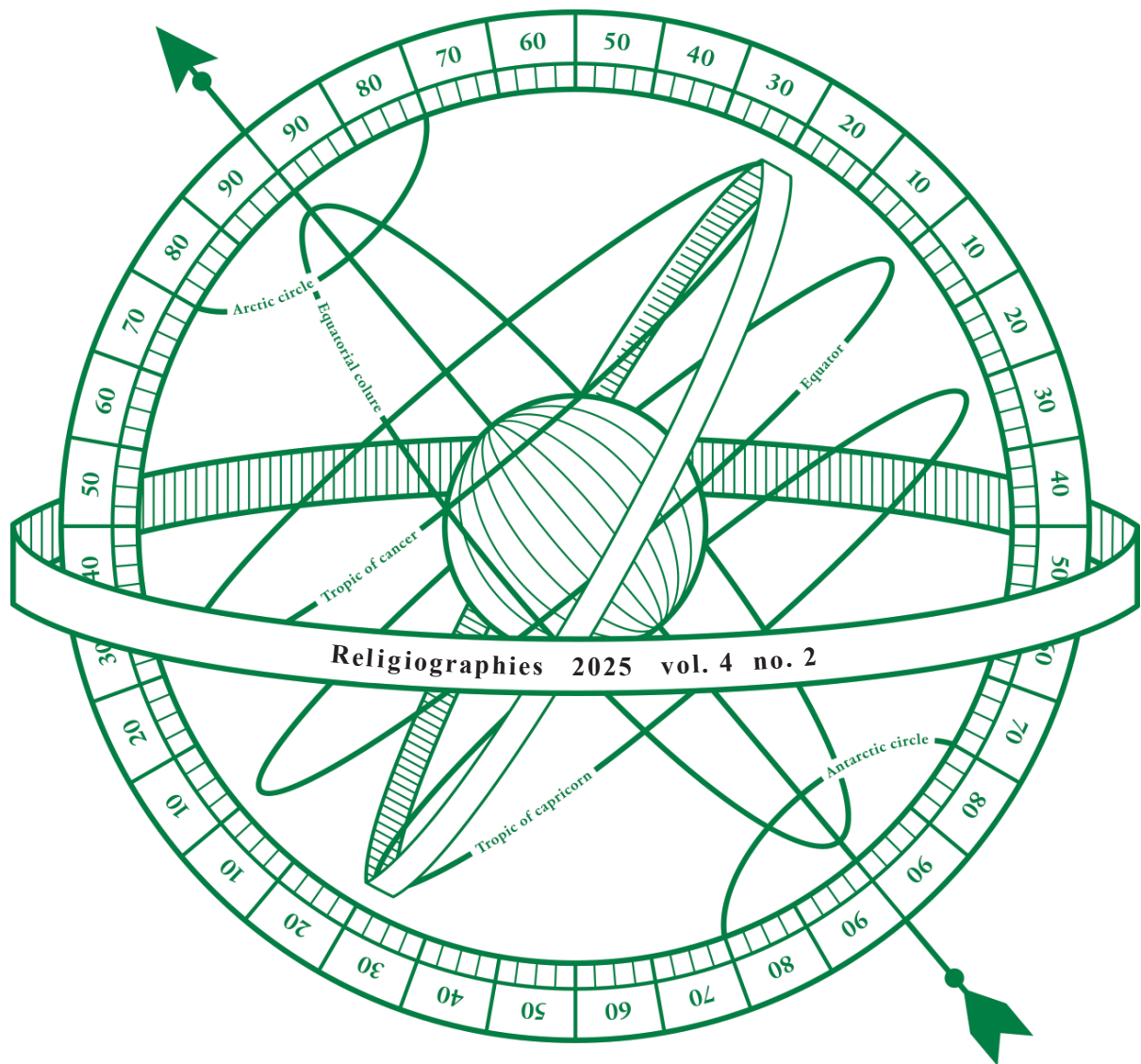


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue  
“Occultural Transfers between North and South”  
edited by  
Giuliano D’Amico

# Editorial

# Understanding Occultural Transfers

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## To cite this

D'Amico, Giuliano. "Editorial:  
Understanding Occultural Transfers."  
*Religiographies* 4, no. 2 (2025): 1–8.  
<https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n2.1-8>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n2.1-8>

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CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE  
fondazione ONLUS  
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## The Rise of Occulture

In the last two decades, the term *occulture* has grown in importance when addressing works of art, literature, music, etc., that engage with esoteric and occult themes. Although the genesis of the term can be traced back to the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> occulture rose to a theoretical status with Christopher Partridge's book *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, where he uses it to include "those often *hidden, rejected* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices" associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices that have developed in the last fifty years.<sup>2</sup>

These practices do not necessarily constitute a coherent religious system with committed adepts. As Partridge continues,

occulture itself is not a worldview, but rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols. Consumers of occulture may be witting or unwitting; they may engage with it at a relatively superficial level or they may have strong religious commitments; they may themselves contribute to the pool of occultural knowledge or they may simply drink from it.<sup>3</sup>

Put this way, occulture is a flexible and useful methodological tool, especially because it does not draw clear lines between agency and passivity: a piece of occulture can be made on purpose or not, or be made or received by an occultist or not. Partridge mainly focuses on popular culture, which "disseminates and remixes occultural ideas, thereby incubating new spores of occultural thought."<sup>4</sup> As his main interest lies in the processes of dissemination of occulture and the mutual influence between it and the arts, it is not surprising that he pays most attention to works that have achieved commercial success, such as vampire or fantasy fiction.

However, Partridge's articulation has never explained why occulture as a term should be relegated to popular culture and/or circumscribed to artistic expressions from the last fifty to sixty years. In a 2013 article in *Aries*, Nina Kokkinen challenged this view, redefining occulture as a "tool" to study "how artists categorize certain things (which may include their own art-making as well) as 'sacred,' 'authentic,' 'spiritual' or 'truthful' by means of their works and other practices."<sup>5</sup> Drawing upon Kocku von Stuckrad's definition of esotericism as a structural/discursive element in social-cultural processes, she re-conceptualizes occulture as

an ever changing discursive field, produced and maintained by (socially-oriented) seekers who are keenly interested in finding or striving towards the higher knowledge/wisdom that would be personally known by them to be *the truth*—the master key for all the questions of life and death. In the midst of this process certain forms of art are often sacralised as "spiritual," "higher" or "absolute" art.<sup>6</sup>

Later research outputs, like Christine Ferguson's and Andrew Rad-

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Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 124–5.

2

Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 68. Italics original.

3

Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 84–5.

4

Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," 116.

5

Nina Kokkinen, "Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art," *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 22–4.

6

Kokkinen, "Occulture as an Analytical Tool," 31. Italics original.

ford's *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947*, have followed in Kokkinen's footsteps and shown how this category can apply to periods other than the late modernist one, and to other forms of art that the popular ones. The success of the *Occulture Conference* in Berlin and *Trans-States* in Northampton, which have been taking place since 2018 and 2016 respectively, and emic publications such as Carl Abrahamsson's *Occulture: The Unseen Forces That Drive Culture Forward*, have contributed to the further dissemination and re-use of this term.<sup>7</sup> This special issue of *Religiographies* is indebted to this (oc) cultural humus, while, as will be evident below, it also tries to expand on and correct how these scholars have used the term.

### Occulture As Cultural Transfer

The articles in this issue engage with occulture not only as a tool to study the mutual influence between esoteric practices and the production of literature, art, or music, but also as a function of larger cultural transfers between different geographical areas and/or temporal patterns. In 2022, the interest in investigating occulture in a larger context sparked a synergistic exchange between the research network on Esotericism and Aesthetics at the University of Oslo (ESOSTETICS), which I direct, and the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities at the Cini Foundation in Venice. Thanks to a sabbatical sponsored by the University of Oslo and Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and thanks to a generous grant from the UiO:Norden research initiative and the NordForsk/ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World) research hub, an international conference took place at the Cini Foundation in November 2023, focusing on *Occultural Transfers Between North and South*. The articles herein were selected from the papers presented at the conference.

The topic of the conference reflected specific trends and met scholarly needs in the domain of Nordic studies, which we tried to approach in parallel with an investigation of aspects of the occultural phenomenon not yet explored. In recent decades, a number of studies on the history of literature, art, and ideas have approached the mutual cultural transfers between Northern and Southern Europe.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, these studies have also discussed established conceptualizations of “North” and “South” and proposed new ones. This development took place, as sketched out above, in the same period when several research projects in the field of religious studies emphasized how selected works of art and/or literature have negotiated spiritual knowledge and, at the same time, emphasized specific national and/or regional cultural traits from North and South.<sup>9</sup>

What has been much less studied—if at all—is how these two avenues of research intermingle, i.e., how cultural transfers between North and South have contributed to negotiating, exchanging, reworking, and elaborating esoteric knowledge in the production of literature, painting, music, architecture, and the arts at large. Such a lack of comparative knowledge and studies is surprising if one considers the impact of esoteric materials from the global “South” on Northern European culture since at least the end of the nineteenth century. This impact involves, while not being limited to, Sufism, Egyptosophy, and

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Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, eds., *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Carl Abrahamsson, *Occulture: The Unseen Forces That Drive Culture Forward* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2018).

8

Among many examples, see Elettra Carbone, *Nordic Italies: Representations of Italy in Nordic Literature from the 1830s to the 1910s* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2016); Stefan Nygård, *Decentering European Intellectual Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Alan Granadino et al., *Rethinking European Social Democracy and Socialism: A History of the Centre-Left in Northern and Southern Europe in the Late 20th Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Peter Stadius, “L’Arcadie moderne: La dimension espagnole du Grand Nord,” in *Le grand tour: Du reste de l’Europe jusqu’à la Laponie et retour*, eds. Maria Lähteenmäki and Joël Ferrand (Helsinki: Fédération des associations franco-finlandaises, 2011), 92–102; Peter Stadius, “Blessed Nordic Modernity: French Images of Welfare Scandinavia in The 1930s,” in *Travels in the North*, eds. Silje Gaupseth et al. (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2014); Peter Stadius, “Happy moderation: Serge de Chessin’s promotion of Sweden in France as a counter image to Bolshevik Russia,” *Nordiques* 41 (2022): 1–14.

9

See for instance Henrik Johnsson, *Det oändliga sammanhanget: August Strindbergs ockulta vetenskap* (Stockholm: Malört, 2015); Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mauro Ruggiero, *Le muse ermetiche: Esoterismo e occultismo nella letteratura italiana tra fin de siècle e avanguardia* (Sesto San Giovanni: Jouvence, 2019); Sasha Chaitow, *Son of Prometheus: The Life and Work of Joséphin Péladan* (Munich: Theion, 2022).

Freemasonry. Conversely, Nordic alternative spirituality has continuously been a source of inspiration for artistic production in Southern Europe (e.g., with the proliferation of Nordic paganism in musical and/or occultural discourse).

The conference thus aimed to fill this scholarly gap, opening avenues of research and discussing new ways of approaching and conceptualizing occultural phenomena with a North-South perspective as a starting point. For the sake of inclusion, we decided to operate with a relatively broad conception of the terms “North” and “South.” The papers mainly focused on the occultural transfers between Scandinavian and Southern European countries, with examples from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, as well as incursions in the Near East and the Mediterranean basin. For example, Gísli Magnússon studies the European occultural reception of the literary and philosophical works of the Danish mystic Johannes Anker Larsen, while Tim Rudbøg addresses the occultural negotiation of Italian and British stereotypes in Anna Kingsford’s novella “The Painter of Venice.” Pekka Pitkälä looks at the occultural, “Egyptian” influences on the Finnish artist and writer Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, and Pehr Englén studies the Danish painter Asger Jorn’s occultural influence on the work of the Situationist International in different European countries. Finally, Matteo Polato investigates the mutual, occultural entanglements between electronic voice phenomena and the sonic arts in Sweden and Italy. The intercultural focus of the articles mirrors occulture’s potential as transfer, which can apply to other geographical areas as well. The heterography at the end of the issue, where Mariano Villalba interviews the Mexican painter Efraín Becerra Castañeda—who blends Mesoamerican and European styles of painting in his search for a spiritual art—may be a good first step in this direction.

### **Occulture as Theory: A Provocation**

While I hope this special issue of *Religiographies* will open new avenues of research on occulture, both at an empirical and methodological level, a theoretical problem remains. During the last decade, while working on different projects related to the relationship between esotericism and the arts, I was repeatedly struck by the lack of a shared theoretical and methodological framework for the interdisciplinary study of literature, art, music, theater, cinema, etc., that engage with esoteric thought. While there are feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, psychoanalytical theories, just to name a few, that have enabled scholars to analyze and study objects across the arts, there is no *occultural theory* to help us study esoteric components and/or implications in the works of esoterically oriented authors and perhaps those with no interest in esotericism. The rest of this editorial will be devoted to this problem, with a special emphasis on the concept of occulture.

As evident in the description above, occulture is first and foremost a *descriptive* and not an *analytical* tool. In other words, it does not offer a method to study and analyze occultural examples. When we know that a piece of art is occultural, what do we do with it? Neither Partridge nor Kokkinen give us any clues. As a partial attempt to address

this problem, Marco Pasi has proposed a four-fold typology of how the relationship of the occult with contemporary art can present itself, summarized as representation, production, initiation, and mediation. In the first instance, occult symbols are reproduced in a work of art. In the second, the artwork becomes an esoteric object on the level of a talisman or magical amulet. If the artwork serves as a point of departure for a spiritual experience, it gains an initiatory function. Finally, a work of art can be the result of a supranatural communication or experience, i.e., it is mediated.<sup>10</sup>

Pasi's typology, which was launched in 2010 and developed further in 2015,<sup>11</sup> has many merits and has been used by several scholars in the field—but it has an inherent limitation: it is dependent on the intentions of the author and on a *purpose* that the given work is supposed to have. Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson developed another model in a dialogue with Pasi's. They identify five overall components that interact and can be distinguished within what they call "occult modernism":

1. Processes. Creation, dissemination, and reception of art;
2. Actors. Primarily the artist-creator, but also the audiences, publishers, etc.;
3. The work itself and its genre-specific features;
4. The function of the work, either as intended by the author or experienced by the audiences;
5. Aesthetics, in cases where a specific aesthetic system can be identified.<sup>12</sup>

As shown, this model suffers from a limitation similar to Pasi's; intentionality or at least the explicit "presence" of occult elements in a given piece of art is still the fulcrum of these models. Once more, these are typological, not analytical structures: they describe how a particular kind of art may look, but they do not tell us how to analyze it. In an article from 2022, Christine Ferguson wrote extensively on the dangers of intentionality and of a purely content-driven understanding of an occultural piece of art. Ferguson calls for an acknowledgement of the aesthetic structures and expressive devices of a literary, artistic, and/or musical work, bearing in mind that "surfaces are rarely straightforward" and that "they are never a wholly conclusive guide to literary meaning or reception."<sup>13</sup>

I focus on the problem of intentionality and typology, not because of a post-structuralistic obsession with the death of the author and/or an urge to theorize, but because I am convinced that occulture has a much larger potential in the study of the arts, and perhaps may overcome artistic and genre constraints and establish itself as a kind of "occult theory." I intuited this, perhaps involuntarily, by Pasi again, during his keynote address at the eighth ESSWE International Conference, which focused on "Western Esotericism and Creativity: Art, Performance and Innovation" and was held at University College Cork in 2022. At some point, Pasi pointed out how Piero Manzoni's sculpture *Merde d'artiste* could be considered an alchemical piece of art, because the conventions at the core of the art world turned vile materials, such as excrement, into gold—a kind of artistic *magnum opus*. I am

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Marco Pasi, "Coming Forth by Night," in *Options with Nostrils*, ed. Alexis Vaillant (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2010), 107–8. See also Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art*, 14–15.

11

Marco Pasi, "Hilma af Klint, Western Esotericism and the Problem of Modern Artistic Creativity," in *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, eds. Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015), 101–16.

12

Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art*, 16–17.

13

Christine Ferguson, "Beyond Belief: Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*," *Aries* 22, no. 2 (2022): 214.

pretty sure that Pasi was joking, not least because Manzoni had no esoteric inclinations (at least that I know of). *Merde d'artiste* would never work in one of the theoretical models I have sketched above. And yet, I would like to take Pasi's intuition seriously and more literally than originally conceived—as a way to discuss a possible occultural theory.

What is theory, or at least, what does it do? This question would need a couple of conferences to be answered properly, but I will try to pinpoint at least one aspect, drawing on a classic text on the matter, Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. According to Culler, literary theory can briefly be defined as “the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it.”<sup>14</sup> At the risk of oversimplification, I see no a priori obstacle to subtracting “literature” from this quotation and using the same definition for other forms of arts like visual arts, music, film, etc. However, I believe that the emphasis should be placed on the second part of Culler's definition, i.e., that theory is a set of methods to analyze a given work. Borrowing a formulation from Richard Rorty, Culler continues by pointing out how theory “designate[s] works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong.”<sup>15</sup> Here we touch upon a crucial aspect of theory, i.e., its capacity to move across fields and genres, and to question assumptions related to them. Working on this line of thought, Culler concludes that

if theory is defined by its practical effects, as what changes people's view, [it] makes them think differently about their objects of study . . . The main effect of theory is the disputing of common sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience. For example, theory questions: 1. The conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker “had in mind,” 2. Or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, 3. Or the notion that reality is what is “present” at a given moment.<sup>16</sup>

Isn't this exactly the opposite of a typology and or/descriptive account? The focal point in Culler's quotation is the transmigratory nature of theory, its possibility to transcend disciplinary barriers and trends and establish new knowledge *regardless of the intention of the author and/or the context in which the object of study is produced*. Can occulture thus be seen as rising to this status of occult theory, an analytical tool applicable across the arts? In lieu of a conclusion, I will test this idea with a case study of occultural transfer between Norwegian culture (an area of Norden which is regrettably not represented in this special issue) and the Scottish one.

### Henrik Ibsen's Occultural Transfers

In 1908, the Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Scotland organized a staging of Henrik Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh. This staging, and the English translation it was based upon, were produced by Isabelle M. Pagan, a theosophist and astrologer who interpreted the play as a drama about reincarnation. The story of the

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Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.

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Culler, *Literary Theory*, 3.

16

Culler, 4.

compulsive liar Peer, who leaves Norway in a quest to escape from his deeds and, existentially, from the question "who am I?," is turned into an allegory of the soul's journey towards perfection through several reincarnations, which is known as one of the pillars of theosophical thought.<sup>17</sup>

In particular, a scene towards the end of the play is interpreted as Peer's physical death, the whole last act of the play taking place in the quarantine period between his past and next incarnation. This interpretation causes problems within a "classical" occultural context, as it raises the question of which insights esoteric readings can integrate in works of art that are not concerned with esoteric doctrines. Based on the present state of research, Ibsen had no interest in esotericism whatsoever, and therefore, from a literal point of view, this interpretation is "wrong"; there is no reason to believe that Ibsen wanted to convey theosophical knowledge—the Theosophical Society was founded eight years after he wrote the play—and there is no later evidence that he had read theosophical literature.

However, if this reading of *Peer Gynt* is literally "wrong," one could then ask if this reading is equally "wrong" on other levels. For instance, the theosophical parlance used by these interpreters resembles that of early psychology and its entanglement with esoteric discourse. To put it another way: when Pagan speaks of Ibsen's "subliminal self," which finds expression in *Peer Gynt*, or of his fiancée Solvejg as an allegory of Peer's "higher self," her argument is not necessarily weaker than that of the psychoanalytical readings that have become part of Ibsen studies in recent decades. And if it is true that Ibsen could not have had knowledge of Theosophy at that point, this is also true for most of the theories (for instance, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism) that are often used to understand his work. Also, if it makes sense to read *Peer Gynt* through Hegel and Kierkegaard—two central philosophers with strong ties to Christian thought that we do not definitively know Ibsen read—this does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to read Ibsen with Theosophy, just because this system of thought has arguably not been part of a shared cultural knowledge in Scandinavia and in the West at large.

This is, I think, a crucial point, because if we lift Theosophy as a system of thought from the field to which it belongs—esotericism—and bring it over to another field—literature/art—we are doing theory. In this sense, theorizing occulture does not mean looking for hidden theosophical elements in *Peer Gynt*, because these elements are not present; it means, rather, using occulture as "a systematic account for analysing literature," as Culler would put it.

The advantages of such an approach are many. In the specific context of *Peer Gynt*, using occulture as literary theory enables us to solve a problem of interpretation that Ibsen scholars have grappled with for over 150 years, i.e., whether Peer's final encounter with the love of his life, Solvejg, represents a form of salvation, be it secular (Peer has finally "found himself" and can start life as a "whole" subject) or religious (Peer has been absolved of his sins). Scholars are mainly divided into two factions, those who say yes and those who say no. No conciliation between these positions has been found. What strikes me about all these readings is that they are built upon a Western, Christian worldview in which such salvation happens once and is valid from

there to eternity. A theosophical interpretation, on the contrary, would disintegrate such oppositions and offer a way out of this impasse.

With that as a starting point, it becomes less important to understand whether the ending is conciliatory or represents Peer's salvation, as Peer has simply concluded one of his incarnations, possibly not one of his most spiritually successful ones, and will be able to do better in the next. In this way, *Peer Gynt* acquires more of a circular than a teleological structure, emphasizing the complexity of human experience, and offers an alternative solution to a scholarly quandary, which seems to be stranded in either a saved/not saved dichotomy or a blunt statement about the fragmentation and aporias of modernity. This is not to conclude that Ibsen wrote a drama on reincarnation, or that he must have known it while writing *Peer Gynt* (although the latter is not impossible). My point is that when occulture is used as an analytical method, and not as a typology or a descriptive umbrella term, it may unveil aspects of a given piece of art that have escaped previous scholarly attention. Raising occulture to the state of theory may turn into an exciting and surprising journey. I hope that this issue of *Religiographies* may be a first step in this direction.