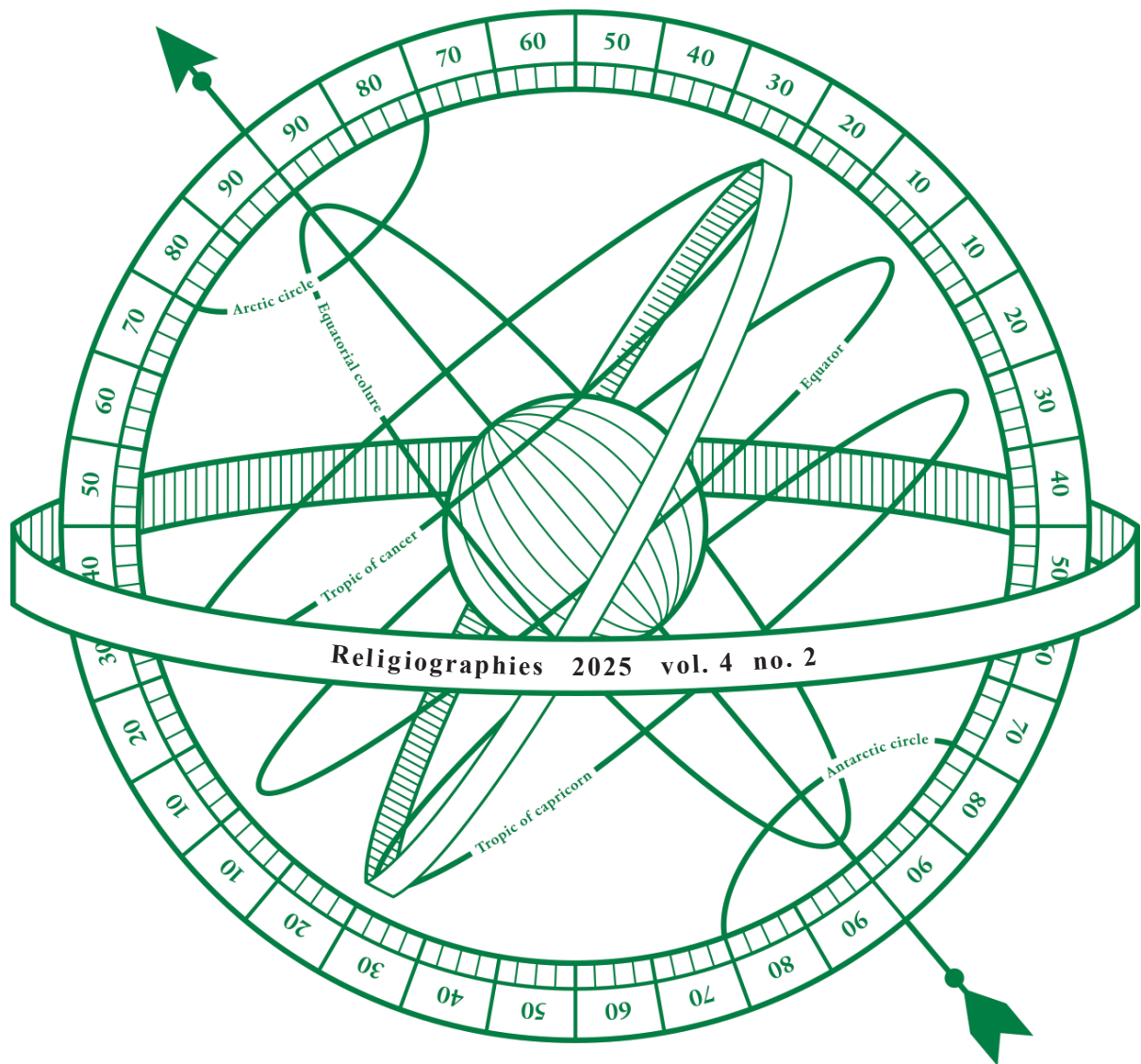


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Occultural Literary Transfer in the Danish Mystic Johannes Anker Larsen

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Abstract

This article examines the European reception of the Danish mystic and novelist Johannes Anker Larsen (1874–1957), situating him within the framework of “literary occulture.” It traces how Larsen’s spiritual and aesthetic ideas traveled across cultural and linguistic borders, identifying three main phases in his reception: the early 1920s, marked by the Gyldendal Prize and international translations; the interwar years, when his thought intersected with the Eranos network; and the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when his works re-emerged within New Age and spiritual subcultures. Through readings of Rainer Maria Rilke’s letters, Eranos scholarship, and later subcultural appropriations, the article illuminates the interplay between esotericism, literature, and cultural transfer, and argues that Larsen’s case exemplifies both the marginalization and persistence of spiritual literature in modern European culture.



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In scholarship, Nordic esotericism—with the exception of Swedenborg—has not received much attention. In an article on the “Research on Esotericism in Scandinavia,” Hammer and Bogdan stated: “The situation is reflected in the standard reference work on esotericism, the Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism. Swedenborg is covered in a full-length article. Apart from this, however, esotericism in Scandinavia is barely mentioned.”¹ They attempted to change this situation by editing the first comprehensive volume on Scandinavian esotericism in 2016.² Separate chapters are dedicated to Swedenborgianism and the Danish cosmological thinker Martinus Thomsen (1890–1981). But Johannes Anker Larsen—the other great Danish esotericist and postconfessional mystic of the twentieth century—is nowhere to be found in the volume. In a Danish scholarly context, Knud Wentzel improved the situation significantly. His 2011 monograph on J. Anker Larsen: *Mystiker og digter: Anker Larsens liv og forfatter-skab*³ (*Mystic and Poet: The Life and Works of J. Anker Larsen*) deals very competently with his life, his literary production, and the Danish reception of it, but he only briefly touches on the European reception. In that regard, he is a good example of the tendency among scholars—also within the field of occulture—to operate with a primarily national perspective. The Scandinavian and European reception of Anker Larsen’s works is, however, considerable.⁴ Without a doubt, Anker Larsen had—and has—a much larger European and transatlantic readership than Martinus.

The following investigation pursues three interconnected aims: first, to map the European reception of Anker Larsen; second, to analyze the imagology of the North in the cultural transfer between Scandinavia and Central Europe;⁵ and third, to examine how literary and esoteric discourses merge in this occultural transfer. Structurally, the article describes three phases of the reception of Anker Larsen: (1) an initial phase in the 1920s, when Anker Larsen received international attention due to the prestigious Gyldendal Literary Prize; (2) a middle phase in the interwar and postwar period, when Anker Larsen appears in or around the Eranos esoteric-philosophical network; and (3) a late phase from the 1980s onwards, in which his works are primarily read and circulated in New Age and spiritual subcultures. This tripartite structure allows us to trace both the shifting *occultural position* of Anker Larsen and the gradual transformation of his reception from mainstream (spiritual) literature to a more subcultural or marginal status.

To Anker Larsen, the medium of literature was a means to an end: he used fiction to express spiritual insights. Using the term “occulture” about Anker Larsen’s spiritual books calls for an explanation. As Partridge coined it, occulture encompassed primarily the countercultural movements from the 1960s onwards.⁶ Occulture can be extended seamlessly, however, to art and literature at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The following description of occulture can easily be related to Anker Larsen’s *De Vises Sten* (*The Philosopher’s Stone*): “Occulture is that shadow side of culture fascinated by that which hegemonic religion, culture, and science marginalizes or rejects, but which is, nevertheless, ubiquitous, perennial, and important for the enchantment of the everyday.”⁷ *The Philosopher’s*

1
Olav Hammer and Henrik Bogdan, “Research on Esotericism in Scandinavia,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 20 (2008): 3.

2
Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer, eds., *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

3
Knud Wentzel, *Mystiker og digter: Anker Larsens liv og forfatter-skab* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2011).

4
Academic research on J. Anker Larsen is sparse. In my initial research, I only found two MA theses from 1973 and 1989. In 2008, I was able to reach the author of the newest thesis, Lis Majlund Nielsen, who borrowed me her manuscript. She established contact with her supervisor professor emeritus Knud Wentzel who was willing to show me his finished, but still unpublished, manuscript, the first Danish academic monograph on Anker Larsen, which was published in 2011. Wentzel included a chapter on how Anker Larsen was received by Rilke based on my research. Furthermore, Anker Larsen is mentioned in the article “Scientific Spirit, Spirituality and Spirited Writing: Spiritualism between science, religion and literature” by Christina Barz (*Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 31, no. 1 [2010]). He is also briefly mentioned in Per Faxneld’s article on the Danish dairy salesman and Luciferian freemason Ben Kadosh (or Carl William Hansen) because Anker Larsen depicts Kadosh in his novel *The Philosopher’s Stone*. “‘In Communication with the Powers of Darkness’: Satanism in Turn-of-the-century Denmark, and Its Use as a Legitimizing Device in Present-day Esotericism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57–77.

5
Cf. Astrid Arndt, Andreas Blödorn, David Fraedorff and Annette Weisner, *Imagologie des Nordens* (Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2021).

6
Christopher Partridge, “Occulture and Art: A Response,” *Aries* 13 (2013): 132.

7
Partridge, “Occulture and Art,” 135.

Stone is a novel that deals with a panorama of occultural currents in the 1920s: mysticism (also Catholic), Theosophy, Tantra, Spiritualism, etc. It is, in other words, a kind of meta-occultural novel that critically describes all the erroneous spiritual pathways of contemporary occulture. At the same time, it is a product of occulture itself.

Partridge approaches occulture as a cultural historian and does not go deeply into the literary aspects of it. While his conceptualization of the term “occulture” offers a valuable framework for understanding the cultural diffusion of rejected spiritualities, it tends to emphasize the sociological and historical over the specifically literary. In this regard, recent scholarship has proposed a more fine-grained engagement with the aesthetic and textual dimensions of esotericism. Notably, Christine Ferguson has articulated what has been termed the *literary turn* in the study of Western esotericism, which foregrounds not only how esoteric themes appear in literature, but also how literary form and technique mediate, transform, or even produce esoteric knowledge. In her 2022 article “Beyond Belief: Towards a Literary History of Modern Occulture,” Ferguson argues that scholars should pay greater attention to the literary strategies by which esoteric or spiritual ideas are conveyed—whether didactically, allegorically, symbolically, or through aesthetic indeterminacy. This perspective is particularly relevant for authors such as Anker Larsen, whose writing is situated in the interstice between spiritual instruction and literary expression. The question is not only *what* he communicates, but *how*: to what extent do literary devices—narrative perspective, character construction, metaphor, paradox—mediate the mystical experience and shape its reception? The ambivalent response to *The Philosopher’s Stone*, which will be examined in the section “How Anker Larsen was Received by Rilke: Imagology and Symbolist Occulture,” provides an opportunity to analyze the notion of literarity in relation to emic literary occulture, since Rilke’s critique focuses on literary form and on the tension between spiritual insight and aesthetic execution. When Rilke laments the didactic dimension of the novel, he is implicitly invoking a set of literary standards by which spiritual literature must also be judged. In this sense, his letters offer a proto-theoretical model for evaluating occultural poetics.⁸

Since Johannes Anker Larsen (1874–1957) is fairly unknown today, it seems appropriate to introduce him. Anker Larsen was born on the small Danish island of Langeland south of Funen in 1874. He briefly studied theology, law, and philosophy of religion, but gave up his studies to devote himself to a double career as actor and author. He never succeeded as an actor, but achieved a certain success as a stage director, translator, and comedy writer. Later in his career, he was censored at the Royal Danish Theatre. Spiritually, his life can be divided into two halves: from 1890–1909, he was a member of the Danish Theosophical Society. And here he encountered what he called “the family documents,” i.e., the great mystical writings of human history such as the Tao-Te-King, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita, Sufi poetry, and the discourses of Jesus, Molinos, Francis de Sales, and other Christian mystics. However, he left the Theosophical Society in 1909. His later criticism of Theosophy was directed at its “intellectualism” (he said he developed a dislike for metaphysics during this time and

The question of occultural aesthetics is not the only parameter. In my research on Rainer Maria Rilke, I have emphasized the importance of understanding the esoteric cultural code as a key to grasping formal aspects of the Austrian poet’s work. Equally central to my project was the task of establishing Rilke’s ideal of a spiritual literature. When Ferguson downplays the narrative that esotericism has been neglected in modernist literary scholarship—while simultaneously citing seminal studies on the subject—she, in my view, underestimates the extent to which mainstream scholarship has tended to exclude esotericism as a serious and influential tradition. This tendency is especially pronounced in German-language criticism, where esotericism continues to be widely marginalized. I have addressed this regrettable state of affairs in relation to the scholarship on Rilke in my monograph: Gisli Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik: Esoterische und okkultistische Modernität bei R. M. Rilke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009).



J. Anker Larsen, 1923, Historisk Arkiv for Rudersdal Kommune (Historical Archive of Rudersdal Municipality).

got out of the “metaphysical jungle with a practically whole skin”⁹). According to his autobiographic book *With the Door Open* (Danish: *For åben Dør*), he had a profound mystical experience in 1910 in the Geel forest in Holte north of Copenhagen—based on the remembrance of a privileged moment, a nature epiphany, in childhood. Now, the most central thing in his life was the mystical experience, the experience of eternity, as he called it. But his personal experiences of nature mysticism also made him critical of the organized, metaphysical, or intellectualized pursuits of spiritual meaning in general: church, theosophy, spiritualism, occultism, tantra, et cetera.¹⁰

Anker Larsen—like Martinus—was a postconfessional mystic, but unlike Martinus, who preferred to write lengthy esoteric treatises to convey his thoughts, Anker Larsen chose literature as his medium of communication. From 1905–1919, Anker Larsen wrote two novels and four short story collections. They can be perceived as preparation for his *magnum opus*, *The Philosopher’s Stone*, published in 1923. Here, we follow three different spiritual paths exemplified by three characters, Jens Dahl, Christian Barnes, and Holger Enke, and Anker Larsen uses the metaphor of the alchemical stone as a symbol of spiritual meaning, often involving a difficult and even erroneous pursuit.

The novel gave Anker Larsen his breakthrough as a writer in 1923, when he won Gyldendal’s novel prize of DKK 70,000, which at the time was equivalent to more than half a Nobel Prize. Henceforth, Anker Larsen wrote the aforementioned autobiographical account *With the Door Open* in 1926 and six more novels, *Martha og Maria* (*Martha and Mary*, 1925), *Sagnet der vokser ind i himmelen* (*A Stranger in Paradise*, 1928), *Rus* (*Intoxication*, 1931), *King Lear fra Svendborg* (*King Lear from Svendborg*, 1932), *Olsen’s Dårskab* (*Olsen’s Folly*, 1941), and his swan song *Hansen* (1949).

Among the Danish public, Anker Larsen’s popularity as an author who was vigorously debated in the leading newspapers followed primarily in the wake of the prestigious literature prize from Gyldendal. The head of the prize committee was the highly respected Professor in Nordic literature Vilhelm Andersen (other members were author Ludvig Holstein and Gyldendal director Axel Garde). Since Anker Larsen was not an established author at the time, it was hotly debated whether the novel was worthy of the recognition. The reviews ranged from panegyric praise and moderate recognition to resentful put-downs. The consensus seemed to be that it was a significant work of great spiritual worth, but aesthetically not wholly satisfying. Nevertheless, *The Philosopher’s Stone* was assessed positively by literary giants such as literary critics Georg and Edvard Brandes, Professor Oluf Friis, and writer Knut Hamsun.¹¹ He received two chapters in Professor of Philosophy Harald Høffding’s book *Religious Types of Thought* (*Religiøse Tanketyper*, 1927). Vilhelm Grønbech, professor of history of religion, who was an expert on mysticism, wrote the foreword of the Danish edition of *With the Door Open* in 1927. This, without a doubt, contributed to his cultural capital in this period.

The Anker Larsen reception was, however, not confined to Denmark. Primarily due to the Gyldendal prize, his books were translated into numerous languages: German, English, French, Dutch, Swedish, Icelandic, Estonian, Finnish, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Ru-

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J. Anker Larsen, *With the Door Open: My Experience*, trans. Erwin and Pleasance von Gaisberg (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931), 25.

10

Without using the term “occulture,” Christina Barz comes to a similar conclusion when describing the presentation of spiritualism in *The Philosopher’s Stone* by Anker Larsen and *Madame d’Ora* by Johannes V. Jensen: “Notwithstanding their different treatment of spiritualism’s ideology and practical employment, those two literary samples actually highlight its significance within the cultural discourse at the time of their origin. However obfuscated or even naïve spiritualism, as presented in the two non-fictional texts, may appear—in retrospect it has to be considered as a mental feature to be reckoned with in the early 20th century’s history of ideas, as it intends a symbiosis of two essential opposite tendencies of the time.” Barz, “Scientific Spirit, Spirituality and Spirited Writing,” 153–54.

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Oskar Weitzmann, “J. Anker Larsen, ein nordischer Mystiker,” *Ostsee-Rundschau und der nordische Aufseher* 11 (1934): 240.

manian, and Russian. As is evident from this list, the Anker Larsen reception is a prime example of occultural transfer, since it encompassed both Nordic, Central European, and Eastern European countries.¹²

How Anker Larsen was Received by Rilke: Imagology and Symbolist Occulture

The imagological aspect of the Anker Larsen reception is most evident in the German-speaking areas.¹³ *The Nordic* was often featured in journals and newspapers. In the *Ostsee-Rundschau*, Anker Larsen was presented as a “Nordic mystic,”¹⁴ and in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, he was called a “Nordic Magus.” Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Nordic literature, theater, and art have enjoyed the reputation of being artistically and politically progressive. Strindberg was performed in Berlin by Max Reinhardt, and Arnold Schönberg used the *Gurre Songs (Gurresange)* by Jens Peter Jacobsen for his monumental cantata. The collected works of Henrik Ibsen, Herman Bang, Strindberg, and Jacobsen were published in German, and two of the most important German novels from the beginning of the twentieth century—Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge)*—were inspired by Norwegian works: Alexander Kielland’s *Garman and Worse (Garman og Worse)* and Sigbjørn Obstfelder’s *A Priest’s Diary (En præsts dagbog)*.

The German historian and journalist Fritz Endres writes about Anker Larsen in an article on “Nordic Poets.” In his introduction, before turning to the German translation of Anker Larsen’s novel *Rus (Intoxication)*, he displays the stereotyping tendencies of Nordic imagology:

Nordic poetry has something over contemporary German poetry: it has an oral tradition, at least in the epic area. Their storytellers can narrate; the long winter nights, one would think, have taught them and their listeners the patience that the true storyteller needs. From their youth on they experience the sound of the sea, the roar of the endless forests, the hard, ever-same work of the boatman and the fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer; their cities are neither so big nor so loud that they drown this austere melody with their rattling and screaming. This is why Nordic epic poetry always has a sense of great form, even if it does not always fill that form; always a knowledge of great content, although it only saw the most content-rich experience of our time, the World War, as a spectator.¹⁵

Endres juxtaposes Nordic and German poetry and uses common conceptions of Nordic nature and life style to explain the special oral quality of its literature and “great sense of form.” Despite a criticism of Anker Larsen’s works as being more philosophical than literary, Endres attests in him the ability to mesmerize and educate the reader due to his “genuine [= Nordic] storytelling.”¹⁶

The North-South-juxtaposition is also evident in how Rainer Maria Rilke received Anker Larsen. Rilke’s judgment of the novel has

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There was also a lively Anker Larsen reception in the United States, but I have limited myself primarily to the European perspective in this article.

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Imagology is a theory on cultural representations and national stereotypes. It was developed in the 1950s, but has gained momentum in recent decades due to the work of Joep Leerssen. Cf. Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: History and method,” in *Imagology The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 17–32.

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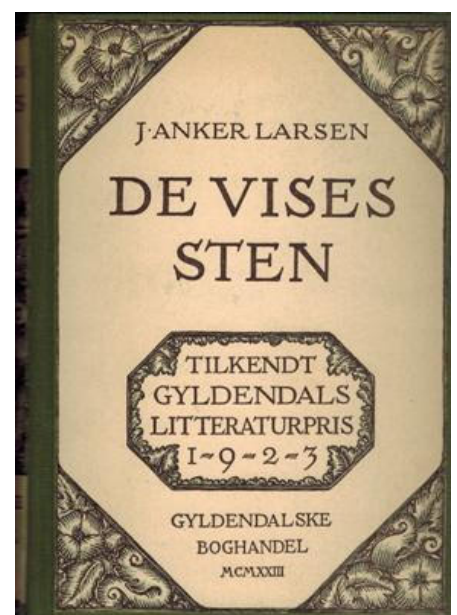
Oskar Weitzmann, “J. Anker Larsen, ein nordischer Mystiker,” *Der nordische Aufseher* 8, II volume of *Ostseeerundschau Lübeck* (November 1934): 240.

15

Fritz Endres, “Nordische Dichter,” *Der Kunstwart* 45 (1931): 195.

16

“echten Erzählkunst.” Endres, “Nordische Dichter.”



Cover of the Danish first edition of *De Vises Sten (The Philosopher’s Stone)*, 1923.

great weight, since he was both one of the greatest German-language poets of the twentieth century and shared Anker Larsen's spiritual worldview. Rilke stylized the Scandinavian mentality as being more open to the occult than other European cultures. In his only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), one of the earliest modernist novels in German literature, the main character is a poor Danish aristocrat who arrives in Paris only to discover its shocking modernity. Rilke, however, also describes Malte's childhood memories from the mansion Ulsgaard in the Danish province. The novel mirrors Malte's genuinely modern experience of fragmentation, alienation, and existential anxiety he was confronted with in the disturbing reality of the metropolis of Paris. But this nihilistic modernity seems to coexist peacefully with ghosts and other paranormal phenomena. When Rilke, late in his life, was asked by the scholar Hermann Pongs about the "occult incidents" in *Malte*, he wrote: "The 'occult occurrences' in Malte: in part accurately recounted experiences of childhood in Prague, in part things experienced and heard in Sweden. This is, moreover, one of the reasons why the fictitious figure of M. L. Brigge was made a Dane: because only in the atmosphere of the Scandinavian countries is the ghost ranged among the possible experiences and admitted (which conforms with my own attitude)."¹⁷ This passage shows that Rilke attached special importance to Scandinavia in connection with the occult and paranormal. It is even the reason why Malte Laurids Brigge is a Dane.¹⁸ This stylized, occult image of the "Scandinavian" mentality echoes in Rilke's letters on Anker Larsen's *The Philosopher's Stone*.

In Switzerland, where Rilke had lived since 1919, Anker Larsen was particularly well received; he thus gave a series of lectures in the autumn of 1925. About this time, *The Philosopher's Stone* was given a positive review in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, where the critic Edouard Korrodi called it "masterly" and "easily the strongest *weltanschauung* novel which can be written in our time."¹⁹ Rilke's Swiss benefactor and close friend, Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, whom Rilke called Nike, had discovered Anker Larsen and was deeply touched by *The Philosopher's Stone*, which she sent to Rilke. Rilke then wrote three letters that constitute the different phases in how he received Anker Larsen:

Thank you for the *Philosopher's Stone*: I read the first chapters with interest; isn't it a kind of Bonsels with, in addition, this clarity of the Scandinavian eye, which, like the twilight of their bright summer nights, never dies completely? I do not know if Bonsels would have been capable of the discovery which, certainly, I divine, carries this book and imports above all: (The "Open"). It is a life-changing experience, related to that which came to me then in Duino as the most peculiar consciousness and which I later had printed under the heading "Experience" in one of the (older) *Inselalmanach*. If there are reviews of Anker Larsen's lecture published, please send them to me, if possible, with some brief comments from you. (I wrote to Inga Junghanns immediately!).²⁰

Here Rilke combines the two overarching themes of this article: the cultural transfer between the Nordic occulture and central Europe *and* the

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Rainer Maria Rilke: *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, vol. 2, 1910–1926, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton 1947–48), 357.

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It is, however, another Dane in the novel who symbolizes the Scandinavian attitude in the most exemplary way, namely Count Brahe. The count's clairvoyance is connoted positively in the novel, which contains five episodes from Denmark, all of which have to do with paranormal phenomena: the Christine episode (and the first Count Brahe episode), the Ingeborg episode, the episode with the ghost hand, the haunted house of the Schulin family, and the second Count Brahe episode. To these five episodes, which all belong to Danish childhood memories, one can additionally add two records which relate to automatic writing: the automatic writing hand and the episode with Goethe and Bettina von Arnim.

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Edouard Korrodi, "Der Stein der Weisen," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Literarische Beilage (May 10, 1925): 3.

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Merci du *Stein der Weisen*: j'ai lu avec intérêt les premiers chapitres ; n'est-ce pas une sorte de Bonsels avec, en plus, cette clarté de l'œil scandinave, qui, comme le crépuscule de leurs neiges claires d'été, ne s'éteint jamais complètement? Ja ne sais pas si Bonsel eût été capable de la découverte qui, certainement, je le divine, porte ce livre et y importe avant tout: (Das "Offene"). Es handelt sich hier um eine lebenswandelnde Erfahrung, verwandt jener, die mir damals in Duino zum eigentümlichsten Bewußtsein kam und die ich, später, unter der Überschrift „Erlebnis“ in einem (der älteren) *Inselalmanach* habe abdrucken lassen. Si on publie des compte-rendus sur la conférence d'Anker Larsen, envoyez-les moi, je vous prie, avec, si possible, quelques petits commentaires de votre part. (An Inga Junghanns hab ich sofort geschrieben!). Rainer Marie Rilke to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, October 29, 1925, in *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, vol. 2 [Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1977], 1062. (My translation).



Duino Castle, etching by Adolf Fesca (1821–1872), based on drawing by August Anton Tischbein (1805–1867).

relationship between occultism and artistic creation. The connection with the *Malte* novel is established through the reference to the translator of *Malte* into Danish, Inga Junghanns. Rilke compares Anker Larsen with Waldemar Bonsels, whose works are characterized by nature mysticism.²¹ But according to Rilke, Anker Larsen has “this clarity of the Scandinavian eye, which, like the twilight of their bright summer nights, never dies completely.” The bright summer nights are one of the often used stereotypical tropes about the Nordic countries. But Rilke merges it with an occultural stylization of Scandinavia as a region of clairvoyance (the “clarity of the Scandinavian eye”). In the first of the three letters, Rilke had only read the first chapters and compared Anker Larsen’s account of “the open” in *The Philosopher’s Stone* with his own experience at Duino Castle in 1912, where he—in the text *Erlebnis* (*Experience*)—uses the same term. In both accounts, the “open state” is contrasted with a normal “closed state,” and in both cases, the meditative togetherness with a tree is the gateway to an experience of “the open.” And in both cases, this mode of experience abolishes the distinction between the living and the dead, who can freely partake in each other’s realms. To describe the state, Anker Larsen makes use of paradoxes. In a poem, Rilke—true to his symbolist task of innovating in traditional language—finds a neologism for this open state: *Weltinnenraum* (the inner world space). Anker Larsen describes the state as being synaesthetic, akin to Rilke’s notion of conquering new areas of extrasensory reality through the optimal interplay of the five senses in his experimental essay *Ur-Geräusch* (*Primal Sound*). Furthermore, both Rilke and Anker Larsen assigned great importance to the child’s ability to sense the world, and they both stressed the value of recollecting the “open” sense impressions from childhood. In the *Malte* novel, Rilke speaks of “performing the childhood” [die Kindheit leisten].²² Rilke, in other words, had good reason to draw a parallel between his own conception of “the open” and Anker Larsen’s.

The second letter, which Rilke wrote to his Swiss benefactor a week later, facilitates a discussion of different kinds of occultural literary strategies. In a sense, Rilke—as a proponent of symbolist poetics—challenges the more naïve literary methods of the “spiritual author” Anker Larsen, to whom literature was a means to a spiritual end. By consulting Rilke’s criticism of Anker Larsen’s novel, we can discern the more advanced literary “occultural” techniques of symbolism. Rilke acknowledges the authenticity of Anker Larsen’s mystical experiences, but he finds it regrettable that “such an extraordinary discovery enters the market in such a ‘packaging.’ ” “Packaging” means the way in which Anker Larsen had aesthetically crafted his novel, and according to Rilke he was greater as a mystic than as a writer. Rilke’s first criterion for the successful work of art is its ability to move the reader. If the action seems untrustworthy, if the portraits of the novel’s characters do not convince, the spiritual core of the work also misses its target. Secondly, Rilke criticizes the book’s self-help or didactic tendency, which he calls “helpful” [hülfreich]: “How do the great Danish names grow back to their previously recognized stature through this book. Jacobsen or Bang: it’s just not acceptable, it’s not acceptable to make ‘helpful’ books, the help must not be in the book, at most above the relationship of the reader to the book, in the space

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Waldemar Bonsels is most famous for the children’s book *The Adventures of Maya the Bee* (*Ge. Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer*, 1912).

22

Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1987), 856.



Rainer Maria Rilke, photograph by M. Schramm, ca. 1900.

between the reader and the book remains (this strange space that has a counterpart in the imaginary image space and in the surrounding space dominated by a sculpture), the misunderstanding of aid becomes transparent as occurrence.”²³

The fact that Anker Larsen connects the spiritual experiences with “goodness” goes against the grain of the modernist Rilke. In his fragmented novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke had strived to endow spiritual experiences with the highest degree of authenticity by contrasting them with the greatest possible misery. The definition of the artistic ideal leads to an attempt to describe the essence of the spiritual work of art. The problem with the “helpful book” consists in the fact that the “help” is *in* the book instead of truly challenging the imagination of the ideal reader. Thereby, the work of art is in danger of being reduced to a one-dimensional mouthpiece of a spiritual message.²⁴ Rilke’s rigorous aesthetic criticism, but also the acknowledgement of Anker Larsen’s mysticism, could serve as a model for the analysis of literary esotericism and occulture: How important is the merging of these two discourses? And how does the lack of balance between them influence the reception? This leads us back to Christine Ferguson’s call for a *literary turn*, since it offers a valuable lens through which to read not only authors like Anker Larsen, but also the critical reactions they provoked. Her insistence that scholars pay attention to the *form* through which esoteric ideas are conveyed—whether through narrative experimentation or through symbolic or allegorical veiling—marks a shift from merely identifying spiritual content to evaluating how such content is *aesthetically constructed and negotiated* within literary frameworks. From a Fergusonian perspective, Rilke may be seen as advocating for a *literary occulture* that gives priority to form over message, resonance over clarity, and disturbance over consolation. This discussion is still relevant in the twenty-first century, where emic occultural literature is often frowned upon by the literary establishment. Here, it might be interesting to investigate whether the marginalization of emic occultural literature is due to its presumed lack of aesthetic complexity.²⁵

Anker Larsen and Eranos

Eranos constitutes an interesting perspective on the European Anker Larsen reception. From July 1–3, 1927, Anker Larsen gave a series of lectures at the *School voor Wijsbegeerte* (The School of Philosophy), a philosophical and esoteric study center in Amersfoort in the Netherlands. According to Hans Thomas Hakl—who has written a comprehensive account of the history of Eranos—“an exchange not only of experiences, but also of speakers took place with Eranos.” In this context, Hakl quotes Anker Larsen:

The Danish philosopher of religion, director, and successful author J. Anker Larsen (author of *Der Stein der Weisen*, 1923), who also spoke there, said of the school: “One gains the impression that here one aspires to knowledge and insight in the old classical sense, in which right knowledge and right living were indivisible and mutually dependent.” Hakl adds: “A resonance

23

My translation. “Wie wachsen einem die großen dänischen Namen über diesem Buch wieder zur früherkannten Größe. Jacobsen oder Bang: es geht eben nicht an, es geht nicht an, ‘hülffreiche’ Bücher zu machen, die Hülfe darf nicht *im* Buche sein, höchstens über dem Verhältnis des Lesers zum Buche, darf, im Raume, der zwischen dem Lesen und dem Buche bleibt (diesem merkwürdigen Raum, der ein Gegenstück hat im imaginären Bildraum und in der, von einer Skulptur beherrschten, sie umgebenden Räumlichkeit), das Mißverständnis eines Beistands zum durchsichtigen Ereignis werden.” Letter to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, November 7, 1925. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1977), 1068.

24

The reply letter of Wunderly-Volkart is not available, but from Rilke’s third letter from November 10, 1925 (Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, 2:1072), we can deduce that she was hurt by the way in which Rilke ridiculed *The Philosopher’s Stone*. He assures her that nothing would be further from his mind than to cause her pain; he would have thought she would have laughed at his “excessive temperament,” “which ultimately stemmed from the recognition, emotion, and admiration that connected me most vividly with certain parts of the book. Only because its essence was infinitely clear and important to me could I become so enraged, as it hurt me to see this innermost value not only connected with weaknesses, but actually exploited to their advantage. And it was precisely about the helpfulness and ability to help of the book that we remained of one mind!” (My translation). In his diplomatic reply, Rilke calls his reluctance to believe that “good people should not pour their goodness into art,” and his “highly private reservation”; a concession that, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt. But Rilke also writes that he wished Anker Larsen himself would agree with him, and on this point Anker Larsen did not disappoint him. On several occasions, Anker Larsen states that his central concern is spiritual experiences and their communication, and that he has no particular ambition as a stylist. Cf. interview with Anker Larsen in the Danish newspaper *B.T.*, May 1, 1931.

25

An interesting case is this regard is the Danish author Peter Høeg, known internationally for *Miss Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (*Froken Smillas fornemelse for sne*, 1992). When he published *The Quiet Girl* (*Den stille pige*) in 2006, the response of the literary critics was so hostile that it transcended purely aesthetic criteria. This is a good example of the way in which literary critics misunderstand emic occultural literature because they are not sufficiently informed about the cultural code that forms the foundation of the novel. Literary criticism should analyze emic occultural literature as works in their own right, and not as the result of an erroneous world view. Cf. Gisli Magnússon, “Tabuiseret Spiritualitet?: Esoterisk Tradition Som Nøglen Til Peter Høegs *Den Stille Pige*,” *Passage* (*Århus, Denmark*) 33, no. 3 (2018): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.7146/pas.v33i3.107746>.

with Eranos can clearly be detected here.”²⁶

Hermann Hesse, one of Anker Larsen’s early readers, did not partake in the Eranos meetings, but his ideas about spirituality, Jungian psychology, East-West dialogue, and cultural renewal were in accordance with the founding principles of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn and C. G. Jung.²⁷ Hesse read *The Philosopher’s Stone* when it was published in German in 1925 and described it as the “highest experience and true magic.”²⁸ Hesse’s positive assessment must be seen in light of the very similar spiritual pursuit in novels such as *Demian* and *Siddhartha*, written shortly before Anker Larsen’s novel, in 1919 and 1922 respectively. Just as Anker Larsen outlined the dangers of Faustian spiritual striving in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, Hesse, in *Demian*, writes about the

Buddhists who sought to convert Europe, a disciple of Tolstoy who preached nonresistance to evil, as well as other sects. We in the inner circle listened but accepted none of these teachings as anything but metaphors. We, who bore the mark [the invisible sign of Cain], felt no anxiety about the shape the future was to take. All of these faiths and teachings seemed to us already dead and useless. The only duty and destiny we acknowledged was that each one of us should become so completely himself, so utterly faithful to the active seed which Nature planted within him, that in living out its growth he could be surprised by nothing unknown to come.²⁹

This is very much in accordance with Anker Larsen’s warning against spiritual searching within metaphysical systems, and both seem inclined towards experiential nature mysticism. The nature-river-contemplation that lets Siddhartha find peace in Hesse’s eponymous novel is not so different from Anker Larsen’s nature contemplation in *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *With the Door Open*.

A scholar closely related to Eranos, who refers to Anker Larsen, is Frederic Spiegelberg, who became professor of Indian civilization at Stanford in 1941. Spiegelberg followed the Eranos meetings with interest, and according to Hakl, was an “important as a link between Eranos and the spiritual center of Esalen in California.”³⁰ In his 1948 book *The Religion of No-religion*, Spiegelberg retells the story of an epiphany he had when he was a young theology student. He had just read a poem by Rilke: “All will again be great and Mighty/And no churches which clasp Him tight/As though a fugitive, then wail over Him/As over a captive and wounded deer” from the *Book of Hours*—the young Rilke’s postconfessional poetic and spiritual manifesto.³¹ As he continues,

I see a boy running along the seashore, across meadows and green fields, looking at trees and bushes, enjoying the scent of the flowers and the majesty of thick white noon-day clouds, and stimulated by his own vitality and youth. He has just read for the first time some songs of the mystic poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and the ideas of this visionary fill his heart, growing in his mind like seeds in a fertile soil. His usual, every-day con-

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Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (London: Routledge, 2014), 137.

27

Hesse’s first wife, Mia Bernoulli, was present at the 1932 and 1935 Eranos meetings. According to Hakl, she even attended the meetings of Fröbe-Kapteyn during the Alice-Bailey phase. Hakl, *Eranos*, 103.

28

Hermann Hesse, “Erinnerung an Lektüre,” *Die Neue Rundschau* 36, no. 2 (1925): 968.

29

Hermann Hesse, *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair’s Youth*, trans. Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck (New York: MJF Books, 2010), 127.

30

Hakl, *Eranos*, 106.

31

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 1987), 329. Frederic Spiegelberg already quotes *The Book of Hours* (and Anker Larsen) in the first chapter of *The Religion of No-Religion* (Stanford: James Ladd Delkin, 1953).

sciousness has vanished, and he feels instead something deep, something holy. He calls it his higher Self. And this, his new, better transmuted Ego, feels in the so-called world nothing but holiness.³²

In this altered state, Spiegelberg suddenly reaches a church:

And while thus enjoying this new life and this transformed reality which is nothing other than a mere testimony of God's glory and omnipresence in everything that exists, he suddenly approaches around the corner of the road—a church. And the sight of the church gives him a shock. For what on earth is a church doing in his glorified world?

The young Spiegelberg—inspired by Rilke's anti-clerical poetry—experienced a stark contrast between the epiphany of nature and the dead rocks of the church. This is, indeed, a very Ankerian experience, and in *The Religion of No-religion*, he refers positively to Anker Larsen's description of the open, where

[r]eality in itself becomes doubtful and miraculous—that is, the general background of all those so-called “revelations,” which, moreover, are as different as can be. The Norwegian [Danish] novelist Anker Larsen, describes in his *Philosopher's Stone* how the little boy, sitting lonely in the garden and gazing at an elderberry tree, suddenly becomes aware that the tree “stands open,” and through this event the entire world around him loses density, leaving as it were some holes open which gave him a thoroughfare into an unknown Beyond.³³

This is, of course, the same scene that Rilke compared to his *Experience* of the “open.”

A third reference to the Eranos circle³⁴ involves the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser, whose stage model of human consciousness has been highly influential.³⁵ In *The Ever-Present Origin* (*Ursprung und Gegenwart*, 1949–1953), Gebser mentions Anker Larsen as a representative of the “aperspectival stage”—in the fine company of Friedrich Hölderlin, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Gebser's favorite poet, Rilke. To Gebser, magic and myth “are flourishing with astonishing purity among those poets who have authentically surpassed the mental-rational structure” which results in a “new attitude toward death.”³⁶ According to Gebser, Anker Larsen expresses a similar aperspectival, integral view of death. Gebser quotes the following passage from *With the Door Open*:

Life and death entered being together with me. They are two continuously present sides of this my being in time. Sometimes the one and sometimes the other predominates within me yet they always work together; and with my being in time they both vanish with me. Whoever has experienced the eternal now [the present] does not see a bottomless abyss between “life” and “death.” Here words are again lacking. I can haltingly say: The

32

Frederic Spiegelberg, *The Religion of No-Religion*, (Stanford: James Ladd Delkin, 1953), 18.

33

Spiegelberg, *The Religion of No-Religion*, 2.

34

According to Hakl, “Jean Gebser took part in the sessions between 1942 and 1948 and established fruitful contacts with Jung, Kerényi, and Portmann, although he did not actually give any lectures.” Hakl, *Eranos*, 8.

35

To mention one example of Gebser's influence, the American philosopher Ken Wilber was inspired by Gebser's cultural structures of consciousness: archaic, magic, mythic, and integral. Wilber even calls his philosophy “integral” rather than “holistic.”

36

Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas, (Part Two: Manifestations of the Aperspectival World) (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 502.

eternal now is Being, and time is existence. Whoever transforms existence into Being has nothing more to do with “life” and “death.”³⁷

Indeed, this passage expresses the same idea of unity of life and death that permeates the aperspectival poet Rilke’s magna opera: *Duino Elegies* (*Duineser Elegien*) (1922) and *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Sonette an Orpheus*) (1922).³⁸ Gebser’s high regard for Anker Larsen as an equal of Rilke and Martin Heidegger is typical of the generally positive assessment of him in the first phase of the reception.

The Anker Larsen Reception during the Late Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

From the 1980s onwards, Anker Larsen’s works have undergone a significant transformation in reception: once the object of interest among leading literary and intellectual figures, his books are now primarily read within spiritual and New Age circles. Thus, Anker Larsen is still available on the shelves of spiritual bookstores in Denmark (5 titles), Germany (9 titles), the Netherlands (4 titles), Czech Republic (6 titles), France (1 title), and the United States (3 titles).³⁹ This shift is not simply a matter of audience, but reflects a broader cultural realignment—one that speaks to the marginalization of spiritual literature within the modern literary system and to the durability of occultural transfer outside the mainstream. This late phase of reception is marked by a double movement: on one hand, Anker Larsen has been gradually erased from the canonical and scholarly memory of twentieth-century literature (the aforementioned monograph by Knud Wentzel being the exception); on the other hand, he is canonized anew within a subcultural field of esoteric seekers, spiritual practitioners, and alternative publishers.

The changing infrastructure of his publication history bears witness to this shift. While *The Philosopher’s Stone* was initially published by leading Danish publisher Gyldendal (1923 and 1955 editions), more recent editions have been issued by *Visdomsbøgerne* (1983, 1986, 2016, and 2021), a small press that positions itself explicitly within a spiritual tradition, printing titles by Meister Eckhart, Patanjali, Aldous Huxley, and other perennialist figures. Similarly, in Germany and the Netherlands, the reprints of Anker Larsen’s works have migrated to boutique spiritual publishers like *Mysterium Magnum* (first Anker Larsen Verlag) and *Stichting Met Open Deur* (named after his autobiographical account *With the Door Open*), often with paratexts and cover designs clearly targeting a New Age readership. Following the new German editions, there were at least ten reviews celebrating the rediscovery of Anker Larsen. Characteristically, these contemporary articles on Anker Larsen did not appear in prestigious literary journals and newspapers like *Zeit*, *Spiegel*, or *Frankfurter Rundschau*, but in German-language New Age and spiritual magazines such as *Pentagramm* (1996), *Pulsar*, *Einblick*, *Golem*, *Strahlen des Lichts*, *Spuren*, *Gralswelt*, *Yoga und ganzheitliche Gesundheit*, and *Advaita-Journal*.⁴⁰ Under the title “A Modern Magician of the Human Soul,” the anonymous *Einblick* reviewer wrote:

37

J. Anker Larsen, *Bei offener Tür* (Leipzig: Grethlein, 1926), 64. Quoted from: Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 502. To Gebser, Anker Larsen is a kindred spirit of Martin Heidegger: “Anker Larsen stresses Being, years before the publication of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.”

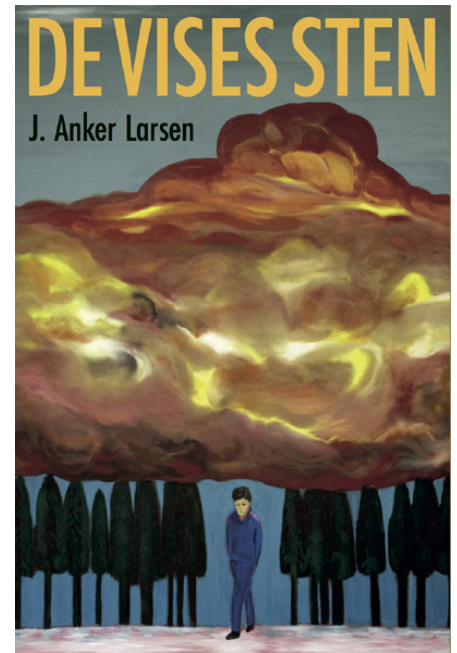


Fig. 5. The cover of *The Vises Sten* by Johannes Anker Larsen. *Visdomsbøgerne* 2016 (4th edition).



Fig. 6. Czech cover of *Philosopher’s Stone: Spolu opustíme den* (Avatar, Prague, 2011).

The rediscovery of the Danish writer Anker Larsen is a sensational discovery for spiritual literature. A man steps out of obscurity into the spotlight of a kind of literature that is now being recognized by more and more people and, quite surprisingly, finds an enormous resonance. Now the readers ask: How could these books be forgotten?⁴¹

The holistic physician Klaus Bielau wrote in the magazine *Pulsar* in a similar vein. He spoke of “the renaissance of the almost forgotten Danish writer and man of the theatre J. Anker Larsen, who was in his time compared with Dante, Dostoyevsky and Tagore.”⁴² The reviews often draw on New Age discourse, giving priority to intuitive knowledge, universal truth, and spiritual authenticity over literary or historical specificity. The logic of occultural re-enchantment at play here aligns well with what Partridge has identified in contemporary occulture: the retreat from institutional religion toward experiential, syncretic, and psychologically interior forms of spirituality.

This surge of interest did not last, but his status as a “spiritual classic” in the German-speaking area was confirmed in an issue of *Magische Blätter* on Art and Spirituality in 2020, reprinting one of Anker Larsen’s lectures from his visit to the *School voor Wijsbegeerte* in 1927—alongside Pëtr D. Ouspensky and Bo Yin Ra.⁴³

The latest Danish book on Anker Larsen (and another rather unknown Danish mystic, Emmanuel Sørensen, who called himself Sunyata) was published in 2023. It was written by Gunhild Lystbæk and bears the title *Evighedsblikket: to glemte danske mystikere (The Gaze of Eternity: Two Forgotten Danish Mystics)*. It is comparable to the contemporary German reception, since it was written by a spiritual insider who wants to share her spiritual discovery of Anker Larsen. And when we look at the contemporary appeal of mindfulness and the popularity of Eckhart Tolle, who writes from a very similar place as Anker Larsen, we may have an explanation of why Anker Larsen continues to be published and rediscovered. In this sense, Anker Larsen’s third-phase reception is emblematic of a broader cultural process: the segregation of esoteric literature into a subcultural niche, even as its ideas continue to circulate widely in popular spirituality. Thus, Anker Larsen’s subcultural survival testifies to the enduring relevance of the occultural themes he explored—nature mysticism, post-confessional mystical experience, the “open state”—albeit reframed through the vocabulary of mindfulness, non-duality, and New Age perennialism. The fact that Anker Larsen is still in print and discussed, albeit outside academic and literary institutions, suggests that the occultural literary transfer he embodies has not ceased but merely changed channels.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, Anker Larsen has generally received a stepmotherly treatment in the esotericism scholarship—and in scholarship in general. The intensity, longevity, and international scope of the Anker Larsen reception make him a particularly interesting phenomenon in the history of literary occulture. By mapping and analyzing the European reception of Anker Larsen, one can discern

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It is remarkable how often Anker Larsen and Rilke are considered kindred spirits. Gebser comments on an Anker Larsen quotation: “Yet the most valid expression to date of this attitude toward death is offered by Rainer Maria Rilke. His ultimate interpretation is completely mythical-polar, yet it transcends the mythical.” Here, Gebser quotes two famous Rilke-letters: “Death is the inverse, the undescribed side of life: we must attempt to achieve the greatest awareness of our existence which resides in both unlimited regions and nourished by both . . . This true form of life penetrates both regions, the blood of the greatest circulation courses through both: there is neither a here nor a thereafter, but rather the great unity,” and: “Like the moon, life too surely has another side turned away from us; yet it is not its opposite but its complement to perfection, to completeness, to the real, intact, and complete sphere of Being.” Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 502. Cf. Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik*, 282–98.

39

I used WorldCat (<https://search.worldcat.org/>) and Google Books to find available versions.

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The spiritual Anker Larsen articles were published in the following journals: “Diener des Lichts,” *Pentagramm* 5 (1996): 35; Klaus Bielau, “Der Stein der Weisen: Zur Renaissance des nahezu vergessenen dänischen Schriftstellers und Theatermannes J. Anker Larsen,” *Pulsar* (June 2003): 22–23; Beate Kruzinski, “Der Stein der Weisen,” *Einblick* 6 (December 2003): 15; Anita Maria Kittler, “Die leichte Unerträglichkeit des Seins oder: Das Eigentliche ist für das Auge unsichtbar; Über den dänischen Schriftsteller Anker Larsen,” *Golem* 4, no. 14 (2003): 20–25; Martin Friesknecht, “Ins Offene: M. F. feiert die Neuentdeckung des dänischen Dichters Johannes Anker Larsen,” *Spuren* 1 (2004): 64–65; Jürgen Edelmayer, ed., *Strahlen des Lichts*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2003): 16; Hella Naura, “Buchbesprechung: ‘Der Stein der Weisen,’ ” *Yoga und ganzheitliche Gesundheit* (September 2003); Werner Huemer, “Der Stein der Weisen. Wieder entdeckt: Johannes Anker Larsen,” *Gralswelt* 30 (2004): 47; Ulrike Porep: “Anker Larsen: Der Stein der Weisen,” *Advaita-Journal* 10 (March 2004): 66–67; *Spirit-Net* (www.spirit-net.de); *BewusstSein* (www.bewusst-sein.net); *Reiki Magazin* (www.reiki-magazin.de).

41

Einblick 6 (December 2003): 15. (My translation).

42

Klaus Bielau, “Der Stein der Weisen,” *Pulsar* (June 2003): 22–23. (My translation).

43

Johannes Anker Larsen, “Vortrag in Amersfoort: I. Kultur und Religion,” *Magische Blätter* 101, no. 7 (Herbst 2020): 55.

three distinct phases: in the first phase, he had a certain cultural capital due to the Gyldendal prize, and this resulted in his being translated and quoted by members of the cultural elite. In this phase, the North-South dichotomy was prominent, especially in Germany. In the second phase, Eranos proved to be a fruitful common denominator. And in the third phase, he is hardly read outside the spiritual milieu (from the 1980s onwards). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the North-South imagology gradually disappeared from the picture. By studying the complex reception history of the Danish mystic and author, we gain insight into the relationship between the cultural establishment and literary occulture. Despite the great affinity with Rilke, whose cultural capital is as prominent within the literary establishment as in spiritual circles, the fate of Anker Larsen was to be compartmentalized primarily with spiritual authors, such as Paolo Coelho, who are not considered “serious” authors by literary critics.⁴⁴ J. Anker Larsen is, however, an essential part of this crossover of discourses. Scholars partaking in the literary turn of esotericism have an important task when considering both the cultural code of esotericism *and* the literary dimension of occultural literature, such as Anker Larsen’s production.

44

Cf. Gísli Magnússon, “Neomystische Naturerfahrung als neuer Sinn: Rainer Maria Rilkes Anker Larsen-Rezeption,” in Karin Wolgast, ed., *Sinnverlust und Sinnfindung am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 43–59.