https://doi.org/10.14232/lh.2025.2.139-157

György E. Szőnyi
University of Szeged

What Can You Learn in Fez?

Oriental Wisdom in Western Fiction Based on the Rosicrucian Mythology

1. Introduction

Body and soul are often used as metaphors in connection with artistic creations, intermedial representations, or rhetorically informed utterances. You can say, the form is the body, while the meaning is the soul, and, like those two, they cannot be fully separated from each other. You can also say, in an allegory the body is the picture language, the soul is the overcoded meaning. In the case of emblems, it is more difficult to determine which is the body and which is the soul, since image and poem are inseparable, *Gesamtkunst*. In any case, the body has iconographic motives, the recognition and interpretation of which leads us to the soul. As Panofsky suggested, this interpretation is the iconological analysis that leads us to complex cultural meaning-creation corrected by our knowledge of cultural symbols. (Panofsky 1970, 51–82)

In the following essay I will concentrate on a special layer of iconographical motives in the Rosicrucian mythology, namely the lure of the East, as it appears in the original Rosicrucian manifestos and in later literary representations.

2. Christian Rosenkreutz

In 1614, as well known, a curious publication flooded Europe from the printing press of Wilhelm Wessel in Kassel, Germany. It was the *Allgemeine und General Reformation, der gantzen weiten Welt. Beneben der Fama Fraternitatis, des Löblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzers...*, that is the soon to be infamous foundation document of the Rosicrucians. The volume contained the following items: "Epistle to the Reader"; "The General Reformation" (that is a German translation of a

section from Traiano Boccalini's *Ragguali di Parnasso*); the *Fama fraternitatis*; and a "reply" by Adam Haselmayer, a Lutheran from Tyrol who hails this publication.[1] What interests me now in this fascinating conglomerate is the story of the founder, Christian Rosenkreutz, especially his biographical iconology.

According to the legend propagated by the *Fama*, for a long time his grave was unknown until the second generation of brethren found it in a specially created vault, where, together with the corps, various documents were also deposited, relating to the foundation and the history of the order. Among these, a parchment book, called by the author "I" concluded with an *Elogium*, referring to the achievement of Brother CR as follows:

> Christian Rosenkreutz sprung from the noble and renowned German family of RC; a man, admitted into the mysteries and secrets of heaven and earth through the divine revelations, subtle cogitations and unwearied toil of his life. In his journeys through Arabia and Africa he collected a treasure surpassing that of Kings and Emperors; but finding it not suitable for his times, he kept it guarded for posterity to uncover, and appointed loyal and faithful heirs of his arts and also of his name. (Yates 1972, 248)

The examination of the crypt then follows to the opening of the grave. The body is found intact, and the vault is decorated with intriguing images of the sky with all the stars and planets, and in the middle an artificial sun is providing non-fading eternal light. The vault reminds us of contemporary alchemical allegories, such as the "Coniunction" in Stefan Michelspracher's *Cabala,* which was published two years after the *Fama*, and, in fact, was dedicated to the Rosicrucians. (See Figure 1) This fascinating engraving represents the stages of the alchemical process, taking place on a magic hill, showing the seven steps of the transmutation and surrounded by the signs of the Zodiac. In the hill there is a cave which hides a building with a cupola, the sealing of which is decorated with the Sun, the Moon,

1 The Rosicrucian manifestos (1614–15), translated into English by Thomas Vaughan were republished as Appendix to Frances Yates. *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), 235–260. Another edition: Pryce, F. N. *The Fame and Confession of R.C.* (1988). On Haselmayer see Gilly. *Adam Haselmayer – Der erste Erkunder der Manifeste der Rosenkreutzer* (1995). Further information about the Rosicrucians: Arnold. *Histoire des Rose-Croix* (1955); Gilly. *Cimelia Rhodostaurotica* (1995); Hauf. *Der Mythos der Rosenkreuzer* (2000); Vanloo. *L'utopie Rose-Croix* (2001).

and the starry sky. The whole image is surrounded by the inscriptions of the four elements, while in front of the hill the Alchemist is standing blindfolded, looking for the Truth. Klossowski da Rola discovered in the British Library a handwritten copy of these allegorical emblems with some explanations, not included in the later printed editions. We read about this image:

> The fourth figure doth note conjunction together with putrefaction, solution, dissolution, resolution, digestion, circulation. [...] They who are to pass this way must ascend by these degrees, and by means of the four chiefest pillars which are Philosophy, Astronomy, Alchymy, and the Virtues... (Klossowski de Rola 1988, 53)

Another noteworthy piece of information is that the great, in fact supernatural knowledge of the founder originated from Arabia. Earlier in the *Fama* we learn about the details.

CR at the age of five was placed in a monastic school where he learnt Latin and Greek and eventually was inspired to go to the Holy Land. While his master and companion died in Cyprus, he proceeded to Damascus and Jerusalem; made friends with the Turks and at the age of sixteen started learning from the wise men of Damascus. "He learned there better the Arabian tongue, so that the year following he translated the book M. into good Latin, which he afterwards brought with him. This is the place where he did learn his physics, and his mathematics, whereof the world hath just cause to rejoice... (Yates 1972, 239)

From Damascus he moved to Egypt, studied nature through plants and other creatures; then he sailed over the whole Mediterranean Sea to come to Fez. Here, the author is sorry to say, that the European scholars are so viciously competitive that they do not share their knowledge with one another as opposed to the Arabs who every year exchange messages about their arts and experiences. At Fez, CR got acquainted with various sciences, including magic, of which that Arabic university was most famous. It is worth mentioning here that the Madrasa of Fez, also known as the al-Quarawiyyin School is competing for the title of the oldest university on the earth. It was founded in 859 by the daughter of a wealthy merchant and the subjects taught ranged from Islamic jurisprudence to grammar, rhetoric, and logic, to medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. (Lulat 2005, 70; Meri 2005, 257; see Figure 2) By the time the manifesto was written, Germany also abounded in learned magicians, Cabalists, physicians, and philosophers,

"were but there more love and kindness among them," adds the narrator with regret. (Yates 1972, 240)

Before one would become perplexed how the religious differences did not bother CR in an age when science and theology were inseparable from each other, we also read that

> he often confessed that their Magia was not altogether pure, and also that their Cabala was defiled with their religion; but nothwithstanding he knew how to make good use of the same. (Ibid.)

This "good use" included personal intellectual gain, CR becoming a writer of an encyclopedic *Axiomata*, "out of all faculties, sciences, and arts, and whole Nature..."; but also, a benefit for the European scholarship, since Rosenkreutz shared his knowledge and by the help of his Arabic wisdom contributed in Spain and in other countries to correct scientific methodology.

But how did this infusion of Arabic science and magic become so important for Western scholarship, exoteric and esoteric alike?

3. The Knowledge Of The Arabs In Reality And In Legend

The lure of Arabic wisdom has two aspects. One is a cultural and science-historical development, the other is rooted in sensationalism and orientalism. The influence of Arabic science and philosophy on the Latin Middle Ages is well known (see Al-Khalili 2011; Burnett 2016; Gázquez 2016; Rashed 2012-17; on the European influence of Arabic magic see the Hungarian translation of the *Picatrix* [2022] and its commentary). Since this is not my speciality, I will only mention the role of Arabic scholarship in the transmission of Greek philosophy, especially of Aristotle, together with individual Arabic thinkers, such as al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes who exercised great impact on Western philosophy and metaphysics, natural philosophy, physics and optics, medicine, and psychology. Among these thinkers many were esoterically minded, speculating about the concept of the Perfect Man (Suhrawardi's synthesis of Zoroastrianism, Platonism, and Islam); about the efficacy of magic rituals (the Picatrix tradition); or the influence of the stars (al-Kindi, and abu-Ma'shar).

Although medieval optics, physics, and medicine were largely dependent on Arabic thought, these were not that fueled the popular imagination. The alien other with its frightening and thrilling characteristics played a part here. The Muslims were fearful arch enemies, adversaries, fighting for the Holy Land; at the same time often friendly and profit-providing merchants, helpful doctors, cooperating architects, gardeners, or artists; occasionally faithful comrades. During different periods of the Middle Ages, fierce fights as well as instances of cooperation are documented in the Near East, around Byzantium, and the Iberian peninsula. Nevertheless, the Arabs were considered to have come from mysterious and faraway lands whose inhabitants were repelling, at the same time attracting and hard to know, even to imagine. This gave way to legendary stereotypes, one being the esoterically informed and superior wise man, also endowed with healing powers. How the Arabic "magicians" found their way in the popular European imagination is explained by Mikel de Elpaza (Elpaza 2007) and Benedek Láng. (Láng 2008; see Figure 3)

Beginning with the eighteenth century, this longstanding, mixed, medieval and early modern image became filtered through the curiosity and self-confidence of the European colonizer, thus creating human encounters within the framework of *orientalism*, as described famously by Edward Said. (Said 1979) Stories about white men learning superior magical knowledge in the Arabic East, à la CR, already appeared in the seventeenth century, but started proliferating with the advent of Romanticism, an attitude that was particularly interested in the historical past, the faraway and exotic lands, and their mystical customs and practices. The "orientalism" of the White colonizer carried along those very old ambiguous feelings that had been haunting the Western societies since the Middle Ages: fear and admiration, a feeling of superiority versus worrying about the possibility that the reality may be the opposite, the image of the savage infidels versus the noble and courteous enemy, appreciation for a sophisticated culture and manners versus the suspicion that under that surface there is something sinister, magical, dangerous. (See Figure 4) These are important aspects of literary orientalism and the novels, treating esoteric themes, very much capitalized on this conglomerate of knowledge and fantasy; emotions that contributed to the rise of new genres, the Gothic, and the horror, contaminated thickly with the mode and atmosphere of the *unheimlich*, or *uncanny*.

As Nicholas Royle explains, the uncanny is the psychological experience of something as strangely familiar, it may describe incidents where an everyday ob-

ject or event is experienced in an unsettling, alienating, or taboo context. This experience is accompanied by a discomforting effect and often leads to an outright rejection of the object. (Royle 2003, vii–1) As we know, the identification of the phenomenon goes back to Freud's 1919 essay, *Das Unheimliche* (for an English translation, see Freud 2003), although in that he acknowledged that the idea originated from the psychologist Erns Jentsch in 1906. Since then, generations of psychologists, philosophers and literary critics have been elaborating on the rather slippery concept of the uncanny (Lacan, Kristeva, Žižek) and a wide array of related subjects have been associated with it, from abjection, doppelgangers, ghosts, to alter egos, and zombies. Each of these have their rich literary iconography. Scholars of Western esotericism cannot bypass this topic, either. Now I would like to turn to the imaginaries of Arabic wisdom in some modern literary fiction, connected to Wester esotericism.

4. The Esoteric In Fiction

The fascination and fantasizing about the supernatural world and eventual human interaction with it goes back as far as the most ancient cultures and has been represented since the emergence of literature. Enough to think of the magic of *Gilgamesh* (2100 BC), the magical legends associated with Egyptian religion and the pharaohs (*Khufu's tale*, 1500 BC), or the many esoteric scenes in Homer, including Odysseus's encounter with the magician Circe (800 BC). But the list can be continued with Latin magic in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (150 AD), and the magic-laden stories of the Hellenic romances (100-300 AD). Around the same period we have an abundance of esoteric motifs in Jewish, Merkabah mysticism (100–600 AD), just to give way to the magical world of the medieval and Renaissance romances from the Arthurian legends to Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. From the Middle Ages we have specific esoteric themes, such as alchemy, astrology, divination.

To understand all this, one has to have a working definition of magic and the occult sciences. I've tried to do this elsewhere,[2] here I recap: esotericism is rooted in the dualistic, antropomorphic, and organic world picture in which the

2 See among other publications the introductory chapters in my monograph on John Dee (Szönyi 2004).

transcendental and material have been separated and isolated; according to most mythologies this resulted from the mistakes of humans. But since the desire for a unification with the divine has always been persisting among them, they have been trying to conceptualize various ways, methods, practices to reestablish the lost contact with the god(s). The "normal" way, accessible to the masses, would be the rituals of religions. But humans have always been seeking "shortcuts." I differentiate three degrees of these efforts: 1/ *mysticism* opens up a special way and attains illumination, experiences the manifestation of the divine, *epiphany*. 2/ The *occult* consists of a mystical, secret lore, knowledge, by the help of which illumination can be catalyzed. 3/ Finally, *magic* means the active will of Man to manipulate nature by means of occult knowledge; his/her power to contact the supernatural beings; procedures to elevate humans to divine *exaltation* (white) or perverted supernatural power (black). As can be seen, through the three degrees there is an amplification of human willpower, from passive mystical experience to very active magical practices.

The above can be completed by a general definition of Joscelyn Godwin:

> The word *esoteric* refers to the inner aspect of a religion or philosophy, of which the outer aspect is *exoteric*. Thus, Christianity once had its esoteric side in theosophy, the science of the knowledge of God; Judaism in Kabbalah; Islam in Sufism; Hinduism in the various yogas; Paganism in its mysteries. These esoterisms were not for the majority of the faithful, but for those with sufficient interest, motivation, and capacity to benefit from them. Entry was through initiation. (Godwin 2007, ix)

However, the belief in initiation is a double-edged ambition. No doubt, its goals are pious, but the program inherently carries in itself hybris, human pride, the trust in the possibility of self-deification. This is how we know about deeply ambiguous characters from the past ages, such as Cornelius Agrippa, or John Dee, or the literary character, Doctor Faustus.

No wonder that literature has always been intrigued by the more extreme forms of esotericism, there was nothing too risky to writers to inflate hearsay and human fears, or ambitions. White and black magicians equally feature in Western fiction: Prospero versus Faustus, Gandalf versus Saruman.

5. The Esoteric Arabic Wisdom In Modern Novels

Romantic fiction writing discovered and promoted esoteric themes as subjects and plot-forming *sujets* for novels. One of the first such novels was (if one disregards, perhaps unjustly Mary Sidney's *Frankenstein*, 1818, of which H. P. Lovecraft noted, "it has the true touch of cosmic fear"[3]) James Hogg's *The Private Memoires and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Perhaps the Scottish writer was the first to use the motif of the *doppelganger* and he also capitalized on ghosts. Angels and demon possession strongly feature in this haunting work. As for its genre, it is a part-Gothic novel, also a part-psychological mystery, part-metafiction, part-satire, part-case study of totalitarian thought. Furthermore, it is also an early example of modern crime fiction, as the story is told from the viewpoint of its criminal anti-hero. But there is no eastern motif in that, for which one had to wait till 1862, when Edward Bulwer-Lytton published his *A Strange Story*. The author-politician was very popular in his days, however today is much less read, I would argue, undeservedly, because at least the *Strange Story* is quite a page-turner and covers a number of interesting issues in connection with rationalism and irrationalism, science and occult, even offers anthropological insights and covers great geographical distances from Arabia, through Europe, to Australia. As one of its critics wrote:

> Bulwer was a highly symptomatic novelist, sensitive not merely to changes in the barometer of taste but to changes in the intellectual atmosphere. Consequently, though none of them is really satisfying, taken all together his novels have a historical excitement that makes them valuable documents of the intellectual and literary climate over some forty years of the century. (Fradin 1961, 2)

All in all, *A Strange Story* is quite an extravagant specimen of the "novels of the supernatural."

The novel's hero is Dr. Allen Fenwick who comes to practice modern medicine in a small English town and with his rational and scientific methods manages to ridicule and destroy the practice of Dr. Lloyd, a mesmerist-enthusiast. Patronized by Mrs. Poyntz, the leader of the genteel society of the town, Fenwick

3 Lovecraft. *Supernatural* (2017), Chapter V., "The Aftermath of Gothic Fiction."

falls in love with the innocent and spiritual Lilian and with the support of Mrs. Poyntz, marries her. But before their happiness could thrive, a mysterious stranger turns up in the town, the powerful and energetic Margrave who recognizes Lilian as a suitable medium for spiritual experiences. Margrave is an adept of Eastern magic and possesses an elixir of life which has helped him to keep youngish, but the power of the potion is fading, and he does not know its secret. So, he wants to use the young woman to search for the secret of the elixir.

He also wants to exploit Fenwick's rationalistic science, but at the same time produces for him phenomena that the doctor cannot explain without acknowledging the supernatural. We have a multiple conflict here: between rationalism and esotericism, love and exploitation, purity and vice, power and weakness. "Though resolutely refusing to give up his beliefs, Fenwick finds that his intellect is helpless in the face of the powers which Margrave has at command." (Fradin 1961, 3) Since Fenwick cannot defeat Margrave, decides to move to Australia with Lilian, however the fiend finds them there too. By now he is old and weak and convinces the doctor to assist in a magic ritual to restore his youth and power. Fenwick agrees, but the magic goes astray and in the explosion Margrave dies.

The literary iconography of the novel is very rich. The English small town and the countryside with a haunted ruinous castle are graphically presented as well as the Eastern vistas, the back lanes of Aleppo, and the Australian wilderness, homeland of threating aboriginal others.

What interests me here is the presentation of Eastern magic in the novel. There are two characters who had learnt their magical skills in the Middle East: one is the representative of evil, Margrave (originally called Louis Grayle), the other is a "white magician," Sir Philip Derval, descendant of Sir Miles Derval, who supported one of the notable occultists of Elizabethan England, Simon Forman.

After an unsuccessful love affair with an unattainable lady, Derval moved to the East where he had been tutored by an Arabic sage, Haroun of Aleppo, who had a reputation of extraordinary wisdom, and was considered popularly a magician. "He appears to have resembled those Arabian sages of the Gothic age to whom modern science is largely indebted, – a mystic enthusiast, but an earnest scholar." (Bulwer-Lytton 1862, 80; recap Figure 4) This Haroun one day was murdered, probably by an old and wealthy Englishman, who had been unexpectedly staying with the sage while Derval was out of town. The Englishman was known to be

> of evil and sinister repute. He was regarded with terror by the attendants who had accompanied him to Aleppo. But he had lived in a very remote part of the East, little known to Europeans, and, had there established an extraordinary power, strengthened by superstitious awe. He was said to have studied deeply that knowledge which the philosophers of old called "occult," not, like the Sage of Aleppo, for benevolent, but for malignant ends. He was accused of conferring with evil spirits and filling his barbaric court (for he lived in a kind of savage royalty) with charmers and sorcerers. (81)

When Mrs. Poyntz inquiries about his name and learns that it was Louis Grayle, she drops her teaspoon in surprise. It turns out that she has heard about him, as he was her father's schoolmate at Eton. Grayle's father was a rich usurer, and the boy grew to be a fierce character. As a schoolboy he had stabbed an older boy who tried to command him, later in Cambridge he became "haughty, quarrelsome, reckless, handsome, aspiring, brave." After an unlawful duel he was charged and escaped from England, never heard of again. Now he is back in the town of *L* as Margrave. By means of magic he regained his youth, and first charms Fenwick, then Lilian.

Derval comes back and wants to remove this devil from the earth, but instead, Margrave murders him and robs his magic medicines originating from the house of Haroun. Fenwick is entrusted with Derval's autobiography from which he learns the story of the two adversaries in Arabia.

> "It was," wrote Sir Philip, "in an obscure suburb of Aleppo that I at length met with the wonderful man from whom I have acquired a knowledge immeasurably more profound and occult than that which may be tested in the experiments to which I have devoted so large a share of this memoir. Haroun of Aleppo had, indeed, mastered every secret in nature which the nobler, or theurgic, magic seeks to fathom. (169)

All in all, Bulwer-Lytton successfully managed to fuse Western mythologies of alchemy, the quest for the elixir on the one hand, and demonology with Eastern legends on the other, at the same time creating some genuine literary quality. As Lovecraft summarized in 1927:

> In *A Strange Story* Bulwer-Lytton shows a marked improvement in the creation of weird images and moods. The novel, despite enormous length, a highly artificial plot bolstered up by opportune coincidences, and an atmosphere of homiletic pseudo-science designed to please the matter-of-fact and purposeful Victorian reader, is exceedingly effective as a narrative; evoking instantaneous and unflagging interest, and furnishing many potent – if somewhat melodramatic – tableaux and climaxes.

*****

A few decades after Bulwer-Lytton, the accomplished British writer, Somerset Maugham, successfully capitalized on many of his predecessor's literary devices in his novel, *The Magician* (1908). Here we also have a doctor-surgeon, a rational man of science; a fiancé with sensitive and weak nerves, who gets under the wicked spell of a criminal black magician; we have a benevolent sage trained in the higher occult sciences and having acquired most of his skills in the East; we also endure travels from Paris to the remote corners of Britain, exotic journeys in the land of the pyramids – just like in *A Strange Story*.

The couple in love is Doctor Arthur Burdon, an honest but rather down-to-earth rational medical doctor, and Margaret Dauncy, the latter studies art in Paris before their planned wedding. In a restaurant, they accidentally meet Oliver Haddo, a British expatriot and famous occultist, who keeps his court there and immediately becomes interested in Margaret. In Haddo's company Arthur meets his former mentor, Dr. Porhoët, a physician, who adheres to the organic-hermetic philosophy and is well versed in Eastern wisdom, too. He had lived in Egypt for a long time, and this is where he acquired his less than common syncretic lore.

When Arthur offends Haddo and they even have a fight, the magician uses all his powers to seduce Margaret. He is so successful, that the young woman unexpectedly leaves Arthur and marries the magus. He takes her back to his home castle in a far corner of England. Some time later Arthur accidentally meets the Haddos at a dinner party in London and he tries to snatch Margaret away from his husband, because the woman looks frail and unhappy. But Arthur's efforts are to no avail, Margaret returns to Haddo.

Further unnerving news trigger Burdon and Dr. Porhoët to go to Haddo's home in England, where they are informed in the local inn that the lady died in a heart attack. Upon suspicion that she was murdered, Arthur asks the Doctor to raise Margaret's ghost from the dead to reveal her fate. It is done and proves that she was indeed killed by Haddo, who, by means of his magic, appears in Arthur's room and they fight again. The surgeon stabs the magus to death, whose body miraculously disappears.

Next day the inquirers break into the castle and find there a secret laboratory: Haddo was experimenting with creating life (following the philosophy of Paracelsus) and for these experiments needed to sacrifice his wife. The place is full of hideous creatures and among them there is the dead body of the magus. Arthur sets fire at the laboratory to eliminate all evidence of Haddo's occult project.

An interesting historical-biographical detail behind the novel reveals that Maugham had spent some time in the artistic society of Paris, and, in 1902, he met there the infamous Aleister Crowley. (Figure 5) The two immediately felt clear antipathy to each other and Maugham used the character of Crowley to create his literary Oliver Haddo. Many think Haddo is meant to be a caricature of Crowley. In return, Crowley charged Maugham with plagiarism when he wrote a review about this novel using the pseudonym Haddo.[4]

The Eastern background seems to be just a decorative motif in the novel, but not quite so. Gradually it is revealed that not only Dr. Porhoët came from Egypt, but in fact Arthur spent his childhood there, too. Although these memories and his supernatural experiences among the Arabic magicians only gradually break out from his subconscious, he has to acknowledge in the end that no matter how his rationality tried to subdue his esoteric self, the complexities of the world far outreached his reason.

*****

The confines of this article permit only the mention of one more novel. But it is important, because, to my best knowledge, this is the only piece of modern fiction which retells the Rosicrucian mythology in detail and seamlessly weaves

4 Booth. *A Magick Life* (2000), 164–7; Sutin. *Do What Thou Wilt* (2000), 105–7; Kaczynski. *Perdurabo* (2010), 112–3.

those legends into the fabric of the narrative. The work in question is *The Pendragon Legend* (1934), written by the Hungarian Antal Szerb, and available in an award-winning English translation by Len Rix (2006).

The author, Szerb, was one of the most brilliant literary minds in between-wars Hungary. Born in 1901 into a converted Jewish Budapest family, he studied Hungarian, German, and English philology; however, he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Castiglione's *Il corteggiano (The Courtier)*. He spent some time in France and Italy, and in 1929/30 received a year-long scholarship in England. On the one hand he became a witty and engaging literary historian, his *History of Hungarian Literature* (1934) as well as his *History of World Literature* (1941) are still bestsellers in Hungary. Parallel with his scholarly work, he started writing fiction, extremely entertaining short stories, and four novels (also translated by Len Rix).[5] First of these was *The Pendragon Legend*, clearly inspired by his study-year in England. Although working amid increasing harassment, he refused to emigrate abroad; in 1944 he was taken into a forced labor camp, and, just a few days before the end of the war, beaten to death by Hungarian fascists.

The hero of *The Pendragon Legend* is János Bátky, a Hungarian philologist working on old esoteric manuscripts in the British Museum. At a party he gets acquainted with the Earl of Gwynedd, a Welsh aristocrat who invites him to his castle to investigate his private collection of occult and magical books. From here the novel superbly manages several plotlines. On the one hand there is a crime story: the Earl's one time beloved, Eileen St. Claire tries to kill him with a gang of criminals, their purpose is to get hold of the Earl's inheritance. Another plotline reveals the Earl as an amateur biologist, who, following in the footsteps of his ancestors and the early modern occultist doctor, Paracelsus, researches the origins of life and tries to create artificial life by using some mysterious water-creatures, axolotls. Soon it also turns out that one of Gwynedd's ancestors was Asaph Pendragon, being no other than the Brother CR. On this occasion Szerb very intelligently and with the prowess of an accomplished cultural historian retells what in the 1930s was possible to know about the Rosicrucian manifestos and about the early history of the Brotherhood, focusing on the motif that the Founder's tomb opens every 120 years and CR appears among later generations of humans. No wonder that the 120-year terminus coincides

5 *The Pendragon Legend* (1934); *Journey by Moonlight* (1937); *Oliver VII* (1943); *The Queen's Necklace* (1943).

with Bátky's visit on the estate and he witnesses the horrible happenings when a Midnight Rider snatches away a peasant boy from the village. The reader gradually realizes that old Asaph was also engaged in Paracelsian research, and to accomplish the work on the homunculus (Figure 6), he used magic, eventually sacrificial black magic.

To make a long story short, in the end the Earl forces him to release the peasant boy, in exchange he kidnaps the wicked woman, Eileen. Bátky accidentally is present when among the ruins of the old family fortress Asaph sacrifices her to Satan, however the magic goes astray, the Great Work comes to a halt, and the place of the ritual burns down. The Midnight Rider disappears, while the awakening Bátky has no idea if all this really happened or was just a bad dream.

Szerb was not capitalizing too much on the motif of the Eastern wisdom clearly present in the original legends, still, he diligently includes the information about the schooling of Rosenkreutz in his cultural historical narrative. As Leigh Penman has pointed out, "the manifesto's condemnation of the Catholic monarchy in Spain, who rejected the ancient magical wisdom of the Arabs – which could help reform the world – as worthless, is a pointer to the document's polemical early seventeenth-century Protestant context." (Penman 2009, 39)

And there is one more noteworthy aspect: it is known that Szerb's vibrant mind, throughout his life, oscillated between faith and skepticism, lyrical emotionalism and intellectual, sometimes parodistic humor. In these capacities he more than once discussed the questions of esotericism, alchemy, and the Rosicrucians. Already at the age of 18, as a graduating student, he wrote a fantasy, adapting and interestingly subverting the German legend about the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1919).[6] (See Figure 7 and 8) It is amazing to see how easily the young student, at the beginning of the twentieth century, speaks about Paracelsus and his concept of the "Azoth", the alchemical solvent alcahest, the *Rosarium philosophorum*, Arnoldus of Villanova, and the Rosicrucians.[7]

Later, sometime around the writing of *The Pendragon Legend*, he also wrote an essay about the Rosicrucians, the tone of which is quite different from that of

6 Also known as the *Rat-Catcher of Hamelin*, the story goes back to the Middle Ages, later was reworked by Goethe (*Rattenfänger von Hameln*), the Grimm brothers and, among others, Robert Browning. See Mieder (2002), and the correct and very informative article in Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pied_Piper_of_Hamelin, access: 2018-03-18.

7 This work survived only in manuscript, written in Szerb's school-notebooks, and was only recently rediscovered and published as a literary sensation (see Szerb 2018).

the novel. While the latter, in spite of its ironic attitude, leaves the plausibility of the esoteric and supernatural happenings completely undecided, in the cultural-historical essay he speaks about the secret societies with biting sarcasm and tries to explain their aims and existence with a fully rationalistic argument[8] – interestingly, somewhat anticipating Frances Yates views in the 1970s:

> In the heart of the Rosicrucian myth there was the desire for the new science. In the 16th and 17th centuries people cast a new glance toward nature. At that time Nature was still full of secrets: the course of the planets, the behavior of minerals in the crucible, illnesses and optical phenomena were still veiled in some superstitious twilight and everything corresponded with everything else. Scientists were astronomers, physicians, chemists, and theologians in one person. This was the age in which the legend of Faust was born.
> Scientists were busy working on reading the *signatures*, the secret code, inscribed in Nature by the Creator. At that time, natural science and theology were inseparable from each other. The *pansophists*, as scholars were then called, did not seek the exact natural laws, rather God's signature waiting for humans to decipher it. Perhaps this is the most fundamental meaning of the Rosy-Cross: the rose is Nature and the cross is God.[9]

In this interpretation the Rosicrucian and Freemason mysticism is nothing else but delusion of a transitory age, the antechamber to rationalism. In Szerb's critical world there is no place for real transcendence, mysticism is explained away from a rationalistic platform. On the other hand, the denouement of *The Pendragon Legend* creates such a perfect ambiguity that can only be produced by literature, seasoned with the uncanny.

8 András Wirágh has compared in details the speaker's differing strategies in the novel and in the essay: "A kedvező megvilágítás 'hermeneutikája'" (Wirágh 2011), 126ff.
9 Szerb, "A rózsakeresztesek" (1969), available online (see bibliography).

Conclusion: Perfect Ambiguity In Literature

In a brief conclusion I would like to claim that it is precisely the uncanny *cum* perfect ambiguity which makes literature so suitable to speak about esotericism, the occult, and magic, while discursive science is often halted while not finding the suitable language to interpret these phenomena. No matter if the writers of the three discussed novels were believers (Bulwer-Lytton was definitely one, to some extent), or skeptics (like Maugham and Szerb), the nature of literary fiction allowed, even compelled them to create ambiguities and leave their works completely open. In this strategy, fiction writers have been assisted and inspired by the iconography of magic, alchemy, and the secret sciences, from early modern illustrated prints to outstanding artists of our own days. Even one of the most skeptical and sarcastic writers about the occult, Umberto Eco (1990, 1992) left his (in)famous *Foucault's Pendulum* unnervingly undecided, and, while on hundreds of pages he tried to rationalize the logic of esotericism, in the end left the reader at the edge of the dark abyss. After all, he was the father of the concept, "Opera aperta."[10]

While writers are in a favorable situation by having the freedom to play with the uncanny, the literary critic and the cultural historian are facing sometimes insurmountable difficulties when talking about literature, which in itself has a different representational logic from that of discursive explanation. To complicate things even more, what happens when literary fiction represents the unspeakable, the sublime, the fantastic, and the esoteric? Perhaps we should go to Fez and study with the Arabic wisemen.

References

Al-Khalili, Jim. 2011. *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance*. New York: Penguin.

Arnold, P. 1955. *Histoire des Rose-Croix et les origines de la Franc-Maçonnerie*. Paris: Mercure de France.

10 Eco. *Opera aperta* (1962, 1976; English translation: *The Open Work*, 1989). See also his *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979); *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (1990 – *The Limits of Interpretation*, 1990); *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992 – with R. Rorty, J. Culler, C. Brooke-Rose; edited by S. Collini).

Booth, Martin. 2000. *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley*. London: Coronet Books.

Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. 1862. *A Strange Story*. A Project Gutenberg Text, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7701 access: 2025. 02. 06.

Burnett, Charles ed. 2016. *The Impact of Arabic Sciences in Europe and Asia*. The International Conference, "The Impact of Arabic Sources on Divination and the Practical Sciences in Europe and Asia," was held in Erlangen (2014 January 21–23) at the International Consortium for Resarch in the Humanities. *Micrologus* 24. Firenze: SISMEL.

Eco, Umberto. 1989. *The Open Work.* Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

— 1990. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP (Advances in Semiotics).

— 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511627408

Elpaza, Mikel de. 2007. "Nota sobre la conquesta musulmana del VII-VIII: els "mags" bascos, berbers, víkings escandinaus, normands i briànics." *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum* 1 (2007): 243–249.

Fradin, Joseph I. 1961. "'The Absorbing Tyranny of Every-Day Life': Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16.1: 1–16. https://doi.org/10.2307/2932844

Freud, Sigmund. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. London: Penguin.

Gázquez, José Martínez. 2016. *The Attitude of the Medieval Latin Translators Towards the Arabic Sciences* (*Micrologus Library* 75). Firenze: SISMEL.

Gilly, Carlos. 1995. *Adam Haselmayer – Der erste Erkunder der Manifeste der Rosenkreutzer*. Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan.

Gilly, Carlos ed. 1995. *Cimelia Rhodostaurotica. Die Rosenkreuzer im Spiegel der zwischen 1610 und 1660 entstandenen Handschriften und Drucke*. Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan (Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica).

Godwin, Joscelyn. 2007. *The Golden Thread. The Ageless Wisdom of the Western Mystery Traditions*. Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House.

Hauf, Monika. 2000. *Der Mythos der Rosenkreuzer*. Stuttgart: Kreuz.

Kaczynski, Richard. 2010. *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.

Klossowski de Rola, Stanislas. 1988. *The Golden Game. Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Láng, Benedek. 2008. *Unlocked Books. Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe.* University Perk: The Pennsylvania State University Press (Magic in History).

Lovecraft, H. P. 2016. *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927–34). Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library. (ebook publication, no page numbers).

Lulat, Y. G.-M. 2005. *A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity To The Present: A Critical Synthesis Studies in Higher Education*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Maugham, Somerset. 1908. *The Magician, together with a Fragment of Autobiography*. A Project Gutenberg ebook: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14257 access: 2025. 02. 06.

Meri, Josef W. ed. 2005. *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia,* Vol. 1, A–K. London: Routledge. 257 "Fez". https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203957608

Michelspracher, Stefan. 1616. *Cabala. Spiegel der Kunst und Natur*. Tyrol: David Francken.

Mieder, Wolfgang. 2002. *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln. Die Sage in Literatur, Medien und Karikatur*. Wien: Praesens.

Panofsky, Erwin. 1970. *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955). London: Penguin.

Penman, Leigh T. I. 2009. "'Singular Adventure in Staffordshire', Or, the Tomb of Rosicrucius. Fact, Fancy and Folklore in the Curious History of a Non-existent Wonder." *Staffordshire Studies* 20 (2009): 35–74.

Picatrix. A bölcs célja. Ghayat Al-Hakim. 2022. Trans. and commentary Monika Frazer-Imregh and Ádám Endre Hamvas. Budapest: Helikon (Szenzár).

Pryce, F. N. 1988. *The Fame and Confession of R.C. Together with an Introduction and Notes* by F. N. Pryce. Tunbridge Wells: Broad Oak Press.

Rashed, Roshdi. 2012-2017. *A History of Arabic Sciences and Mathematics*. 6 vols. Ed. Nader el-Bizri. London: Routledge.

Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester University Press.

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism* (first published in 1978). New York: Vintage.

Sutin, Lawrence. 2002. *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Szerb, Antal. 2006. *The Pendragon Legend* (1934). Trans. Len Rix. London: The Pushkin Press.

––. 1969. "A rózsakeresztesek." In Szerb. *A varázsló eltöri pálcáját*. A collection of essays. Budapest: Magvető. Available online: https://www.kfki.hu/~cheminfo/hun/olvaso/histchem/alkem/szerb.html, access: 2025. 02. 06.

—. 2018. *A hammelni patkányfogó* [school drama, 1919]. First printed edition from the MS at the Petőfi Museum of Literature, V.5462/113. Ed. Attila Zoltán Kovács. Budapest: Szépmíves Könyvek.

Szönyi, György E. 2010. *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780791484425

Vanloo, Robert. 2001. *L'utopie Rose-Croix du XVIIe siècle à nos jours*. Paris: Dervy.

Vaughan, Thomas. 1652. *The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of R: C: Commonly, of the Rosie Cross*. With a praeface annexed thereto, and a short declaration of their physicall work. By Eugenius Philalethes. London: Giles Calvert. https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00008334

Wirágh, András. 2011. "A kedvező megvilágítás 'hermeneutikája.' Észrevételek A Pendragon legenda olvasandóságáról." *Iskolakultúra* 2011/4–5: 120–133.

Yates, Frances. 1972. *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. London: RKP, 1972. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203166017