

# The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism

**July 6-10, 2011, Szeged, Hungary**

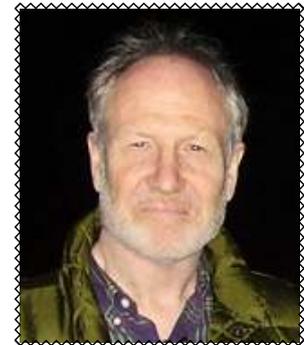
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## INVITED PLENARY SPEAKERS

### **MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN**

Distinguished Professor of English at UCLA, USA.

Michael Allen is the former Director of UCLA's Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies; past Editor of *Renaissance Quarterly*; and Past President of the Renaissance Society of America. Born in England, his doctorates are from Oxford and from Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is one of the world's leading authorities on Florentine Platonism.



Besides visiting professorships in Munich, Toronto and Arizona, his honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977); an Eby Award for Distinguished Teaching at UCLA (1977); UCLA's Research Lectureship (1999); and a year as a national Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar (2007-8). In 2007 he was awarded the Commendatore decoration by the Italian Republic and in 2008 one of Italy's highest academic honors, the Premio Internazionale Galileo Galilei.

### *Publications*

His books include: □ *Marsilio Ficino: The "Philebus" Commentary* (1975); □ *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (1981); □ *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (1984); □ *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Sophist* (1989); □ *Nuptial Arithmetic* (1994); □ *Plato's Third Eye* (1995); □ *Synoptic Art* (1998); □ *Marsilio Ficino: Platonic Theology*, 6 vols. with James Hankins (2001-2006); and □ *Marsilio Ficino: Commentaries on the Phaedrus and Ion* (2008). He has also co-edited a 2002 Brill volume on Ficino as well as books on Shakespeare's Quartos, the Latin Sources of Old English Poetry, and Sir Philip Sidney.

*Talk offered for ESSWE3*

### GLORY, TRANSFIGURATION, AND THE FIRE WITHIN: FICINO ON THE METAPHYSICS AND PSYCHOLOGY OF LIGHT

The divine command in the third verse of Genesis "Let there be light" – a light before the creation of the lights of the firmament in the fourteenth verse – was especially significant for the Renaissance Platonists, as it had earlier been for Augustine and for other Genesis commentators. It prompted them to look beyond the blinding sunlight (the splendor) of the great myth of the cave in the Republic to contemplate the trans-solar lux, the light that was inextricably linked to the mysterious notion of the divine "glory" that appears in the Bible and that invested Christ at his Transfiguration as it had invested Moses on Sinai. This paper will explore some of the salient, often heretical implications of Platonic theories of illumination.

## LINA BOLZONI

Professor of Italian Literature, Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, Italy.



Lina Bolzoni has also served as Dean of the Classe di Lettere e Filosofia. Since 2000, Dr. Bolzoni has been the director of the Centro per l'Elaborazione Informatica di Testi e Immagini nella tradizione letteraria and a Visiting Professor at many European and American universities, including Harvard University, UCLA, New York University, and the College de France. She has also been a Visiting Scholar at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and a Whitney J. Oates Short-Term Fellow of the Humanities Council at Princeton University.

Dr. Bolzoni curated the opening section of the exhibition *La Fabbrica del pensiero. Dall'arte della memoria alle neuroscienze* (1989 Florence; 1990 Paris). She is the author of many articles and books on Italian Renaissance literature, the relationship between literature and philosophy, the utopian tradition, medieval vernacular preaching, chivalric poetry, treatises on women and love, the art of memory, and the relationship between literature and the figurative arts. She is elected member of *The American Philosophical Society*; the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* in Rome and the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* of Paris.

### *Publications*

Her recent publications include □ *Il cuore di cristallo. Ragionamenti d'amore, poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010); □ *Poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008); □ *La stanza della memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995) and □ *La rete delle immagini* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002). *La stanza della memoria* was translated into English and French, and Spanish and Japanese translations are currently under preparation. An English edition of *La rete delle immagini* has been published and the book is being translated into Japanese. *La rete delle immagini* was awarded three prizes: Premio Viareggio per la saggistica (2002), Premio Brancati Zafferana Etnea per la saggistica (2002), and the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for an Outstanding Scholarly Work in the Field of Italian Studies awarded by the Modern Language Association of America (2003).

### *Talk offered for ESSWE3*

## THE MEMORY THEATRE OF GIULIO CAMILLO: ALCHEMY, RHETORIC, AND DEIFICATION IN THE RENAISSANCE

Giulio Camillo (ca. 1480 - 1544) was one of the most famous men of his time, glorified as divine by many, viewed with suspicion as a mere charlatan by others. He traveled the length and breadth of Italy and France in search of patrons who might be willing to finance the Faustian dream of his life – the realization of a universal memory theatre in which one might store, and re-activate at will, all the knowledge contained in a universal mind. In my talk I will demonstrate how:

1. Camillo's theatre incarnated the dreams that characterized the literary and artistic explorations of his period, and for this precise reason attracted the attention of poets such as Ariosto, painters such as Titian, and architects such as Serlio.
2. His theatre represented the realization of a complex synthesis of different philosophical and religious traditions (Hermeticism, the Kabbala, etc.) conceived in such a way as to guarantee its mystical powers and effective functioning. The theatre was invested with a

secret, semi-divine dimension that permitted the actuation of the three arts of metamorphosis: eloquence (which acts on words), alchemy (which acts on things), and deification (which acts on the soul of man).

In this way, Camillo's theatre reinterpreted in a Renaissance key even more antique practices in which the techniques of memory were intertwined with the arts of meditation and preaching. Camillo's project is of particular interest to us because it focuses on the power of images, on their capacity to summon up knowledge and at the same time to re-activate the divine power of the mind.

## **PIA BRINZEU**

Professor of English, University of the West, Timisoara, Romania.



Since 1996 Professor of English Literature, University of the West, Timi oara, presently she also serves as vice-rector of that university. Member of ESSE (European Society for the Study of English), IASS/AIS (International Association of Semiotics), RSEAS / SRSAA (Romanian Society for English and American Studies ), Chair of RSEAS – The Romanian Society for English and American Studies; Member of Romanian Writers' Union; Editor-in-chief of the journal of semiotics that appears in Timi oara ("Caiet de semiotica") and co-editor of B.A.S. ( British and American Studies). Visiting Professor: University of Urbino, 1995; University of Georgia, Athens, USA, 1998; University A Rovira i Virgili A, Tarragona, Spain; University of Natal, Durban, South Africa, 2000; University of Munich, 2002. Research Grant: CRC grant for the project Euromyths in Post-Wall British and Romanian Fiction, 2001–2002.

*Fields of interest:* British culture and civilization, comparative literature (British and Romanian); narratology; semiotics, feminism, mysticism, Buddhism, Indian philosophy.

### *Publications*

Professor Brinzeu's books include: □*Zile si semne* [Days and Signs] (1994); □*Armura de sticla* [The Glass Armour] (1995); □*The Protean Novelists* (1995); □*Corridors of Mirrors* (1997, University Press of America, 2000). She has also published studies and articles in comparative literature, semiotics, narratology as well as short prose writings.

### *Talk offered for ESSWE3*

## **ROMANIA AND INDIA: SPACES OF INITIATION FOR ELIADE AND BRANCUSI**

The fictional spaces described by Mircea Eliade in his novels and stories belong to an Oriental-Orthodox world of sacredness. Whether Eliade's characters live in Romania (as they do in *The Secret of Dr. Honigberger*, *With the Gypsy Girls*, *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*) or in India (*Nights at Serampore*), they believe in the magic power of their territories, created by gods out of primordial chaos and marked by a sacred centre where both Westerners and Easterners can undergo secret forms of initiation. Obsessed with esoteric symbols, the heroes tell stories which integrate the profane world into a sacred cosmos through the painful effort of anamnesis. They perform magic rituals supposed to take them to Shambala, the paradise of supreme peace and happiness.

The same unusual combination of Romanian folklore and Indian beliefs can be noticed in Constantin Brancusi's opinions on art. Brancusi believed that, all over the world, the artists had the mission of deciphering great mysteries of existence. Moreover, as ascets, they could gain powers over natural forces in a way yet undiscovered by modern science.

Invited in 1937 to build a temple at Indore, a project which remained unfinished, he discovered the numerous similarities between Indian and Romanian cultures, a discovery similar to the one that marked Eliade's scientific and literary career. Understanding the common origins and primordial symbolism of cosmogonic representations, Brancusi could bring about the revolution that marked significantly the 20th century modernist art.

The Indian temple, which was planned to contain the ashes of Maharadja Holkar's wife together with a variant of the Magic Bird, was supposed to have the form of an ovoid so that its architectonic structure might combine Brancusi's archaic ideas, derived from Romanian folklore, and his modernist attitudes and Indian philosophical beliefs. Brancusi also wanted the sanctuary to have an orifice in its roof, so that every year, on a special day, the sunrays should fall on his sculpture in a special way to establish, through luminous reverberation, the right equilibrium between the beauty of the work of art and that of the surrounding world. This coincided with both the Romanian and the Indian beliefs that an architectural symbol could unfold its entire value only when establishing the right relationship with the environment. Moreover, the solar rays were supposed to prolong the bird into an axis mundi and thus transmute the Endless Column from Targu Jiu to Indore, in order to connect, with the help of an object of art, two totally disparate geographical places.

The numerous associations with Buddhism in the work of Brancusi, who declared himself a disciple of Milarepa, and with Hinduism, in that of Eliade, who studied Indian philosophy with Dasgupta and yoga with Shivananda, show that the most distanced spaces can turn into places of initiation and can help Westerners transcend their cultural limits in both science and art.

## **MOSHE IDEL**

Professor, Department of Jewish Thought, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel



One of the world's leading authorities on Jewish mysticism and the kabbalah, professor Idel is also a Senior Researcher at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Born in Romania, he arrived in 1963 to Israel and has lectured since 1975 at the Hebrew University. He received the Israel Prize for Jewish Thought in 1999, the Emmet Prize in 2002, and is a member of the Israeli Academy since 2006. He has served as visiting Professor at the JTS of America, UCLA, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, and College de France.

### *Publications*

Professor Idel's numerous books include: □*Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988); □*The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (1988); □*Messianic Mystics* (1998); *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (2002); *Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism* (2005); □*Kabbalah and Eros* (2005); □*Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (2007); □*Old Worlds, New Mirror, On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (2010).

*Talk offered for ESSWE3*

THE SHIELD OF DAVID: AN HISTORY OF A SYMBOL  
FROM JEWISH KABBALAH TO WESTERN ESOTERICISM