

***Kandor, or Revelation of Egyptian Mysteries* (1800): An Example of Initiatic Novel in Slavic Orthodox Culture¹**

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The novel in question – *Kandor, or Revelation of Egyptian Mysteries* – is not merely a work of interest for a niche of esotericism studies. It is the first modern Serbian novel and, as such, holds a special place in the history of Serbian literature. To understand its emergence, it is necessary to provide some historical context. While medieval Serbian literature knew chivalric romances translated from Western European versions, like *Tristan and Isolde*, the rise of the modern novel in the 17th and 18th centuries bypassed it. Slavic Orthodox literature – a world often referred to as *Slavia Orthodoxa* – followed medieval patterns, and inherited from Byzantine sources right up to the modern era. It was only from the 17th to the early 19th century that profound changes affected Orthodox cultures, with Byzantine models being abandoned and Western ones adopted. In literature, the visual arts and music, with Baroque and Classicism; in intellectual history, with movements such as the Enlightenment. In the late 17th century, masses of Serbian people left Serbia (under Ottoman rule) to join the neighbouring Habsburg Empire. Gradually, a new culture appeared, influenced (directly or indirectly, through Russian mediation) by Western intellectual and artistic currents. A new social class emerged: an *intelligentsia* educated in the Western way, but at the same time familiar about current developments in Russia. Its members often attended Protestant universities in Germany or, if they were in Austria, in Slovakia. Among the works they translated and introduced to their compatriots were sometimes modern novels, such as Marmontel's *Belizar* (1777) or Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1799). The genre of the oriental tale began to appear in periodicals, too.

Atanasije Stojković (1773-1832), the author of *Kandor*, belonged to this new type of educated and modern Serb. He studied sciences at Göttingen, defended his dissertation, and became a member of the learned societies of Göttingen and Jena. He then published *Physics*, a three volume *compendium* of the natural sciences (1801-1803). The success of this work caught the attention of Count Potocki, brother of the famous novelist Jan, who was in charge of education in Russia. This led him to invite Stojković to settle there; after all, it was difficult for a non-Catholic to build a career in Austria. Stojković moved to Harkov, where he taught sciences at the university. He became rector, and was also one of the founders of the Harkov Learned Society. He died in Russia as a renowned scientist,

¹ The article is an English version of article originally published in Serbian: « Stojkovićev 'Kandor kao inicijacijski roman » [Stojković's *Kandor* as an Initiatic Novel], *Letopis Matice srpske*, 181.476.3 (2005), p. 447-455, republished in the author's book *Podzemni tok, Ezoterično i okultno u srpskoj književnosti* [Underground current, Esoteric and Occult in Serbian Literature], Belgrad, Službeni Glasnik, 2009.

and as a pioneer in the study of meteors². His biography presents him as one of those versatile 18th century scholars, who moved from one European country to another – in this case, between two great empires (the Austrian and the Russian), which constituted his main cultural sphere, while his intellectual formation was shaped by the German milieu. Stojković also wrote classical poetry, translated the New Testament and, a year after *Kandor*, published another novel entitled *Aristid and Natalija* (1801), which epitomises sentimentalism in Serbian literature. He was influenced by the Enlightenment, as shown by his *Physics*: it helped him to disseminate scientific knowledge, but also to critique folk “superstitions”. Yet, various other ideas of his era are interwoven in Stojković’s work.

The philosophical tale

Kandor has a very simple plot. A young man named Kandor travels to Memphis to be initiated into the mysteries of the Egyptian sages. On his way, he meets an old hermit in the mountains, who tells him that there is no need to go to Memphis for truth is to be found everywhere. The hermit accepts Kandor as his disciple and leads him to a secret garden, a *locus amoenus*, where the unenlightened men cannot enter; he then teaches him about the universe, humanity, and history. At the end of this process, the hermit leads Kandor to a Temple of Wisdom, at midnight, and it is there that it is revealed that the hermit is in fact an angel in human form; he regains his true angelic form and ascends to heaven, while Kandor praises God. This story has been labelled in various ways in Serbian literary history. Some influential literary histories have recognized it as a novel, but the question has arisen as to whether it is indeed a novel³. Some critics have described it as a popular scientific and philosophical essay, with a novelistic introduction and conclusion, or as a hybrid between rhetorical prose and fiction⁴, or even as a philosophical tale⁵. The interest in the fantastic, which has developed in Serbian literary criticism since the 1980s, has led to view *Kandor* from this last perspective⁶. When it comes to the research of sources, some scholars have suggested that the novel was influenced by Kant’s philosophy (in addition to Enlightenment influences)⁷, but the most obvious similarity concerns Voltaire’s *Zadig* (1747)⁸. *Zadig* has a friend, Kador (who travels to Memphis), and he meets an old hermit too (who teaches him about destiny through strange actions). This part of Voltaire’s novel is drawn from the Qur’an, and originally stems from a typical folk tale, classified under number 759 – “The Angel and the Hermit” – in Aarne-Thompson-Uther International Folktale Types Index (ATU Index).

² For his life, see Jovan Radonić, « Atanasije Stojković », *Glasnik SAN* 212, Odeljenje društvenih nauka (1953), p. 97-154.

³ Sreten Marić, « Da li je Stojkovićev Kandor roman? » [Is Stojković’s Kandor a Novel?], *Naučni zbornik Matice srpske. Serija društvenih nauka*, 1 (1950), p. 159-165.

⁴ Jovan Deretić, *Vidaković i rani srpski roman* [Vidaković and Early Serbia Novel], Novi Sad, Matica srpska, 1980, p. 103-105; *Idem.*, *Srpski roman 1800-1950* [Serbian Novel 1800-1950], Belgrade, Nolit, 1981.

⁵ Milorad Pavić, *Istorija srpske književnosti 4. Predromantizam* [History of Serbian Literature 4. Preromanticism], Belgrade, Dosije & Naučna Knjiga, 1991.

⁶ Dejan Ajdačić, « O pogledu na svet Atanasija Stojkovića u delu ‘Kandor ili otkrovenije egipetskih tain’ » [About Worldview of Atanasije Stojković in the Work ‘Kandor or Revelation of Egyptian Mysteries’], in Dejan Ajdačić (ed.) *O srpskoj književnoj fantastici*, Belgrade, Alma, 2019, p. 7-16.

⁷ Sreten Marić, « Da li je Stojkovićev Kandor roman? », *op. cit.*

⁸ Jovan Deretić, *Vidaković i rani srpski roman*, *op. cit.*, p. 105; Pavle Popović, « Volter i naše narodne pripovetke » [Voltaire and our Folk-Tales], in *Narodna književnost*, Belgrade, Zavod za Udžbenike, 2000, p. 50-57.

The initiatic novel

But *Kandor* could also be regarded within the context of 18th century initiatic novels. The term “initiatic novel” can be taken in a broad historical sense, ranging from Apuleius till Hermann Hesse via Edward Bulwer-Lytton⁹. It can be considered in a broad anthropological sense too, in recognizing rites of passage as conceived by Arnold van Gennep – which could include young adult novels centred on the theme of coming of age. Literary history often focuses on sources from the 18th and early 19th centuries, whereas, in the words of Antoine Faivre himself, initiatic novels were never as numerous as in the period 1740-1800¹⁰. Many of those he cites are largely forgotten today, but some remain classics, such as Schiller’s *Ghost-Seer* (1787), Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795), or Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) – and scenic works, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (1791), of course. The initiatic novel overlaps with other terms used in literary history, such as the Masonic novel or the *Bundesroman* (lodge novel)¹¹. They are not entirely identical: not all initiatic novels include secret societies, and Masonic novels can be didactic or allegorical but without containing any initiatory elements. Speaking of the Slavic context, one might add to the examples cited above the Russian novels from the 1780s to the end of the century, which are not necessarily initiatic but are undoubtedly Masonic, such as those by Mihail Heraskov¹².

What makes *Kandor* an initiatic novel is its composition, its symbols, its imagery, and its ideas, which are explicitly presented as a transmitted teaching (particularly those related to the genealogy of knowledge). In this type of book, the journey often appears as a symbol of an initiatic quest (in 20th century initiatic novel, the travel even becomes the external projection of an inner journey¹³). It also shapes the structure of the story. The hero leaves the city towards the source of wisdom, stays in a mountain, in a garden, and in a separate place – as a candidate for initiation; the hermit explicitly tells him that the “uninitiated” cannot enter the mountain. Throughout the novel, the contrast between sleep and awakening is reiterated, which is very common in initiatic symbolism¹⁴. A wise old man is a typical character of the genre, and the same defining traits characterise the hero. His very name probably derives from the Latin *candor*: he is a pure one, a sincere one, just as the candidate for initiation.

Particular attention should be paid to Egypt. Although *Kandor* never reaches the land of the pharaohs, the novel is described in the subtitle as an “Egyptian” one, and the famous wisdom of Memphis is not neglected. As it is well known, it was precisely during this period, that of Cagliostro and of *Krata Repoa*, that Egyptomania was a dominant theme in initiatic novels. Some of these are mentioned by Faivre, and the list can be expanded to include Mouhys’s *Lamekis* (1734), Albrecht’s *Der Keuscher Joseph* (1792), Jung-Stilling’s *Das Heimweh* (1794), Spiess’ *Die Geheimnisse der alten Egyptier* (1798), and

⁹ Pierre Riffard in his (proesoteric) *Dictionary of Esotericism*, for example, enlists Apuleius, Avicenna’s *The Living One, Son of The Awaken One*, Andreae’s *Chemical Wedding*, Balzac’s *Seraphita*, and Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni* (see the entry « Roman »).

¹⁰ Antoine Faivre, *L’Ésotérisme au XVIII^e siècle en France et en Allemagne*, Paris, Seghers, 1973, p. 65-66.

¹¹ Theodor Ziolkowski, *Lure of the Arcane: The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

¹² Nikolai K. Piksanov, « Masonskaja literatura vtoroj poloviny XVIII veka » [Masonic Literature of the Second Half of the 18th Century], in *Istorija russkoj literatury* IV [History of Russian Literature 4], Moscow/Leningrad, Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., 1947, p. 51-84.

¹³ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Was ist esoterik, Kleine Geschichte des geheimen Wissens*, München, C. H. Beck, 2004, p. 224-227.

¹⁴ « Conquering sleep, remaining “awake”, is equivalent to a transmutation of the human condition »; Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, t. I, p. 79.

even parody such as Wieland's *Die Stein der Weisen* (1786)¹⁵. The most influential example is *Sethos* (1731) by Terrasson, in which a prince is initiated in Memphis. It is quite possible that this whole context directly inspired Stojković's novel; indeed, *Kandor* bears strong similarities to another novel by Karl von Eckartshausen, *Kosti's Reise* (1795). In Eckartshausen's novel, the eponymous young hero travels and meets an old hermit too, who instructs him and introduces him to the temple of wisdom; later, Kosti is even initiated in a pyramid in Memphis. In both novels, the symbolism of the sun also plays a great role¹⁶. Eckartshausen was one of the most popular writers of the time, his esoteric writings having a special impact in Russia. Some of his non-esoteric works were translated into Serbian (*Arthello*, *Fernando und Yariko*, *Codex der Menschlichen Vernunft im Kleinen*, and various articles in journals). Stojković mentions him in *Physics*, but in a rather rationalist way.

The masonic symbolism

As might be expected, Egypt leads us to Freemasonry, another framework of this novel. Indeed, certain parts of the work are best understood precisely within the context of masonic initiatic symbolism¹⁷. Kandor and the old hermit enter the garden from the west, which might carry Masonic significance since one enters the lodge from the west too. At the entrance of the garden stand two rows of cedars, maybe an allusion to two pillars? Or an allusion to the association of the cedar with Solomon, himself associated with Freemasonry? Or simply an oriental setting? The gate leading to the garden opens when the hermit utters some strange words, which comes perhaps from the genre of the oriental tale ("Open sesame!"), but which could also be a reference to a Masonic password. Kandor, aged twenty-two (an adult under Austrian law, and suitable for initiation according to Masonic rules), spends a night in a dark, secluded room with instructions to meditate on his life, reminiscent of the Masonic chamber of reflection. The Temple of Wisdom naturally carries strong Masonic symbolism: it was first mentioned in the 17th century by Jan Amos Comenius, and gained considerable resonance in the 18th century. The term also appears in *The Magic Flute* and in Masonic poetry¹⁸. Inside the temple, there is a table on which lie a book and a candle, perhaps resembling the book of sacred law and the three candles representing the three minor lights of a lodge. At midnight, a great flame rises in the centre of the temple, likened to the sun, echoing Apuleius' midnight sun. At this point, Kandor receives teaching about the universe: he sees twelve candles around the central light, representing twelve ways of understanding nature (a zodiacal symbolism might seem obvious, but it is not mentioned), and a river, representing the flow of time.

Masonic symbolism can also be traced in the images used throughout the novel. One can mention the constantly recurring images of the sun and dawn, the image of a blind

¹⁵ See an overview and an anthology in Jan Assmann & Florian Ebeling, *Ägyptische Reisen in die Unterwelt, Mysterien in Aufklärung und Romantik*, München, C. H. Beck, 2011.

¹⁶ Karl von Eckartshausen, *Kostis Reise von Morgen gegen Mittag*, Andechs, Dingfelder Verlag, 1987.

¹⁷ The very name Candor is also the name of some masonic lodges of Strict Observance in the 18th century; see René Le Forestier, *La Franc-maçonnerie templière et occultiste aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles*, préface d'Antoine Faivre, introduction par Alec Mellor, Paris/Louvain, Aubier-Montaigne/Éditions Nauwelaertes, 1970, p. 369-371.

¹⁸ Eugen Lehnhoff & Oskar Posner, *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*, Zürich/Leipzig/Wien, Amalthea, 1932, article « Comenius », p. 290-291, here p. 291; V. A. Bogoljubov, *N. I. Novikov i ego vremja* [V. A. Bogoljubov, N. I. Novikov and his Time], Moscow, Izdatel'stvo M. i S. Sabašnikovyh, 1916, p. 178; Dolf Lindner, *Ignaz von Born, Meister der wahren Eintracht, Wiener Freimaurerei im 18. Jh.*, Wien, Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1986, p. 163.

man, the phrase “Temple of Light”, and expressions such as “knocking on the door of the King of Light¹⁹”. These poetic images can be read as symbols of an underlying initiatory process, reminiscent to Masonic or paramasonic societies: they were very common in Russian Masonic poetry of the time. While most of these symbols are easily recognisable in the context of Masonic initiation, let us single out the image of the blind man, who represents the uninitiated²⁰. When the midnight light appears, Kandors exclaims: “The darkness has disappeared from my eyes, the night has gone now, my morning star is born, I see the rising star in the East!²¹”. This can be interpreted as the lifting of the veil from the eyes of a Masonic candidate (the image of the veil is also sometimes used in the description of nature as perceived by the human eye).

It is also worth paying attention to the hermit’s speeches. While the novelistic nature of the work has been questioned due to the thinness of its plot, it is precisely because Masonic novels of the period (like *Sethos* or Ramsay’s *New Cyropaedia*, 1727) feature a didactic section as a central element²² (which is not surprising given that Masonic novels share the 18th-century general interest in education²³), that we can classify it as belonging to this literary genre. The transmission of teaching is also an important element, albeit the least narrative one. In fact, according to some researchers, the defining feature of Masonic novels lies precisely in their non-narrative and didactic nature²⁴. According to the hermit, there is no need to go to Memphis, as mentioned, since the truth is the same everywhere. As well as teaching Kandor about the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, he draws up a sort of spiritual genealogy: belief in God is a characteristic found among the wise men of all nations and all ages (perhaps a nod to natural religion?). After Adam, wisdom was preserved in its purest form among the Egyptians, who kept it in a veiled form (a common trop of Egyptomania). Then, wisdom was passed on to Pythagoras and Socrates, before the Saviour came. Pythagoras transmitted his knowledge to initiates, but he admitted too many of them, and Christianity split into too many branches. To illustrate this, Stojković uses the image of a labyrinth, another initiatic symbol. One can note that the story of the hermit’s wisdom is a variant of the *prisca theologia* literature, marked by a strong Egyptophile tendency. Two other elements can be identified that may contain esoteric aspects: one is the distinction between the outer man and the inner man, typical of Christian esotericism of the time, and the other is the doctrine of the four elements. Not specifically esoteric, of course, but interesting in this context since Stojković, trained in the sciences, wrote after the traditional doctrine of the four elements had begun to be abandoned after Lavoisier’s works, so it probably refers to symbolical meanings here²⁵. Let’s mention here that the elements have an initiatic value in the second degree of Schroeder’s ritual, in *Sethos*, and in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*.

Biographically speaking, we do not know whether Stojković was a member of some secret society. Apart from the Freemasons, of course, there were other similar societies

¹⁹ Atanasije Stojković, *Kandor ili otkrovenije egipetskih tain*, Budim, Pečatnja pismeni Slaveno-Serbskija Pečatnji Kraljevskago Vseučilišta Peštanskago, 1800, p. 10-11, p. 13, p. 42, p. 44, and p. 62-63.

²⁰ A. V. Pozdneev, « Rannie masonskie pesni » [Early masonic poems], *Scando-Slavica*, 8 (1962), p. 61.

²¹ Atanasije Stojković, *Kandor*, *op. cit.*, p. 86-87.

²² L. I. Sazonova, « Perevodnoj roman v krugu masonskogo čtenija » [Translated Novel in the Circle of Masonic Readership], in V. I. Saharov (ed.), *Massonstvo i russkaja literature XVIII-načala XIX vv.* [Freemasonry and Russian Literature, 18th-early 19th Centuries], Moscow, URRS, 2000, p. 36-37.

²³ Eduard von Jan, « Der französische Freimaurerroman im 18. Jahrhundert », *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 13 (1925), p. 394. See also Jean-Marie Mercier, « Roman maçonnique », in Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire (dir.), *Dictionnaire de la franc-maçonnerie*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014, p. 265-269.

²⁴ L. I. Sazonova, « Perevodnoj roman v krugu masonskogo čtenija », *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁵ For example, influential Russian mason Nikolaj Novikov polemicizes against contemporary science because of its antitraditional character; see V. A. Bogoljubov, *N. I. Novikov i ego vremena*, *op. cit.*, p. 265, and p. 274.

inspired by Freemasonry, such as student fraternities in German university towns²⁶. But we know for certain that Stojković's close associates, leading figures of the Serbian Enlightenment, were Freemasons: Metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Habsburg Empire (who was also the author's patron); Bishop Stefan Šakabenta; and the leading figure of this movement, Dositej Obradović²⁷. A police report dating from 1810 mentions Stojković's "atheism²⁸", but it seems unlikely that this should be understood as atheism in the modern sense of the term. Judging from his writings, he was not an atheist, but this may have signified a heterodox attitude. These biographical questions are, however, of lesser importance: what matters is whether Stojković wrote his novel in the style of the initiatic novels of his time, and I think the evidence suggest he did.

This kind of contextualisation and source research, while it may seem rather traditional (yet remains nonetheless necessary, as it was lacking in previous studies), may perhaps lead us to conclusions of broader significance. If we were to imagine a literary map of 18th century Europe on which initiatic novels were marked, we could now add a new pin to it. In this sense, this is a modest contribution to literary history, a new piece of information to add to other half-forgotten works. The initiatic novel of the period is mainly studied through examples drawn from French and German literature, while Russian researchers have written mainly about Russian works. In the present case, we have another example from the Slavic-speaking world, and from the perspective of Serbian literature, the situation is interesting: its very first modern novel is an initiatic one. Just out of the blue, Egyptian mysteries marked the beginnings of modern Serbian fiction. While Stojković's book did not have a direct influence on the development of the Serbian novel, it nevertheless marked a turning point. To summarise the historical context mentioned at the start of this article: during this period of profound historical change for Orthodox cultures, this type of novel – short, relegated to the margins of literary history – actually appears as a sign of something else, as a sign of modernity. It is striking to note that it all started with a genre deeply imbued with esotericism. Esotericism, often disparaged as a relic of pre-modern and archaic thought, appears here as a constituent element of modernity, within an Orthodox space undergoing profound cultural transformation. In this sense, this perhaps concerns not only Serbian literature, but the entire area of *Slavia Orthodoxa* and its cultural history. The rise of the modern novel is precisely such a sign of modernity, and it is a novel of initiatic nature.

²⁶ Joachim Bauer & Jens Riederer, *Zwischen Geheimnis und Öffentlichkeit, Jenaer Freimaurerei und studentische Geheimgesellschaften*, Jena/Erlangen, Academica & Studentica Jenensia, 1991.

²⁷ Beside Masonic lodges, some other secret organizations were present on the Serbian territory in Hungary; see Günter Mühlhpfordt, «Europarepublik im Duodezformat Stojković», in Helmut Reinalter (ed.), *Freimaurerei und Geheimbünde in 18. Jahrhundert in Mitteleuropa*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 343-344.

²⁸ Jovan Radonić, «Atanasije Stojković», *op. cit.*, p. 135.