

Chapter 1

Western Esotericism

Introduction

The academic study of Western esotericism has in recent years developed into an important field of research. Scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff have contributed in placing Western esotericism firmly on the agenda of modern scholarship.¹ The impact and recognition of this new field of research is shown by conferences and organizations being formed on the subject;² academic journals and book series with a focus on esotericism are established;³ and academic chairs devoted to esotericism have been created.⁴

The area covered by the term Western esotericism is vast, and it includes such apparently diverse phenomena as Renaissance hermeticism, nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism, and New Age *inter alia*. Somewhat crudely, esotericism can be described as a Western form of spirituality that stresses the importance of the individual effort to gain spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*, whereby man is confronted with the divine aspect of existence. Furthermore, there usually is a strong holistic trait in esotericism where the godhead is considered manifest in the natural world—a world interconnected by so-called correspondences. Man is seen as a microcosm of the macrocosm, the divine universe. Through increased knowledge of the individual self, it is often regarded as possible to achieve corresponding knowledge about nature, and thereby about God. However, the interpretation of what *gnosis* “actually is,” or what the correspondences “actually are,” differs considerably in the history of Western esotericism.

These ideas can be found already in antiquity, especially in gnosticism and hermeticism, but it was not until the Renaissance that Western

esotericism, as understood by the majority of scholars today, emerged. At this particular point in history, there occurred a period of intensified syncretism in which a number of diverse traditions intermingled: traditions such as Neoplatonism, mysticism, Jewish Kabbalah, medieval ritual magic, and hermetism/hermeticism were seen as compatible, and a “new” form of thought gradually appeared—Western esotericism.

From the Renaissance onward esotericism can be seen as an underlying form of thought that can be traced in a number of currents or traditions. In the present work it will be analyzed how this form of thought entered the world of initiatory societies, and more specifically how esotericism was transmitted through masonic rituals of initiation. It should, however, be emphasized at the outset that Western esotericism, in the present context, is not to be understood as a tradition in itself, but rather as a scholarly construct. This construct is aimed at providing an understanding of diverse currents, which, although they have certain aspects in common, more often than not differ significantly in form and content. It should furthermore be stressed that Western esotericism is not to be interpreted as dealing with a separate phenomenon as such, but as a number of phenomena that have been more or less integrated with various trends of Western culture. It is thus a highly complex field of research that constitutes the academic discipline of Western esotericism.

The Delimitation of a Field of Research

Western esotericism, as an academic discipline, is of a relatively recent date. Prior to the appearance of the works of Frances Yates in the 1960s the study of Western esotericism had been confined to works dealing with only specific aspects of esotericism, often without any attempt at placing these aspects in a larger context.⁵ In fact, the academic community at large often viewed areas of research connected to Western esotericism with suspicion, or even contempt. There are a number of reasons for this negative attitude toward study of Western esotericism. Hanegraaff stresses the fact that esotericism “emerged as a syncretistic type of religiosity in a Christian context, and its representatives were Christians until far into the eighteenth century,”⁶ and this is probably one of the reasons why the study of Western esotericism was reserved to theologians. By tradition, historians of religion have to a large extent left the research into Christian currents to theologians, and they, in their turn, have often viewed esoteric currents as heresies.

Another reason for the negative attitude can be traced in the particular form of knowledge at which esotericists have aimed. Western culture is sometimes, somewhat simplistically, viewed as resting on two

pillars: Greek rationality and Christian faith. The knowledge strived for by the esotericists is, however, “characterised by a resistance to the dominance of either pure rationality or doctrinal faith.”⁷ According to van den Broek and Hanegraaff, the knowledge of the esotericists is of a revelatory and experiential nature:

The adherents of this tradition emphasized the importance of inner enlightenment or gnosis: a revelatory experience that mostly entailed an encounter with one’s true self as well with the ground of being, God.⁸

Western esotericism can thus be viewed as a third pillar of Western culture, a form of thought that took a middle position between doctrinal faith and rationality. To the adherents of doctrinal faith, however, this type of knowledge or gnosis smacked of heresy, while the promoters of rationality accused it of irrationality and metaphysical reasoning. It should, however, be stressed that these three forms of knowledge were not watertight compartments, but on the contrary highly complex and interconnected currents. For instance, esotericism played a significant part in the development of modern science, with many scientists being esotericists at the same time.⁹ In other words, different strategies of attaining knowledge did not necessarily exclude one another. This would later change and lead to a forceful denunciation of, and distancing from, esotericism by the promoters of modern natural sciences.

The study of Western esotericism can be approached from a number of perspectives, and Hanegraaff has distinguished authors on esotericism into five groups:

- (1) perennialists or traditionalists
- (2) religionists
- (3) historians of science and philosophy
- (4) specialists on specific currents
- (5) generalists in the study of Western esotericism¹⁰

The first group, perennialists or traditionalists, sees the established world religions as outer manifestations of an inner, common, “esoteric” tradition based on specific metaphysical doctrines. According to Hanegraaff, this group parallels dogmatic theology and can thus be seen as an explicit religious pursuit, rather than an academic approach to the study of Western esotericism.¹¹ Furthermore, traditionalists are essentially anti-modern and reject the values of modern society. Nevertheless, the academic merits of scholars influenced by perennialism, such as Mircea

Eliade, should not be underestimated. Their approach to the study of religions in general is comparative, and this is reflected in their understanding of esotericism, which is seen as a universal phenomenon.

The religionists, on the other hand, are more implicit in their dogmatic approach to the study of esotericism.¹² This approach is typified by the cultic milieu of *Eranos* meetings from 1933 onward.¹³ Many of the scholars associated with the *Eranos*, such as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), were driven by the conviction that modern man needs religious symbols and myths, and the non-denominational spirituality that evolved in connection with the *Eranos* meetings was well adapted to the beliefs and principles of the counter-culture of the 1960s. Ideas originating from the *Eranos* group were well received in the New Age movement and in popular culture. For instance, the enormously successful *Star Wars* movies were to a large extent influenced by the writings of Joseph Campbell.¹⁴

The third group, historians of science and philosophy, generally maintained a negative attitude toward esotericism up until the appearance of the works of Frances Yates. Esoteric beliefs and practices were often considered to embody unreason and unscientific reasoning, and were thus held to be in opposition to the positivistic ideals of natural science. Yates, on the contrary, argued that the hermetic tradition (understood as esotericism) was not only congenial to modern science, but the causal factor in the emergence of modern science. This drastic reinterpretation of the emergence of modern science has been criticized, but Yates' theories have nonetheless been instrumental in changing the attitude of historians of science and philosophy toward esotericism. Today, the categorical stance against everything connected to esotericism is not as prevalent as it used to be among this category of scholars. Instead, esotericism is often seen as an important factor in the understanding of early modern science.

The specialists of particular currents and personalities of esotericism form a large category of scholars. The prime characteristic of this type of scholar, from a methodological point of view, is that the subject of their research is not placed in a larger context, but rather studied as an independent phenomenon.

Finally, the generalists in the study of Western esotericism approach the subject of their research from a broader perspective, concretized by a basic research paradigm. In the following discussion of research paradigms formulated specifically for the study of Western esotericism in a general sense, I will limit myself to the ones proposed by Yates, Faivre, and Hanegraaff.

The Research Paradigms of Western Esotericism

Before discussing the research paradigms of Yates, Faivre, and Hanegraaff, mention should be made of an often-overlooked early generalist approach to the study of Western esotericism. The amateur scholar Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942) wrote extensively on various aspects of Western esotericism, such as alchemy, Rosicrucianism, ceremonial magic, occultism, and Freemasonry, and actually saw these different aspects as part of a larger whole, which he termed *The Secret Tradition*. While lacking a research paradigm, and not offering a clear definition of *The Secret Tradition*, it is clear that to Waite the prime object of this tradition is a mystical union with Christ. Waite's "scholarly" approach to Western esotericism was, to a certain extent, a mixture of a traditionalist, religionist, and generalist approach. Notwithstanding the fact that Waite's research to a large extent today is outdated, he was often cited as an authority on Western esotericism by scholars, such as Yates, working in this field.¹⁵

Dame Frances Yates (1899–1981), historian and art historian of the Renaissance, was the first scholar to study Renaissance esotericism and Rosicrucianism as a coherent cultural phenomenon. By the early 1940s Yates was employed by the Warburg Institute, today part of the University of London, where she concentrated her research on the artistic and literary efforts of the French academies of the sixteenth century. At the end of the 1940s she began to concentrate her research on the hermeticism of the Renaissance. Her research resulted in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), and it was further expanded into *The Art of Memory* (1967), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979). Yates challenged the established history of the Renaissance and showed the importance of, what she called, "the Hermetic Tradition" to influential Renaissance thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. She argued that the Hermetic Tradition is crucial to the understanding of the Renaissance and the development of modern science. Yates set out to rediscover what she perceived to be an ignored part of our cultural heritage, and thereby to rewrite history. The main thesis of Yates research has been summarized by Hanegraaff as the "Yates Paradigm":

This "Yates Paradigm," which has remained dominant through the 1970s and only gradually began to wane during the 1980s, has two main characteristics. First, "the Hermetic Tradition" (and by implication, Western esotericism generally) is presented

as a quasi-autonomous counter-tradition pitted against the mainstream traditions of Christianity and rationality. Second, the presentation of this Hermetic Tradition is inextricably linked to modernist narratives of progress by means of science. Yates' grand narrative was based upon an exciting paradox: she claimed that the "great forward movement" of the scientific revolution, from which the modern world has emerged, was crucially indebted not to rational traditions but—of all things—to the hermetic magic epitomized by figures such as Giordano Bruno. In other words: precisely this forgotten hermetic counterculture of the West, long decried as merely superstitious and reactionary, has supposedly been the true motor of progress.¹⁶

The two main components of the "Yates Paradigm" have today been refuted.¹⁷ The very notion of a Hermetic Tradition, in the sense of an autonomous and demarcated single tradition, has been abandoned by modern scholars in favor of a number of traditions, loosely connected. Yates' arguments for a single tradition were simplistic and did not take into account the highly complex nature of cultural phenomena. Further, the idea that the Hermetic Tradition was the impetus of the emergence of modern science has been discarded, and it is today assumed that Western esotericism was merely one among a number of factors that contributed to the emergence of modern science—not the only one.

In 1992 Antoine Faivre proposed a definition of Western esotericism as a "form of thought," which consists of four intrinsic and two secondary constituting components.¹⁸ Faivre's definition has had a large impact on the academic community, and it has become the standard definition in works dealing with Western esotericism. According to Faivre, the historical scope of Western esotericism covers the period from the Renaissance at the end of the fifteenth century to modern movements of today. Geographically, the field is restricted to the Western cultural hemisphere, and there are thus no claims to study a so-called "universal esotericism."¹⁹ The four constituting components are: (1) *The idea of correspondance*; (2) *Living nature*; (3) *Imagination and mediations*; (4) *The experience of transmutation*; and the secondary (5) *The practice of the concordance*; (6) *Transmission*.²⁰ This form of thought, expressed in different ways, can be found in a number of traditions from the Renaissance and onward: hermeticism, Christian Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, spiritual alchemy, astrology, magic, theosophy, occultism, etc. Different as all these traditions most certainly are, they share Western esotericism as their common basic form of thought around which their individual traits and characteristics are centered. It is this common aspect that gives them a shared *air de famille*.²¹

(1) *Correspondences*. There are symbolic and concrete correspondences between all the visible and invisible parts of the universe. Man corresponds as a microcosm to the universe (macrocosm). The idea of correspondences is vital to the three “royal arts” of Western esotericism; that is, magic, alchemy, and astrology. There are primarily two kinds of correspondences. First, “those that exist in nature, seen and unseen.”²² For instance, the seven planets correspond to the seven metals, and the seven metals correspond to specific parts of the human body. The human *spiritus* corresponds to the *spiritus mundi*, and so on. Second, “correspondences between Nature (the cosmos) or even history and revealed texts.”²³ Scriptures, such as the Bible, are considered to be in harmony with nature, and through careful study of one, greater knowledge is reached about the other. This type of correspondence is particularly important to the Kabbalah.

(2) *Living Nature*. The entire universe is “complex, plural, hierarchical.” It is alive and traversed by a network of sympathies or antipathies that link the things of nature. The knowledge of this network (usually described as mystical links) enables the magician to manipulate it, and thereby causes results in the natural world according to his will. The manipulation of this network of mystical links, is in fact the core of Renaissance magic, or *magia*.

(3) *Imagination and Mediations*. The esotericist regards the imaginative faculty of man to be of great importance. That which is being revealed to his “inner eyes,” or creative imagination, is the material (i.e., invisible part of the Universe) that interests him. Connected to the imagination or *vis imaginativa* is the use of rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, and intermediary spirits. As Couliano has pointed out, magic works primarily through the imagination.²⁴

(4) *Experience of Transmutation*. Transmutation is a term borrowed from alchemy, which signifies the passage from one plane to another, the modification of a subject in its very nature. Just as the alchemists aimed at turning lead into gold through a process that included the stages of *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo* (sometimes even *citrinitas*), this process could be viewed as a spiritual one. For the present study, the experience of transmutation is of great importance, since the idea of initiation is partly connected to it. The initiate is often viewed as going through a process of transmutation as he passes through the various rites of initiation.

(5) *The Praxis of the Concordance*. From the end of the fifteenth century and during the sixteenth century an idea of acquiring “a gnosis embracing diverse traditions and melding them in a single crucible” existed. This is exactly how Western esotericism got its form during the Renaissance. By taking ideas from Neoplatonism, pythagorism,

hermeticism, Christian Mysticism, and kabbalah the esoteric form of thought was formed. Faivre describes the practice of the concordance as “a consistent tendency to try to establish common denominators between two different traditions or even more, among all traditions, in the hope of obtaining an illumination, a gnosis, of superior quality.”²⁵ Connected to this is the popular idea of the *philosophia perennis*, which claimed that a tradition of mystical knowledge had been handed down from Hermes Trismegistus through Moses, Zarathustra, Plato, and many others.

(6) *Transmission*. The esoteric knowledge must be transmitted from master to disciple according to set rules. The knowledge that is transmitted cannot be questioned, and it is seen as part of a tradition that must be respected and regarded as an “organic and integral ensemble.” The importance of this idea for initiation is clear: there must be someone who initiates the disciple—he cannot initiate himself. This last criterion is of vital importance for the masonic initiatory societies.

According to Hanegraaff, Faivre’s definition of Western esotericism is problematic as foundation for a disciplinary paradigm. While Hanegraaff does not deny the “heuristic value” of Faivre’s paradigm, “as based upon a scholarly construct,” he questions the validity of the definition for post-sixteenth and particularly post-eighteenth-century esoteric currents. Hanegraaff argues that Faivre’s definition is based on the esotericism of the Renaissance, and that it does not take into account that esotericism changes through history.

The problem becomes all the more pressing if one applies the definition to post-eighteenth century “occultist” currents. Precisely Faivre’s first—and arguably central—intrinsic characteristic, the worldview of correspondences, was severely compromised, to say the least, under the impact of a “mechanical” and positivist worldview based on instrumental causality. Obviously this is not to deny that doctrines of “correspondences” may be encountered in various nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of esotericism. The point is that the disenchantment of the world may cause the meaning of “correspondences” to get thoroughly reinterpreted; one might even go as far as suggesting that at least some nineteenth- and twentieth-century “esoteric” currents reflect a (neo)positivist “form of thought” adorned with some of the trappings of pre-Enlightenment esotericism, rather than the reverse. In sum, it seems that Faivre’s paradigm runs the risk of ignoring or minimizing the creative innovations and transformations of Western esotericism under the impact of secularization, in favour of a “grand continuity” on phenomenological foundations.²⁶

Hanegraaff's criticism implies that Faivre's definition of esotericism as a "form of thought" is static, and that esotericism instead should be studied as something complex and changeable. It should, however, be noted that Hanegraaff does not seem to contest Faivre's constituting components as such, but instead focuses on the interpretation of their meaning. According to Hanegraaff, the meaning of the basic components of esotericism changes due to "disenchantment of the world" and the secularization of esotericism.

In order to understand the finer points of Hanegraaff's criticism it is necessary to be familiar with his idea of how occultist forms of esotericism of the nineteenth and twentieth century differ from traditional, or Renaissance, esotericism. First, the understanding of what the "correspondences" actually consist of changed dramatically due to the impact of scientific materialism and nineteenth-century positivism. The mechanical and "disenchanted" worldviews stood in sharp contrast to the enchanted worldview of the Renaissance, in which the divine power permeated the micro- and macrocosmic worlds through the noncausal correspondences.

Accordingly, occultism is characterized by hybrid mixtures of traditional esoteric and modern scientific-materialist worldviews: while originally the religious belief in a universe brought forth by a personal God was axiomatic for esotericism, eventually this belief succumbed partly or completely to popular scientific visions of a universe answering to impersonal laws of causality.²⁷

Second, Hanegraaff stresses the fact that Western esotericism emerged as a "syncretistic type of religiosity in a Christian context, and its representatives were Christian until far into the eighteenth century." The dominance of traditional Christianity on esotericism decreased in favor of an influx of eastern religiosity, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. According to the first nonintrinsic component of Faivre's definition of esotericism, the *Praxis of the Concordance*, the esotericists often saw the various established religions as different branches of one and the same tree. This view is especially apparent in nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultist movements. The eastern religiosity that came to influence Western esotericism was, however, a Westernized form, as it was in particular through theosophical literature that the general public encountered it. The interest of the theosophical leaders, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), in Buddhism drove them to visit Ceylon in 1880. This visit can, to a certain extent, be considered as the commencement of the so-called Buddhist revival that would spread across Asia around the turn of the twentieth century. During

his visit to Ceylon, Olcott founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society “with the aim of preserving the heritage of Buddhism and spreading Buddhist education by setting up Buddhist schools.”²⁸ It is noteworthy that many of the early westerners who converted to Buddhism came from occultist milieus. For instance, the first European to enter the *sangha* and become an ordained monk was the Englishman Allan Bennett (1872–1923), who took Ananda Metteyya as his ecclesiastical name. Allan Bennett had been an active member of the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, and it is often assumed that he was the adopted son of MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), the chief of the order from around 1895 to its collapse in 1900. Prior to his departure for the east, Bennett lived with the occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and trained him in ritual magic.²⁹

The most significant impact of Hinduism on Western esotericism can be attributed to the endeavors of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). In 1893 Vivekananda attended the World Parliament of Religions and his contribution is of paramount importance for the interpretation of Hinduism as a modern teaching of wisdom. Vivekananda preached a form of neovedanta, which was congenial to the sentiments of the occultist currents. According to Vivekananda, his teachings were of a universal nature and not limited to the sects of individual religions.³⁰

Third, the impact of the new theories of evolution, and in particular the philosophical models originating in German Idealism and romanticism, became connected to a universal process of spiritual progress. The idea of a universal spiritual progress became, according to Hanegraaff, fundamental to almost all forms of occultism. This is especially true for New Age, of which one feature is the belief that mankind is about to enter a new age, astrologically termed the Age of Aquarius, characterized by a higher spiritual development. This spiritual development is often considered to be connected to a monistic form of thought, as opposed to the supposed dualism of the previous age, the Age of Pisces.³¹

Fourth, the influence of psychology, and in particular the influence of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Jung’s theory of the anima and animus, the importance attributed to the unconscious, the process of individuation, and the universally applicable archetypes have all become standard features of contemporary esotericism. Psychological terminology is often used to explain religious concepts to such an extent that it is valid to speak of a “psychologisation” of the occult.³²

Finally, the fifth aspect, which Hanegraaff mentions, in which the occultist movements differ from earlier forms of esotericism, is the impact of capitalist market economy on the domain of spirituality. This aspect is especially prevalent in the New Age movement.³³

Hanegraaff’s dissatisfaction with Faivre’s definition of Western esotericism as a form of thought is to be contrasted with his own propo-

sition for a new research paradigm. According to Hanegraaff, Western esotericism should not be studied as an essentially static worldview, but as something that is continually transformed and that adapts to new circumstances. His theoretical definition of Western esotericism is based on the previously mentioned three different ways of achieving knowledge: doctrinal faith, rationality, and the “middle way,” which is characterized by knowledge, or *gnosis*, of a revelatory nature:

It is indeed hard to deny that an emphasis on *gnosis*, rather than on rationality or the reliance on religious authority, is quite typical of the currents and personalities usually considered as falling under the heading of “Western esotericism”; and one may add that a marked preference for mythical and symbolic rather than logical and discursive language follows naturally from these premises. *The great risk of such a definition consists in the frequent tendency to misunderstand its ideal-typical and heuristic nature, and use it in a reductionist fashion.*³⁴ [My emphasis.]

Hanegraaff’s theoretical definition of Western esotericism as a strategy of knowledge does not, however, only run the risk of being used in a reductionist fashion, but it also runs the risk of being used in such a wide manner that it becomes all-inclusive—and consequently useless as an alternative to Faivre’s definition. The nature of the *gnosis* strived for by the esotericists needs to be further analyzed. The already-quoted definition of *gnosis* as “a revelatory experience that mostly entailed an encounter with one’s true self as well with the ground of being, God” is a good starting point for a theoretical stance, but it needs to be further elaborated in order to be used in a satisfactory way. For instance, is *gnosis* to be seen as a way of salvation (not forgetting that esotericism is seen as a form of Christian spirituality)? In what way does *gnosis* differ from the aim of the mystic—or indeed, is there a difference at all? Questions such as these need to be addressed before Hanegraaff’s proposal for a new definition of esotericism can be used with any greater result.³⁵

At present, Hanegraaff’s definition does not exclude the use of Faivre’s definition of esotericism. On the contrary, the two definitions can be used as two parallel ways of approaching esoteric discourses. Faivre’s constituting components do not necessarily have the same import in the nineteenth century as they had in the Renaissance, but this does not mean that they are not applicable to esoteric currents after the Renaissance.

Finally, a word or two needs to be said concerning Hanegraaff’s valuable contribution to the understanding of the development of esotericism under the impact of secularization and modernity. It is, in

my opinion, undeniable that the five above-mentioned changes can be traced in nineteenth- and twentieth-century esotericism, but I would also like to mention the importance of yet two other significant new aspects of occultist currents. First, the importance attached to personal religious experiences. The pragmatic nature of occultism is evident already in the writings of Éliphas Lévi (pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875), often considered to be the chief instigator of nineteenth-century occultism. This pragmatism was often directed toward the achievement of various “altered states of consciousness,” for example, by the invocations and evocations of higher beings, angels, or gods. The religious/mystical experiences strived for were often very specific in nature: for instance, in the A.:A.:, an order founded by Aleister Crowley in 1907, the adepts were expected to reach a state that was called “the Knowledge of and Conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel,” which can be described as a union of the conscious mind with the unconscious. The terminology was taken from a medieval manuscript at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal that MacGregor Mathers had translated and published as *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage* (1898). Other examples of the importance placed on religious experiences are the popularity of works on yoga among adherents of occultism, and the use of sex in magical rituals. The experiential aspect of occultist currents has continued to be an important feature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism, but it is also a significant part of the New Age movement.

The second new important aspect of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultist currents is the importance placed on the personal will of the esotericist. The will is not only seen as a fundamental tool in magical rituals, it is often seen as a divine or supernatural aspect of man. This latter view is not as prevalent in the writings of early French occultists, such as Eliphas Lévi, as compared to later British occultists. But the will is nonetheless important to Lévi as the prerequisite to attain “magical power”:

Two things, as we have already said, are necessary for the acquisition of magical power—the emancipation of the will from all servitude, and its instruction in the art of domination.³⁶

The later occultist view of the will as something divine was to a large extent influenced by modern philosophers, most notably Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Although, for instance, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and the founders of the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* attributed great importance to the will,³⁷ it is with Aleister Crowley that the reli-

gious nature of the will reaches its climax. The new religious movement that Crowley founded in the first decade of the twentieth century, *Thelema* (Greek for will), has as its basic tenet that all men and women have a “purpose” with their lives—a “True Will.” With the help of “Magick” and “Mysticism,” which were seen by Crowley as the two roads of attainment, the adherents of *Thelema* aim to find out what their True Will is. Crowley summarized the formula of the law of *Thelema* thus:

The formula of this law is: Do what thou wilt. Its moral aspect is simple enough in theory: Do what thou wilt does not mean Do as you please, although it implies this degree of emancipation, that it is no longer possible to say *à priori* that a given action is “wrong.” Each man has the right—and an absolute right—to accomplish his True Will.³⁸

These two additional features (i.e., the importance attached to personal religious experiences and the emphasis of the will), in occultist currents are important in many contemporary forms of esotericism, such as Wicca, ritual magic and certain forms of Satanism.

Western Esotericism in Theory and Practice

Faivre’s methodological paradigm of Western esotericism as a “form of thought” is an abstract construct aimed at capturing the essence of a wide variety of phenomena. To be sure, the criteria required of a material in order for it to be classed as esoteric are simple enough. If the constituting components of Western esotericism, and preferably the secondary ones as well, are present in a material, then it is regarded as esoteric. If one, or more, of the constituting components are not to be found, then the material is consequently not regarded as esoteric. The esoteric discourses are characterized by a highly symbolic language, often accompanied by images and emblems through which esotericism is expressed:

The best way to locate any of these six components in a discourse, a work, a ritual, etc., is not to look for doctrinal tenets, but to try to find evidence of their presence in concrete manifestations like images, symbols, styles, etc.³⁹

The complexity of symbols and images found in the esoteric material requires that the scholars who endeavor to trace esotericism have a thorough knowledge of the esoteric currents and their particular

symbolism. In theory, Faivre's methodology of Western esotericism is a simple, yet precise, tool where the scholar can identify the form of thought in question. In practice, however, I would argue that the identification of the esoteric form of thought is not always as simple as one might expect. In fact, the scholar is confronted on numerous occasions with material that apparently belongs to the corpus of specific esoteric currents or traditions, such as alchemy, but in which it is impossible to detect some, or all, of the constituting components. Furthermore, as Faivre points out, a material is never exclusively esoteric—it is the question, based on a particular methodological approach, posed to the material that to a large extent direct the subsequent answers.⁴⁰ That is, depending on what aspects one chooses to address in a material, different answers will be found. For instance, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* can be described as, for example, Rosicrucian, alchemical, mystical, Christian, hermetic, or simply as a joke—depending on what questions we pose to the text. This fact presents us with a number of problems. For instance, can a Rosicrucian text be *nonesoteric*? Can a text in which it is impossible to detect the constituting components of the esoteric form of thought still be classified as esoteric? What follows is an attempt to classify four different types of texts related to Western esotericism.

(1) *Texts belonging to one (or more) esoteric current(s), in which the constituting components of the esoteric "form of thought" are explicitly present.*

This category is that which we normally term esoteric; that is, texts in which the constituting components of Western esotericism are clearly present. Thus, esoteric currents such as Christian Kabbalah, paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, theosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic (Magia), occultism and perennialism all have the common feature that they are permeated with the esoteric "form of thought," expressed through the constituting components. The esoteric form of thought is to a large extent explicitly present in these currents; that is, the constituting components of Western esotericism are detectable—and thereby these currents answer to the required criteria of designing them as esoteric. Important to note is that the esoteric form of thought is a fundamental aspect of these currents, and that their individual traits and developments are in accordance with Western esotericism.

(2) *Texts belonging to one (or more) esoteric current(s), in which the constituting components of esoteric form of thought are implicitly present.*

In the majority of the discourses related to the esoteric traditions discussed above, Faivre's constituting components of Western esotericism are easily detectable. However, there are a certain amount of texts that

belong to one, or more, of the esoteric traditions, in which it is not possible to trace the constituting components of the esoteric form of thought. That is, it is not possible to trace any explicit references to the components, but the context and subject of the texts are nonetheless pointing toward the components in an implicit manner. Indeed, even nonesoteric texts can be interpreted as esoteric, depending on the circumstances in which they appear, and how they are used.⁴¹ Western esotericism is, according to Faivre, a form of thought, a certain manner through which the esotericist interprets phenomena. As esoteric materials are composed by esotericists, and more often than not, for other fellow-esotericists, it is important to take into account the possibility that the constituting components of Western esotericism were not always expressed explicitly as they already played such an integrated part of the authors' and readers' shared worldview. It is more than likely that the fundamental components often were taken for granted, and there was consequently no need to express them.⁴² However, by a thorough study of the text it is possible to trace them implicitly. For instance, an alchemical recipe might not explicitly refer to the correspondences between the seven metals and the seven planets, but an alchemist would nonetheless immediately see the connection, and further, he or she would relate the correspondences to man, as man is the microcosm of macrocosm.⁴³ This is admittedly an oversimplified example, but it serves to illustrate that since the constituting components of Western esotericism are such fundamental features, they must be taken into account even though they are not explicitly present. It is the context that determines whether or not esotericism can be considered to be implicitly present, and not the mere fact that it belongs to an esoteric tradition.⁴⁴

(3) *Texts belonging to one (or more) esoteric current(s), in which the esoteric form of thought is not present:*

There are, however, instances when a text clearly belongs to a certain esoteric current, but in which the esoteric form of thought is not present. At first appearance this statement might seem as a contradiction. However, a text that is clearly part of an esoteric tradition, such as Rosicrucianism, can be dealing with subjects that are not dependent on the esoteric form of thought.⁴⁵ In other words, a text can be Rosicrucian, but that does not necessarily make it esoteric. A text can only be termed esoteric when the constituting components are present in it, in an explicit or implicit manner (vide supra). A text dealing with organizational questions, such as *The Laws of the Fraternity of the Rosie Cross* (in which the esoteric form of thought is not explicitly present), is not dependent on the esoteric form of thought, and it is therefore possible to rule out

the presence of esotericism in an implicit manner. The criteria for assigning a text as esoteric should not be based on the mere account of it belonging to one or more of the esoteric currents, but to whether or not the constituting components can be ascertained in an explicit or implicit manner in it.

(4) *Migration of esoteric ideas into nonesoteric materials:*

It is common enough to find symbols, ideas, or techniques that traditionally are connected to a certain esoteric tradition in nonesoteric materials. For instance, references to magic or alchemy can frequently be found in modern literature, such as the Fantasy genre, in which the esoteric form of thought is not present.⁴⁶ Magic, for example, can have either a seminal or nominal presence in the material, but that does not make it esoteric, as we understand the term. Another example can be found in the New Age movement in which the eclectic attitude is apparent. A person might use techniques that traditionally are connected to the esoteric traditions, such as Tarot, in a purely divinatory or meditational manner without taking into account the underlying esoteric form of thought. Such practice cannot be termed esoteric, as it is an example of a nonesoteric usage of a traditionally esoteric technique. These two examples illustrate two different ways in which esoteric ideas can migrate into nonesoteric areas.

All classifications are reductions, and ultimately simplifications, of complex data, and the above classification is no exception. Furthermore, theoretical classifications tend to become awkward instruments when practically applied. It is nonetheless important to stress the different aspects of esotericism in order to understand its various modes of manifestation. It should be stressed that the notion of *implicit esotericism* should be used with caution and only when there are valid reasons for applying the term. A liberal usage of the term might render it too inclusive and thus distancing it from the definition of Western esotericism as understood by Faivre. Used with proper reserve it will, however, serve the scholar with a means to draw attention to a hitherto largely ignored aspect of Western esotericism.

Western Esoteric Currents

Criticism to Frances Yates's theory of a so-called Hermetic Tradition shows that there is no such thing as a homogenous hermetic tradition, but rather a number of complex and intertwining hermetic traditions or currents.⁴⁷ In a similar manner it is necessary to be cautious toward the

notion of a single esoteric tradition. As already stated, Western esotericism, as a form of thought, is an abstract construction that only exists as a methodology. There is no such thing as an esoteric tradition *per se*, in which the esoteric form of thought can be traced historically. What we can study, however, are the various currents through which the esoteric form of thought manifests itself. The components of esotericism are traceable through a number of historical currents that have been present in our cultural hemisphere since the Renaissance. While there is no “Esoteric Tradition” we can, according to Hanegraaff, speak of a so-called “tradition of esotericism”:

Certainly, it is on the basis of its *ideas* that esotericism becomes visible to the historian as a separate field of study, and it is their development over time which enables the historian to speak of a “tradition” of esotericism.⁴⁸

Thus, when we speak of esoteric currents, it is not the esoteric form of thought itself that is being referred to, but rather the esoteric form of thought in its various modes of manifestation.⁴⁹ Western esotericism is a passive, nonmanifest construct that is traceable only when active, or manifest in one or more of the esoteric currents; that is, in the empirical data available to us.

There is not, for us, any esotericism *sui generis*. Each of the component elements of the form of thought that it has been agreed to call esoteric presents itself only as a theoretical generalization starting from empirical data (under the circumstances, starting from concrete historical ideas).⁵⁰

The relationship between the “active” and “passive” sides of esotericism; that is, the unmanifest esoteric form of thought on the one hand, and the active, manifest form of thought as expressed through the esoteric currents on the other, is by definition a one-sided relation only. The esoteric form of thought, being static, is not subject to historical conditions (since it is an abstract construct), which the esoteric currents on the other hand by necessity are. The constituting components of Western esotericism are the same today as they were during the Renaissance—Faivre does not count with additional components as history evolves.⁵¹ The esoteric currents, being nonstatic and dynamic, constantly change and new currents appear. They show a remarkable tendency to adapt to the historical conditions of our culture, a fact that is easily detectable in many of our contemporary esoteric new religious movements.⁵²

The interrelationship between the esoteric currents shows that they are often interpreted by esotericists as dependent, or at least explanatory, of each other. This is most evident in occultism in which the eclectic attitude is taken to its extreme. In discussing the use of certain terms connected to Western esotericism Faivre differentiates between what he calls *Currents* and *Notions*, which he further divides into three groups (Table 1.1).⁵³ According to Faivre the *Currents* correspond to movements, schools, or traditions, while the *Notions* correspond to spiritual attitudes or to practices.⁵⁴

The division into currents and notions is important as it stresses two interconnected dimensions of Western esotericism—the theoretical (or organizational) and the practical (or experiential). The theoretical dimension, realized in movements, schools, fraternities, organizations, etc., appears to be an important factor in Western esotericism, especially from the eighteenth century onward. The notion that certain societies or groups of initiates are repositories of a sacred knowledge, or gnosis, is indeed a prominent feature of the esoteric mythology. An important aspect of esoteric societies as *transmitters* of gnosis lies in the emphasis of the legitimacy of the “transmutative” knowledge.⁵⁵ The theoretical dimension of Western esotericism can be studied from an historical point of view; that is, it is possible to trace a particular school’s development from its foundation, to ascertain the identity of its founders and members, and so on. A further characteristic of the esoteric currents is that most of them can be traced back to one or more founding texts, whereas the notions are loosely based on a corpus of literature.

The practical or experiential dimension of esotericism can be traced back to classical or Renaissance esotericism, but during the nineteenth century the importance of this dimension is considerably increased. To a certain extent, the experiential aspect of esotericism can be linked to the notion of gnosis, the revelatory form of knowledge, which, according to Hanegraaff, is the prime characteristic of Western esotericism.

Table 1.1. Terminology relating to Western esotericism according to Faivre.

<i>Currents that are not notions</i>	<i>Currents that also correspond to notions</i>	<i>Notions that are not currents</i>
Hermetism	Alchemy	Hermeticism
Christian Kabbalah	Astrology	Gnosis
Paracelsism	Magic (or <i>Magia</i>)	
Rosicrucianism	Occultism	
Theosophy	Perennialism	

Faivre's division of terms in relation to Western esotericism into notions and currents is important as it stresses two important aspects of Western esotericism. Nevertheless, the division might lead to some confusion, as it does not provide any clear criteria of where currents end and notions begin. This is apparent in Faivre's table in which there is a group that correspond to both notions and currents simultaneously. Especially the relationship between groups 1 and 2 is problematic. Faivre is correct in separating the two groups, as they, from a theoretical point of view, clearly refer to two different *types* of terms, or phenomena. However, if we apply Faivre's classification of terminology to the historical esoteric currents and notions, the division becomes problematic. According to Faivre the notions correspond to spiritual attitudes or to practices, as already mentioned. I would argue that the first group, that is, Currents, include these as well. There are for instance spiritual attitudes and practices connected to the esoteric currents referred to as theosophy, a term that Faivre classifies as belonging to the first group, "Currents which are not notions."⁵⁶ There seems to be a discrepancy, then, in this division when applied to the historical "manifestations" of esotericism—the division is valid but the criteria for the division are questionable. Nevertheless, Faivre's classification is, if used with care, of great practical use for the scholar when used on a general level.

Western Esoteric Rituals of Initiation

The recent academic interest in Western initiatory societies (often with a focus on Freemasonry) parallels, to a certain extent, the academic interest in Western esotericism. In other words, it is a relatively new field of research, which was previously avoided by the academic community. Freemasonry was often viewed as a subject not worthy of serious research, partly because a large part of the literature dealing with the subject did not meet academic standards. This negative view was aptly described by Yates when discussing the supposed connections between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry:

The main reason why serious historical studies on the Rosicrucian manifestos and their influence have hitherto been on the whole lacking is no doubt because the whole subject has been bedevilled by enthusiasts for secret societies. There is a vast literature on Rosicrucianism which assumes the existence of a secret society, founded by Christian Rosencreutz, and having a continuous existence up to modern times. In the vague and inaccurate world of so-called 'occultist' writing this assumption has produced

a kind of literature which deservedly sinks below the notice of the serious historian. And when, as is often the case, the misty discussion of 'Rosicrucians' and their history becomes involved with the masonic myths, the enquirer feels that he is sinking helplessly into a bottomless bog.⁵⁷

Fortunately, the situation has improved considerably in the last seven years. There are today at least three academic chairs devoted to Freemasonry,⁵⁸ and important studies have been published on the subject. In addition to this, there exist a number of masonic research organizations that maintain a high scholarly standard in their published transactions.⁵⁹ The situation for the scholar has also been improved through a change of attitude among masonic research societies and libraries toward the academic community. Scholars are invited to publish articles in renowned masonic periodicals such as *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* and *Heredom*, and to attend conferences open for both masons and nonmasons. Furthermore, most masonic libraries are, contrary to what is often thought to be the case, open for nonmasonic scholars.

Scholars working in the field of Western esotericism have taken an interest in initiatory societies, and it is often assumed that esotericism can be found in this type of society. Yates, for instance, explored the relationship between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, and came to the conclusion that the Rosicrucian furor of the seventeenth century probably inspired the founding of "secret societies," such as Freemasonry.⁶⁰ Both Faivre and Hanegraaff mention that esotericism can be found in masonic initiatory societies—especially in the high degrees from the second half of the eighteenth century.⁶¹

Faivre begins his short description of eighteenth-century initiatory societies in *Access to Western Esotericism* with the words: "It is obviously the high degree rites that contain the most esoteric content, therefore Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry is less esoteric in character."⁶² After a short discussion of the *Strict Observance* and the *Rectified Scottish Rite*, Faivre makes a distinction between three types of masonic rites: (1) Christian or Western rites, (2) medieval and chivalric rites, (3) neopagan Egyptian rites.⁶³ Suffice it to say at present that Faivre, while stressing the difference between the Craft degrees and the high or additional degrees, does not state that esotericism is not to be found in the Craft degrees, merely that they contain less esoteric content than the later "High" degree rituals.

In discussing the history of Western esotericism, Hanegraaff states that a Western esoteric tradition known as Christian theosophy, con-

nected to esoteric philosophers such as Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) and Friedrich Christian Oetinger (1702–1782), would later find its way, through German Naturphilosophie, into initiatory societies of the eighteenth century:

Christian Theosophy came to be closely linked to the emergence of German *Naturphilosophie*, including a strong interest in magic and the “occult” phenomena associated with “the Night-Side of Nature.” It flourished, finally, in the so-called Illuminist current of the later eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, partly linked to new initiatory societies modelled upon or connected with Freemasonry such as the theurgical Elus Coëns, the Illuminés d’Avignon, the Rectified Scottish Rite, the Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross and the Asiatic Brethren.⁶⁴

Although both Faivre and Hanegraaff state that Western esotericism is to be found in masonic initiatory societies, they do not venture deeper into the subject and do not explain *how* esotericism is actually transmitted in this type of society. Furthermore, they do not discuss the rituals of these societies at all, despite the central position they have for initiatory societies. From an academic perspective, the relationship between Western esotericism and rituals of initiation is thus an unexplored field of research. In the present work it will be analyzed how Western esotericism is transmitted through rituals of initiation and, furthermore, what types of esoteric currents or traditions are transmitted. It is hoped that this will result in a deeper understanding of Western esoteric rituals of initiation, and thereby assist in bringing this type of ritual from the darkness of obscurity, to the light of academic scrutiny.

Concluding Remarks

The academic study of Western Esotericism is a comparatively new field in the history of religions, and it is only in the last ten years that the field has received wide academic recognition. There are several reasons for this belated recognition, but perhaps the most important reason is that Western esotericism has been viewed with suspicion, both by theologians and historians of science. Today, the situation has improved considerably and scholars from a wide range of disciplines are beginning to view Western esotericism as an important part of Western culture.

In this book Western esotericism is approached from a broader (generalist) perspective, which is based on the two research paradigms

proposed by Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff. These two paradigms can be described as esotericism as a “form of thought” (Faivre), and esotericism as gnosis (Hanegraaff). More specifically, this book will be dealing with the relationship between Western esotericism and rituals of initiation as used by masonic initiatory societies.