# Part One

# Methodology and Reflexions

## I) METHODOLOGY

The key word in this book for which general consensus on meaning has not yet been established covers a loosely defined concept. However, if we judge on the basis of bookstore offerings as well as on media discourse and imagery, there is a great deal of interest in it. Under the heading of esotericism, merchants and journalists group together for convenience such diverse topics as astrology, parapsychology, Tarot and yoga side by side with Freemasonry, theosophy, and alchemy. It would be difficult to prepare an exhaustive inventory, while too many articles, added by the whims of fashion, would make the whole an incongruous display. Let us recognize from the outset that the meaning of "esotericism," never a precise term, has begun to overflow its boundaries on all sides.

Three possible paths present themselves to anyone who wants to see into the matter clearly. The first would consist of making an inventory, lumping together any and everything that has been termed "esotericism." This might be the method of a sociologist who, easily satisfied, could interpret the results as showing the need our contemporaries feel for the irrational. The second way would be to decide on the basis of value criteria what deserves to be called "esotericism," which might, of course, entail throwing a few babies out with the bath water. One can guess where that might lead. If we renounce taking inventory of the stands at the fair and donning the garb of the guru, there still remains a third possibility: A careful study of the material. There we see harmonies and contrasts appear before us. (If we are to see beyond the panes of glass surrounding us, we must do some looking in libraries and museums.)

To be sure, academic recognition of esotericism as a special field of study already exists, in France where there is a chair for "esoteric currents" as

in other countries where related programs are in operation (cf. *supra* in "Preface"). But up to now there has hardly been any critical questioning of this specialization, although each discipline must define its own purview. The proposed system of criteria in the present introduction bears on these esoteric "currents." It does not pretend to be more than a methodological tool, subject to refinement and correction. The historical survey that follows stems directly from these methodological propositions. For reasons to be taken up later, this system of criteria treats essentially the modern period of Western esotericism.

### *A) Overly Restricted Definitions of "Esotericism"*

The lexical content of the word "esotericism" is slight.* ("Eso" means "inside" and "ter" implies an opposition.) Like any word rather empty of meaning in itself, "esotericism" has shown it can be inflated, permeated, and semantically overdetermined. Still, it is by no means its etymology that must be queried but rather its function, which calls forth a bundle of attitudes and an ensemble of discourses. The question for us is whether these attitudes and these discourses permit the observer, i.e., the esoterologist, to circumscribe a possible field of study. Above all, we do not want to start with what "esotericism" would be "in itself," we doubt that such a thing exists. Nor is this even a domain in the sense we would use in speaking of the domain of painting, philosophy, or chemistry.

Rather than a specific genre, it is a form of thought, the nature of which we have to try to capture on the basis of the currents which exemplify it. Thus the adjective appeared long before the noun, which dates only from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In fact, it would be advantageous, wherever possible, to use the adjective, and the plural form of the noun. (Likewise, it might be preferable to use words like "astrology" or "alchemy" in the plural.) Moreover, how could an abstract definition avoid an a priori assumption about what it ought to be, its "real" nature, i.e., finally basing itself on a philosophical or ideological presupposition? It appears more fruitful to start with its variable usages within diverse discourses and to query what observable realities these usages stem from; then to take as material for study, the appearance of fields that explicitly present themselves as esoteric as well as those discourses that may implicitly present themselves as esoteric. Finally, to ask what guiding criteria could be used to determine if a discourse or a work is esoteric, whether it is considered to be already or not.

* I would like to express my gratitude to the Crossroad Publishing Company for permission to use here (pages 11 to 15) part of the material presented in my "Introduction" to *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (Volume 21 of "World Spirituality, An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest", New York, 1992, pages XI to XXI).



These empirical reflections start with a threefold interrogation. What implicit criteria are used by university programs that treat materials that are explicitly qualified as esoteric? What does the noun "esotericism" seem to cover since it came into use at the beginning of the nineteenth century? Especially, what does it cover among words used more or less synonymously, notably since the Renaissance? What would be the basic characteristics which, taken as a whole, could serve as a methodological base, even provisionally, for a history of Western esoteric currents?

"Esotericism" conjures up chiefly the idea of something "secret," of a "discipline of the arcane," of restricted realms of knowledge. It is certain that mystery inspires reverie, confers a dimension of depth on the world and that things too familiar easily lose their attraction. Thus esotericists knowingly cultivate mystery. Certainly it is not a question here of considering the use of the word "esotericism" illegitimate for secret, "restricted" teachings. But we want only to note that it is not especially operative, because it is much too exclusive. A large part of alchemy, for example, is not secret, when one considers the fact that since the sixteenth century, an abundant literature on alchemy has been continuously disseminated. The same is true of theosophy. Boehme's writings, so very representative, were destined to circulate in various milieus. These examples could be multiplied. And when secrets do exist, they are generally open secrets. The etymology of "esotericism" clarifies the idea of secret by suggesting that we can access understanding of a symbol, myth, or reality only by a personal effort of progressive elucidation through several successive levels, i.e., by a form of hermeneutics. There is no ultimate secret once we determine that everything, in the end, conceals a secret. Let us note also that peripherally, "esoteric" is sometimes used to qualify the hidden God (as in Franz von Baader).

"Esotericism" has a second, very widespread meaning. Here it serves to designate a type of knowledge, emanating from a spiritual center to be attained after transcending the prescribed ways and techniques—quite diverse considering the schools or the currents—that can lead to it. This spiritual locus, this higher level of "knowledge" would overarch all particular traditions and initiations, which are only so many means of access. It is identical to all who achieve it; experience of its attainment is the proof or guarantee of the "transcendent unity of religions." Let us note also that in this context, "esotericism" means as much the ways that lead to this "center" as the "center" itself. Esotericists who speak of esotericism in this second sense (oftentimes they speak of "esoterism") tend, just like mystics, to maintain a discourse marked by subjectivity. And if they wish to escape this trait, they tend towards a form of normative or doctrinal discourse. In any event, this second sense is too restricted for us to be limited by it.

To use the word in these two different but contiguous meanings is quite legitimate. Unfortunately, the notion of "esotericism" is often confused with

other notions, already in general use and with which it is has become identified. One example is the general notion of "initiation." However there exist all sorts of initiations, the goal and significance of which vary enormously according to context, whether the initiation is conferred individually (from master to disciple) or collectively. Moreover, is not initiation itself a substantial part of most religious traditions? Finally let us mention the confusion, incurred by ignorance or an inquisitorial spirit between esotericism and religious marginality. This confusion leads to contradictions that various sectarianisms exploit, thereby making any serious approach impossible. Esoteric currents could not, except by intellectual dishonesty, be defined as by nature marginal to the churches. Specifically, the doctrinal elements that can be found in esotericism are not the same as those that identify them as esoteric. Therefore, to start with doctrinal elements only perpetuates the misunderstandings. By means of bits and pieces of theology or metaphysics plucked from here and there, we can build up a heresy that does not exist, just for the pleasure of criticizing it later. Thus, above all else, esotericism involves a form of thought. Following this mode of thought does not mean denying or adopting any dogma whatsoever, and the fact that esotericism often happens to be accompanied by heretical propositions is in no way what defines it as esoteric. Just as there is no lack of esotericists at the very heart of Catholicism, without being heretical for all that. This said, the status of esoteric currents cannot be defined except as a function of their relationships to the dominant religions. In the Latin West, these relationships have been and remain difficult with the Catholic and Protestant churches.

### *B) The Formation of a Referential Esoteric Corpus in the Renaissance*

We are speaking now of "esotericism" in a sense both more general and more precise: a third sense that is neither that of a "secret" nor that of a "spiritual center to be attained." This sense is more general, in allowing to cover entire areas of material presenting common elements: a kind of unity of fact. And it is more precise since it does not lose sight of the aspects of the imaginary it calls forth—and which, as we shall see, considerably overflow the entirely too restrictive usages alluded to earlier—aspects that are united under the same heading *by the West*. To be sure, words also exist in the East that some have tried to make correspond more or less to esotericism. But these words are loaded with different connotations. They refer to meanings that are too diverse, conceptually too restricted, or anthropologically too vast to be applied to the field that concerns us here. In the Far East and in other cultural terrains, esotericism does not even have its own status, whereas in the West it does. To be perfectly clear, it would be difficult to understand what a "universal esotericism" might be.



What we mean by the West is the vast Greco-Roman ensemble, both medieval and modern in which the Jewish and Christian religions have cohabited with Islam for several centuries. The present reflections involve essentially the modern esoteric currents, i.e., the Latin West since the end of the fifteenth century. It is only then at the beginning of the Renaissance, it would appear, that we see emerging a will to bring together a variety of ancient materials of the kind we are concerned with here, and that it was believed then that these materials could constitute a homogeneous whole. Certain among them were found linked from the beginning of our era to forms of Hellenistic religiosity (Stoicism, Gnosticism, Hermetism, Neopythagoreanism) and later to the three Abrahamic religions. But in the Renaissance came the idea of considering them as mutually complementary and looking for their common denominators (cf. Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, *et alia*). Thus, especially after 1492, the Jewish Kabbalah penetrated Christian milieus and celebrated surprising nuptials with neo-Alexandrian Hermetism in a light of analogy and a climate of universal harmonies. The more or less explicit project consisted in placing these traditions in a diapason, arranged into consonances. Then the *prisca theologia* of the Middle Ages underwent a transformation. It became *philosophia occulta* and *philosophia perennis*, terms that were not interchangeable, but that were applied to a nebula endowed with relative autonomy in the mental universe of the epoch, and detached from theology properly speaking. The representatives of *philosophia perennis*, real or mythical, constituted links in a chain. Their names are Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, Orpheus, the Sibyls, and many more. It already constitutes, give or take a few nuances, of course, what some would call the "Tradition." The work of the historian is not a matter of wondering whether a similar tradition really existed as such before the Renaissance, invisible and hidden behind the veil of eventual history, but of trying to seize the emergence of this idea in imagery and discourse, i.e., through the forms it could have taken on up to that point.

This autonomization of a body of knowledge, increasingly considered "exoteric" in relation to the official religion is truly in the sixteenth century, the point of departure for what can be called "esotericism" in this third sense of the word. In the Middle Ages, such an autonomization was not necessary because this same body of knowledge had bearing on the forms of the imaginary in which it was inscribed, which were generally in phase with theology. When the latter unburdened this part of itself, a vast abandoned field was soon recuperated, reinterpreted from the outside (i.e., outside the field of theology). Esotericism became the object of a body of knowledge where access no longer happened by itself, but needed specific new approaches. Whoever said "esotericism" said "go to what is more *interior*," an "interior" that became such because now believers were on the "exterior." In the Middle Ages, that "more interior" did not exist, since a believer was always "inside." We cannot

overemphasize the importance of the role played by humanist scholars in the genesis of modern esotericism. Reacting to the appropriation of philosophy by the Scholastics, the humanists professionalized such esoteric sciences as Hermetism or Kabbalah, practicing a monopoly of another sort themselves! At that time, esotericism was basically a matter for specialists, but while theologians addressed listeners who could understand, these specialists were more likely to address the cognoscenti, who by necessity, were other scholars.

And what does this body of knowledge bear upon? Essentially on the articulation between metaphysical principles and cosmology. This articulation did not create a problem as long as the cosmological domain (that of "second causes") remained subordinate to metaphysics. The very idea of esotericism was hardly traceable. But when the sciences of Nature freed themselves from theology, they began to be cultivated for themselves (a process that in Christianity and Islam took hold in the twelfeth century). Henceforth the esoteric field could be constituted, which in the Renaissance began to deal with the interface between metaphysics and cosmology, i.e., to function as an extratheological modality for linking the universal to the particular. However, it filled the interface with speculations that were much more cosmological than metaphysical. There is little metaphysics in Giordano Bruno, and the alchemists began to think divinity alchemically rather than think alchemy divinely.

From then until the present, a vast field is constituted, comprised of fundamental characteristics (or components) selected from a multiform historical corpus. Before presenting the components, let us recall what formed the corpus. On the one hand, are presented three rivers, the three "traditional sciences," which do not seem to belong to any epoch in particular: alchemy, astrology, magic (in the Renaissance sense of *magia*), generally linked to some kind of arithmosophy (or science of numbers, to which are attached, of course, various forms of musical esotericism). Still active in our own times, they maintain close interconnections. On the other hand, there are a certain number of streams that have hollowed out their bed at relatively determinable moments (often starting with a founder's text). These are in no way alien to the three large rivers because all this is intermingled. From the end of the fifteenth century on, these streams are the Christian Kabbalah (an adaptation of the Jewish Kabbalah), neo-Alexandrian Hermetism, discourses inspired by the idea of *philosophia perennis* and of the "primordial Tradition," the philosophy of nature of the Paracelsian variety, then the Romantic (partly German) *Naturphilosophie*; from the seventeenth century on, theosophy and Rosicrucianism (both Germanic at first), as well as the later associations (initiatory societies more or less inscribed in the wake of the former).

We might have believed that these rivers and streams would disappear after the Renaissance. But when the great epistemological break of the seventeenth century occurred, they survived, and the scientism of the nineteenth century did not cause them to dry up. Today esotericisms are more present than ever before. Their tenacious permanence appears in modern times as a counterpart of our scientific and secularized vision of the world. But it would be simplistic and erroneous to reduce this longevity to a need to react against the imaginary and *epistémè* in place. More than a reaction we could be dealing with the possible forms that one of the two poles of the human soul, i.e., mythic capacity, dons for actualization. (The other pole is the so-called rational thought, which in the West is modeled on a kind of Aristotelian logic.)



Here we confront a heteroclite body that must be studied in the relations its parts maintain among themselves and vis-à-vis the diverse religious, political, and cultural contexts with which it is associated. A considerable corpus, complex contexts, all the more so since what belongs to esotericism does not always bear the name. There are those who are like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain (who had realized that he had always spoken prose); in reverse, there are people who label themselves esotericists but whose activity does not go beyond that of fortune tellers or who use the word to baptize their own doctrine. Now esoteric currents are not identified by a word but by guideposts, just as for us today gods are less identifiable by proper names than by their attributes. None of the signs or components that will be presented later is doctrinal. Nor can esotericism be defined simply on the basis of the various ways esoterists themselves define it. Neither, as we have seen, on the basis of sectarian presuppositions bearing on what it "ought" to be, contrary to what certain others do today who claim it for themselves, intending to place their little parish above all the rest. On the other hand, if we approach esotericism phenomenologically as a form of thought, an ensemble of tendencies to be described, we can avoid doing violence to historical data.

It would not be doing too much violence to this data to look for guiding notions that at first glance would be esoteric because esoterists have considered them to be so. An example would be the *magia naturalis* (so-called natural magic) or sophiology (discourse on the Sophia of the Old Testament, the marriage of our soul with Sophia). But this would assuredly not be the best way to approach the question. In truth, if the idea of *magia naturalis* may be tinged with esoteric coloration, it may just as well not be, depending on the authors who discuss it. Moreover, in the Latin West, divine Wisdom (the Sophia) belongs to theology almost as much as to theosophic tradition.

Nor would we be doing violence to historical data in cataloging the preferred images, symbols and motifs that esoteric literature uses—occasionally to the point of satiety. Among these are found the androgyne, the Fall, the philosopher's stone, the "subtle body," the *Anima mundi*, the geography of the sacred (e.g., subterranean cavern, mandala design, or labyrinth), the book of magic, and such dramatis personae as Hermes or Orpheus. One could easily cite scores more. But motifs hardly serve to circumscribe the nature of the esoteric terrain, given that the majority of these motifs are found nearly

everywhere in various disguises. Any motif returns in the end to an archetypology such as that of C.G. Jung, i.e., an anthropology. That esoterologists are called on to take an interest in the archetypes is self-evident, but if their field merely coincides with that of anthropologists or psychologists, what would be their *raison d'être* and why continue to speak of esotericism or esoteric currents? Reciprocally, if the esoteric terrain concerns anthropologists of the imaginary, it is no less evident that the mere presence in a work of a theme of more or less universal dimension need not categorize that work as esoteric. It is an issue that concerns not only the dissolution, always to be feared, of the field we are studying into other fields of study, but also the very status of its historical position in general vis-à-vis anthropology and vice versa. Between one and the other, the relationships that ought to arise from complementarity are sometimes made difficult by virtue of reductionist, dilatory historicism on the part of the former and a tendency to amalgamate on the part of the latter.

### *C) The Components of Esotericism Considered as a Form of Thought*

In the modern West what we may call "esotericism" is a form of thought identifiable by the presence of six fundamental characteristics or components, distributed in varying proportions inside its vast, concrete, historical context. Four are "intrinsic," meaning that they must all be present for a given material to be classified under the rubric of esotericism. By nature they are more or less inseparable, as we shall see, but methodologically it is important to distinguish them. To them two more components are added that we shall call secondary, i.e., not fundamental, but frequently found in conjunction with the others.

Here are the four fundamental elements:

*1) Correspondences.* Symbolic and real correspondences (there is no room for abstractions here!) are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen. ("As above so below.") We find again here the ancient idea of microcosm and macrocosm or, if preferred, the principle of universal interdependence. These correspondences, considered more or less veiled at first sight, are, therefore, intended to be read and deciphered. The entire universe is a huge theater of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret. The principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle of linear causality are replaced here by those of the included middle and synchronicity. We can distinguish two kinds of correspondences. First, those that exist in nature, seen and unseen, e.g., between the seven metals and the seven planets, between the planets and the parts of the human body or character (or of society). This is the basis of astrology—correspondence between the natural world and the invisible departments of the celestial and supercelestial world, etc. Next there are correspondences between Nature (the cosmos) or even history and revealed texts. Here we find the Kabbalah, whether Jewish or Christian, and various varieties of *physica sacra.* According to this form of inspired concordism, scripture (the Bible, for example) and Nature are in harmony, the knowledge of one aiding in the knowledge of the other. Ultimately, the world stage is a linguistic phenomenon. But neither correspondences nor concordism necessarily mean "esotericism." Such are found present also in many a philosophical or religious current where each more or less delimits the nature of its own networks of analogy and similitude. This principle is equally at work in the procedures of divination, poetry, and sorcery, but the latter, nonetheless, are not synonymous.



*2) Living Nature.* The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical—as we have just seen with the idea of correspondence. Accordingly, Nature occupies an essential place. Multilayered, rich in potential revelations of every kind, it must be read like a book. The word *magia*, so important in the Renaissance imaginary, truly calls forth that idea of a Nature, seen, known, and experienced as essentially alive in all its parts, often inhabited and traversed by a light or a hidden fire circulating through it. Thus understood, the "magic" is simultaneously the knowledge of the networks of sympathies or antipathies that link the things of Nature and the concrete operation of these bodies of knowledge. (Let us think of the astral powers that the magus brings to talismans, Orphism in all its forms, especially musical forms, the use of stones, metals, plants favorable to reestablishing physical or psychological harmony that had been disturbed.) Inscribed in this perspective, Paracelsism represents a vast current with multiple ramifications, from animal magnetism to homeopathy, by way of all the forms of *magia naturalis* (a complex notion at the crossroads of magic and science). More than the practices, properly speaking, it is knowledge—in the sense of "gnosis"—which seems to contribute to establishing the notion of the esoteric attitude. This is knowledge in the sense Goethe meant when he had Faust say that he burns with desire to "know the world/in its intimate context/to contemplate the active forces and the first elements." To this is often added, fraught with implications for alchemy and for a *Naturphilosophie* of esoteric character, an interpretation of a teaching of Saint Paul (Rom. 8:12–22), according to which suffering Nature, subjected to exile and vanity, also waits to take part in salvation. Thus are established a science of Nature, a gnosis laden with soteriological elements, a theosophy which labors over the triad of "God–Humanity–Nature" from whence the theosopher brings forth dramaturgical correspondences, complementary and forever new.

However, we must note that since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the wake of an ontologically dualist metaphysics—and a theology, which since the nineteenth century has neglected Nature by letting science take over the universe—the emergence of a form of monist spiritualism in which Nature (the created world) is neglected, even denied in its reality through the influence of Oriental, especially Hindu, doctrines. This is a current that grants Nature only a quite inferior place at best and rejects modernity, including the sciences stemming from it. For the observer of present-day tendencies, this is an interesting phenomenon and for the historian, an off-course current.

*3) Imagination and Mediations.* The two notions are linked and complementary. The idea of correspondence presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds, such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits. From whence the importance of angelology in this context, but likewise of the "transmitter" in the sense of "initiator," of "guru" (cf. also *infra*, apropos of the sixth element). Perhaps it is especially this notion of mediation that makes the difference between the mystical and the esoteric. In somewhat oversimplified terms, we could say that the mystic—in the strictly classical sense—aspires to the more or less complete suppression of images and intermediaries because for him they become obstacles to the union with God. While the esoterist appears to take more interest in the intermediaries revealed to his inner eye through the power of his creative imagination than to extend himself essentially toward the union with the divine. He prefers to sojourn on Jacob's ladder where angels (and doubtless other entities as well) climb up and down, rather than to climb to the top and beyond. The distinction is merely a practical one. Indeed, there is sometimes a great deal of esotericism in a mystic like Saint Hildegard, and we note an acute mystical tendency in many an theosopher, e.g., Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin.

It is the imagination that allows the use of these intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphs of Nature, to put the theory of correspondences into active practice and to uncover, to see, and to know the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world. It would be instructive to trace the history of the imagination in the West, i.e., its status. We would thus shed light on its importance for it is in no way, as in Kant, the simple, restrained psychological faculty between perception and concept, or "the mad woman in the attic," mistress of error and delusion whose victims are those who flee the world but remain trapped in their own inner universe. But rather it is a kind of organ of the soul, thanks to which humanity can establish a cognitive and visionary relationship with an intermediary world, with a mesocosm—what Henry Corbin proposed calling a *mundus imaginalis*. Arabic influence (Avicenna, Sohravardhi, Ibn Arabi) was able to exert a determinative influence here in the West, but independently Paracelsism found



very comparable categories. And it is especially under the inspiration of the *Corpus Hermeticum* rediscovered in the fifteenth century that memory and imagination are associated to the extent of blending together. After all, a part of the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus consisted of "interiorizing" the world in our *mens*, from whence the "arts of memory" cultivated in the light of magic, during and after the Renaissance.

Understood thus, imagination (*imaginatio* is related to *magnet*, *magia*, *imago*) is the tool for knowledge of self, world, Myth. The eye of fire pierces the bark of appearances to call forth significations, "rapports" to render the invisible visible, the "*mundus imaginalis*" to which the eye of the flesh alone cannot provide access, and to retrieve there a treasure contributing to an enlargement of our prosaic vision. The accent is placed on vision and certainty, rather than on belief and faith. This imagination founded a visionary philosophy. Such especially energizes theosophical discourse in which it is exercised and deployed on the basis of verses of the revealed Book, both in the Jewish Kabbalah with the *Zohar* or in the great Western theosophical current which takes flight in Germany at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

*4) Experience of Transmutation.* If we did not consider the experience of transmutation as an essential component, what is discussed here would hardly exceed the limits of a form of speculative spirituality. Now we know the importance of initiation rituals in what on the most popular plane is called to mind by words like "esotericism," "gnosis," and "alchemy." Transformation would hardly be an adequate term because it does not necessarily signify the passage from one plane to another, nor the modification of the subject in its very nature. "Transmutation," a term borrowed from alchemy in our context, seems more appropriate. It should be understood also as "metamorphosis." It consists in allowing no separation between knowledge (gnosis) and inner experience, or intellectual activity and active imagination if we want to turn lead into silver or silver into gold. What modern Western esoteric currents often call "gnosis" in the current modern sense of the term is that illuminated knowledge that favors the "second birth"—a capital notion here, especially in theosophy. It seems that an important part of the alchemical corpus, especially since the beginning of the seventeenth century, had as its object less the description of laboratory experiments than the figurative presentation of this transmutation according to a marked path: *nigredo* (death, decapitation of the first matter or the old man), *albedo* (work in white), *rubedo* (work in red, the philosopher's stone). The rapprochement could have been suggested with the three phases of the traditional mystic's way: purgation; illumination; unification. It is often implied in such contexts that transmutation can just as well occur in a portion of Nature as in the experimenter himself.

Such would be the four basic components upon which the methodological approach proposed here for modern Western esotericism rests. Two more might be added, "relative" insofar as they are not indispensable to the defini-

tion. To present them as two new necessary conditions would limit the exploratory field too much. These two "relative" elements deserve to be considered nevertheless in their specificity because they frequently occur with the four others. On the one hand we could call this the practice of the concordance and on the other hand the transmission.

*5) The Praxis of the Concordance.* What is designated thus is not a property of Western esotericism throughout but marks most particularly the beginning of modern times (end of the fifteenth through the sixteenth century; cf. *supra*, concerning *philosophia perennis*) to reappear at the end of the nineteenth century in a different and triumphant form. This shows up in 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.

To be sure, there exists a practice of concordance that could be called "external." This is based solely on the recognition or simple respect for all established religions that must then be investigated for points of convergence capable of bringing together men of good will in a spirit of indifferent or active tolerance. The type of concordance meant here is of another nature. It tries to be more creative; it concerns individual at least as much as collective illumination and manifests the will not only to eliminate some differences or to uncover harmonies among diverse religious traditions, but to acquire above all a *gnosis* embracing diverse traditions and melding them in a single crucible. This would give the "Man of desire"* an X-ray plate image of the living and hidden trunk behind and beneath the visible branches of the discrete traditions. Starting with the nineteenth century this tendency really stands out, as a result of a better knowledge of the East, then thanks to the influence of "comparative religion," a new academic discipline. This reaches the point where the proponents of traditionalism, those called the *perennialists* in English, go so far as to postulate and teach that a "primordial Tradition" exists, overarching all the other religious or esoteric traditions of humanity.

*6) Transmission.* Emphasis on transmission implies that an esoteric teaching can or must be transmitted from master to disciple following a preestablished channel, respecting a previously marked path. The "second birth" comes at that price. Two notions follow from this: a) the validity of knowledge transmitted by an affiliation of unimpeachable authenticity or "regularity" (the believer must be attached to a tradition considered as an

* "Homme de Désir": a human being inspired by the desire to deserve the love of God and to know His secrets. The expression comes from the Vulgate ("vir desideriorum," see Book of *Daniel*, IX, 23; X, 11; X, 19) and was widely used by Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (see his book *L'Homme de Désir*, Lyons, 1790), by his master Martines de Pasqually and by several authors thereafter. Arthur E. Waite translates: "Man of Aspiration".



organic and integral ensemble deserving respect); b) the initiation, that is generally effected from master to disciple. (A person cannot initiate himself, any way he chooses, but must go through the hands of an initiator). We know the importance of these conditions in the genesis and development of secret, initiation societies in the West.

Just as there exists a form of thought of the esoteric type, so there exists one of a scientific, theological, or utopian type. The specificity of each consists in the simultaneous presence of a certain number of fundamental characteristics or components. Obviously the same component could belong to several forms of thought. Each puts into operation its own activities and procedures, its diverse ways of arranging and articulating its components. In this way, each constitutes for itself a body of references, a culture. There are references common to several forms of thought, e.g., "mystical" and "esoteric." With the latter, the "scientific" maintains complex and ambiguous relations where certain philosophies of Nature are at stake. It is especially interesting to note the oppositions and rejections. They are not caused uniquely by incompatible components among two forms of thought but can result also from an epistemological break inside one of them. Thus, inasmuch as the "theological" was presented in the form of a symbolic theology (e.g., the early Fathers, in the School of Chartres, or in St. Bonaventure), it was rather close to esotericism (without the two blending together for all that), but with appearance of Scholasticism in the thirteenth century such theology was increasingly in opposition to esotericism.

Therefore, to study the history of Western currents of esotericism would be first of all to identify the simultaneous presence of the six components in the works and discourses where they are found. These components can be positioned quite unequally. On the other hand, they are as identifiable in music, art, and literature as in explicitly esoteric works. We can no longer keep up with the Shakespeare studies devoted to that aspect of his dramas.

### *D) Advantages of the Empirical Approach*

Far from sending us to doctrinal contents, the six components serve as receptacles into which various types of experiences or imaginaries* are distributed. We can enter there as many hierarchical views of the Neoplatonist type (like: the high is placed hierarchically above the below) as non-hierarchical views of

* "The (an) imaginary": In the sense that it has recently acquired in Humanities, mostly in France ("l'imaginaire"), this substantive refers to the images, symbols, myths, which consciously or not underlie and/or permeate a discourse, a conversation, a literary or artistic work, a current of thought, an artistic or political trend.

the hermetic type (like: God can be found just as well in a grain of sand as anywhere else; heliocentrism changes nothing essential ). In the same way "transformation" can cover very different theological aspects depending upon whether or not belief in the existence of "subtle bodies" is present. A theosophy can be "emanationist," or "creationist." It can admit or reject reincarnation just as easily without having its esoteric character questioned. The question is in fact less one of believing than of knowing or of seeing. . . . It would appear, thus, advantageous to seek out similar constitutive elements having value as receptacles of the imaginary, rather that to try to find what would stem from separate explicit beliefs or professions of faith. The advantage is two-fold .

The first advantage is facilitating the sketch of a possible boundary around the field. A boundary, happily quite fluid, favoring and respecting its transdisciplinary character which considerably overflows into art, politics, literature, history of ideas. (Concerning the history of ideas one of the more interesting aspects of contemporary esotericism is the manner in which some of its representatives adapt to modernity, even postmodernity, which others reject. ) A thoroughly understood transdisciplinarity respects the specificity of disciplines in order to keep any from being absorbed by neighboring disciplines of expansionist or encroaching tendencies. This implies that each define its scope in a sense that is not too "universalizing" to keep from being dissolved in a nearby ocean.

Thus the project of constituting a domain that would be "universal" esotericism appears somewhat unsuited to seat the status of our specialization on a solid basis. To be sure, there is perhaps "some esotericism" in other cultural terrains (e.g., ancient Egypt, Far East, Amerindian civilizations, etc.), and the temptation to apprehend a "universal" esotericism, to seek out its probable invariants is understandable. In a recent work (*L'Esotérisme*, Paris, R. Laffont, 1990, pp. 311–364), Pierre A. Riffard tried to present such invariants. These would be, according to this scholar, the impersonality of the authors, the opposition between the profane and the initiated, the subtile, correspondences, numbers, occult sciences, occult arts, and initiation. Riffard examined the text of the *Emerald Tablet* and found his eight invariants there. (Let us note in passing that we also find in the *Emerald Tablet* our four component-conditions, plus the second of our relative components.) This proves that his taxonomy can be utilized, at least in certain cases. Nevertheless, if we can establish an agreement on the subject of correspondences, indeed on initiation (which would closely correspond to our "transmission" and "transmutation"), that is not the case for the six other invariants. Thus, Riffard's proposition is different from ours. He means to find his eight universals from the beginning of the history of civilization, a bold and stimulating undertaking, but which appears rather more able to serve as an instrument for investigating vast terrains, already so constituted, such as the history of philosophy



(so long as it takes up the universal history of philosophy), the works on the imaginary (those which for nearly twenty-five years have detailed their method), or anthropology in the broad sense. Methodologically, it appears more valid to start from the empirical perspective that esotericism is a Western notion. And that the latter goes back to an ensemble of materials already sufficiently varied and thorny for it to be preferable to study them inside their context. Thus esotericism, according to Riffard, escapes what the present proposal attempts to enclose through research, not of invariants, but of elements that would be found together: a) in a given historical period or geographical domain; b) from the moment when names are sought to designate them as a whole. It is a more circumscribed enterprise, but one which allow us to avoid anachronisms like the following.

Today and for the last three centuries there are enthusiasts who see in the religion of ancient Egypt an esotericism, present in the form of mysteries, symbols, initiations, and information hidden from the profane. Now, even presuming that the enthusiasts are correct, what they describe would never be but a form of religiosity shared by many other religious systems, and it is hard to see why that should be termed "esotericism." It appears more pertinent and legitimate to study forms of egyptomania and egyptophilia proper to Western esotericists themselves, because if there is an Egyptian esotericism, it exists first of all in our modern imaginary. Whether or not the latter since the seventeenth century, reflects what ancient Egypt really was concerns the historian of Western esoteric currents only very indirectly.

Limiting the scope of the field means likewise not unduly extending it to nearby sectors despite actual overlappings and obvious proximities. A phenomenon like the New Age, so interesting today for the sociologist, psychologist, and historian of religions, comes under the rubric of New Religious Movements (NRM) rather than esoteric currents properly speaking. (The domain of the NRM has an importance which the university is only now beginning to fully appreciate. It will require special chairs.) In the same way parapsychology and witchcraft, sectors with often obvious connections to modern esoteric currents, do not for all that form an integral part of them. There are likewise some institutions like Freemasonry that come under the heading of esotericism only in certain aspects. (There are forms of Freemasonry almost completely devoid of esotericism.)

If the first advantage of the approach seems to be that it lets us sketch in the borders, the second is that it lets us distance ourselves from each esoterist speaking in that capacity—seeing that often, in our century, thoughts or schools tend to present themselves as esotericism-in-itself, as *the* way, *the* true Tradition, in opposition to other approaches. Some of the former present the postulate that all religious traditions in the world, all expressions of the sacred join together beyond their differences in a higher unity, with the result that we no longer know whether it is still a question of esotericism or of the sacred

in general under all its forms, of the Myth, of religion *sub specie aeternitatis.* This tendency is often accompanied by a dogmatic attitude and confers henceforth to the uttering voice a militant, partisan, even fundamentalist coloration.

Still some of these currents (e.g., the neo-Guénonian or traditionalist and the Frithjof Schuon school in its continuation), derivative as they may be, appear quite respectable on an intellectual level. It is not the same for many a suspect or hodgepodge discourse proffered in our days by people convinced they hold the truth, who co-opt a shameless appropriation of the word "esotericism." We thus witness a perversion in a caricatural or paranoid vein of the most humanely valuable legacies of the esoteric traditions. How can we then be astonished when serious minds, somewhat uninformed on the complexity of these problems, have trouble assessing the situation and are often inclined to view the objects of our discipline with suspicion or irony?

Not only the delirious, alas, are available to sow confusion (and furnish weighty arguments to the traditionalists). We now see appear, in impressive numbers, more serious students, indeed specialists of one discipline or another, who get involved speaking authoritatively on esotericism when they have no particular competence. The reason for this phenomenon is twofold. On the one hand, this vast terrain, until now badly beaconed, still little attended to by universities, represents a choice prey for imperialist projects. On the other hand, above all, in our times where the book market is intensely active and where for lack of specialists in sufficiently large number (and this is a euphemism) editors of Western countries lack touchstones when they must decide to whom to assign texts (popularizing essays, summaries, dictionary entries, etc.) on esotericism in general. Now the fact that someone deals with mystics, religious symbolism, or psychology does not necessarily qualify him to write such texts—but he or she receives the assignment for lack of someone better. The result is that today almost anybody thinks he has rights to esotericism; almost anybody speaks of almost anything with impunity, with the complicity of the editors and the public.

A situation like this arouses in other serious minds—and not the least of these—an understandably negative reaction. If one has to write on a subject that an esoterologist would consider as pertaining to esotericism—e.g., a study (a book, journal article, dictionary entry) on Swedenborg or alchemy in seventeenth-century England—there is no need there to examine the notion of esotericism (suspect in their eyes) nor even to bring it up. It suffices to have studied properly what is going to be discussed. In fact, we observe (and there is nothing surprising about this) that it is not the esoterologists who do the studies the most scientifically satisfactory on the authors or these currents but specialists engaged in focussed research (e.g., in the Jewish or Christian Kabbalah, philosophy in the Renaissance, the history of science at such and such a time). The result is that instead of the recuperating perspectives



already mentioned, the attitude of many these specialists is rejection pure and simple. Rejection of a notion of esotericism understood as scientifically operative and distrust of any enterprise tending to circumscribe a specific corpus—operative also—of esotericism because for them this corpus can only overlap those, already extant, of philosophy, literature, art, etc. But a similar suspicion as well as the homogenizing "confusion" constitute, no doubt, a stimulant indispensable for the growth and autonomy of our new discipline.

Therefore it behooves us to use the word "esotericism" wisely. We should not consider it a bearer of a spiritual or semantic value that it does not contain in itself. We should not make it designate a landscape in which by virtue of some intention or other, all cats would be gray. We should extricate it, if possible from the recuperators, scholarly or otherwise. We should consider it a frame of mind, a style of imaginary, through which circulates a tincture permeating diverse materials to give them a specific hue. The approach proposed here translates thus a twofold concern. On the one hand, to have differences respected; on the other hand, to carry empirical research, without ideological apriori, of transversal pathways and converging byways. Thus we can in the future make a clearing into many other hitherto unexplored gardens. Let us preserve this term so suitable for denoting an ensemble of cultural and religious realities, which a family resemblance seems to bind together sufficiently to authorize our making them a field of study. The official disciplines or specializations which so willingly marginalize these realities are themselves never more than the expression of one form of the imaginary among others.

## II) SOME KEY CONCEPTS: GNOSIS, THEOSOPHY, SECRECY, OCCULTISM, HERMETICISM.

### *A) Gnosis*

Gnosis (from the Greek, *Gnosis, "knowing, knowledge"*) is a spiritual and intellectual activity that can accede to a special mode of knowledge. Unlike scientific or "rational" knowledge (which, moreover, gnosis does not exclude but uses), gnosis is an integrating knowledge, a grasp of fundamental relations including the least apparent that exist among the various levels of reality, e.g., among God, humanity, and the universe. Gnosis is either this knowing in itself or the intuition and the certainty of possessing a method permitting access to such knowledge. This project is more inclusive than Aristotelian metaphysics because it aims at integrating the self and the relationship of the subject to the self, as well as to that of the entire external world, in a unitary vision of reality. To a static metaphysics of being, gnosis thus opposes a dynamic and genetic metaphysics. The gnosis of esoteric currents possesses two very characteristic traits. On the one hand, it abolishes the distinction between faith and knowledge. (From the moment a person "knows," faith is

no longer necessary.) On the other hand, this gnosis is presumed to possess a soteriological function, i.e., it contributes to the individual salvation of the person who practices it. The word "gnosis" serves to denote as much the spiritual and intellectual attitude itself as the referent corpus that illustrates it. Part of that corpus constitutes a very specific ensemble, Gnosticism, a religious system appearing along side Christianity in the first centuries of our era (with Basilides, Valentinus, Marcion, etc.). An original feature of this system is absolute ontological dualism (rejection of the created world, considered as evil), professed by numerous representatives and that the gnoses of later western esotericisms would rarely retain—but which would reappear later in religious movements not specifically esoteric like Bulgarian Bogomilism and Catharism. "Gnosis" in the singular is often used as a synonym of "gnosticism," so that the mistake is sometimes made of identifying gnosis in general with this particular system.

Besides the etymology referred to earlier, for "esotericism" the following is occasionally proposed: "eso-thodos," method—or way—toward the interior ("eiso-theo"—I make enter). This means "entry into the self." This is why it is sometimes called "interiorism": a knowledge that passes through a gnosis to reach a form of individual illumination and salvation. A knowledge of the relationship uniting us to God or to the divine world, or even the knowledge of the mysteries inherent in God. (In that case gnosis is theosophy in the strict sense.) To learn these relationships, the individual enters or descends into him- or herself: therefore "interiorism," but without any romanticized or intimist connotation, which would neglect an engaged resonance with the world and with God to the advantage of introspection alone. By the same token we do not enter into our self any way we choose, but according to an initiatory process. (*Initium*, initiation, beginning, are kindred notions.) Here it is important to "recognize" the guideposts because the way is marked by a series of intermediaries. According to the forms that the esoteric tradition takes, these are simply states of being (esotericism is then the study of and experimentation with the inner twilight realms), but more generally, angels, or entities called "*intellectus agens*" or "*animae coelestes*," more or less numerous, more or less personalized, but which are always in a certain way connatural to us—without which relationships could not be established. In order to travel felicitously along our initiatory path, it is less a matter of inciting them to intercede in our favor than of coming to know them.

We follow this path by committing ourselves to it, either alone, helped by appropriate texts, which hide the mysteries while revealing their keys, or with the help of an initiator, who can be an isolated master or a member of an initiatory school. The initiation serves to regenerate our consciousness, thanks to a process that lets us reappropriate the knowing we have lost—the theme of Lost Word, the exile caused by the original sin, etc.—and thanks to which we refashion the experience of our relationships to the sacred and the



universe. Whether or not a disciple has a master, he has to access a knowing—or a form of nonknowing—transmittable by the word and, thanks to that, to advance in the knowledge of the connections uniting the disciple to higher entities (theosophy *strictu sensu*) and to cosmic forces, to living Nature (theosophy *lato sensu*).

To succeed it is necessary to practice what is traditionally called "active imagination," the essential component of esotericism, as we have seen. This imagination lets the disciple escape both from the sterility of a purely discursive logic, and from the rule-free extravagances of fantasy or sentimentality. This imagination is what prevails against the dangers of the essentially psychic lower imagination, source of error and untruth. The imagination, true organ of the soul, puts us in contact with the *mundus imaginalis* or the "*imaginal*" world. (Henry Corbin coined that appropriate adjective.) The imaginal world is the space of intermediary beings, a mesocosm possessing its own geography, thoroughly real, perceptible to each of us as a function of our respective cultural imagery. From this point on we will use "gnosis" in a general sense. The Greek root (*gnosis*), the same as in Sanskrit (*jnana*)—likewise for "knowledge, "*Erkenntnis* or "*connaissance*"—means simultaneously "to know" and "sapient wisdom." Late Greek thought, then patristic Christianity, as a result of distinguishing between "*gnosis*" and "*épistème*," introduced a separation between knowledge and its sacred source, while the root *Kn*, apparent in *genesis*, implies simultaneously knowledge and the coming to being. Franz von Baader, the most important German theosopher of the nineteenth century, was thus able to devote a part of his work to the ontological identity of learning and engendering. In bringing us to birth, or rather rebirth, gnosis unifies and liberates us. To know is to be liberated. It does not suffice to utter symbols or dogmas, it is necessary still to be engendered by them in the very place where spiritual traditions really are fulfilled, a space accessible only to those who succeed in penetrating into the time and space proper to the imaginal.

Gnosis indeed is not knowledge by itself; between believing and knowing there is a third term: the imaginal. Islamic gnosis establishes the division clearly: intellective knowing, knowledge of the traditional givens that are the object of faith, and knowledge or internal vision, intuitive revelation. It is the latter that opens the imaginal for us: "Gnosis" is inner vision. Its mode of expression is narrative; it is a *recital*. It believes only to the extent it knows. It is wisdom and faith. It is *Pistis Sophia*" (Henry Corbin). "Gnosis" must therefore be understood here in its first sense of higher knowledge, which is added to the common truths of objective Revelation, or "the deepening of that Revelation rendered possible by a special grace," according to Pierre Deghaye's elegant definition. A divine science par excellence, which the eighteenth-century theosopher Friedrich Christoph Oetinger called *philosophia sacra*. Sacred philosophy, bringing salvation, soteriological because it has the

virtue of effecting metamorphoses, the inner mutation of human beings, thanks not to discursive thought but to a narrative revelation of hidden things, a salvific light bringing life and joy, which effects and assures salvation. To know what we are and whence we came is already, in a certain way, to be saved. Knowledge that is not theoretical but operative, and which for that reason transforms the knowing subject, just as alchemy, besides material transmutation is the transformation of the adept himself.

Shiite esotericism and the Jewish Kabbalah both represent a spiritual attitude essentially comparable to that of Christian esotericism. By nature Islam lent itself to the flowering of esotericism. According to the Koran tradition, the Koran possesses seven esoteric senses, to which a *hadith* of the prophet alludes: "I plunged into the Koran's ocean of secrets, and I pulled out the pearls of its subtleties. I raised the veils of sounds and letters covering its true realities, the secret meanings that are kept there far from the eyes of men." The gnostic practices the *ta'wil*, i.e. a spiritual interpretation. The letter is only the *zâhir* (back) of a *bâtin* (cavern, matrix) or hidden reality. More than the other branches of Islam, such as Sunnism, Shiism conceived of divine revelation in the light of prophecy never finished in time and a permanent interpreter of that very revelation. This does not mean replacing already existing divine law by another law, but it means uncovering its plenary sense ever better and more fully. Such conceptions are in no way incompatible with the purest Christianity, even if the official theologies have had a tendency to smother them. The reason, or pretext, of that obscuring is due in part to the emphasis in official catacheses on the absolute transcendence of God with respect to the creature, lest the gulf separating them be filled. Now "*trans*" does not only mean a frontier. It has two meanings, depending on whether it is envisaged as verb-prefix or a preposition. In the first case there is continuity, passage as in "*transeunt Rhenum*"; in the second there is discontinuity (*incolunt trans Rhenum*). Despite the presence of a negative theology proper to the majority of Western esotericisms, as to what constitutes divinity itself, the latter always insist on the procession of stages and of entities mediating between God and His creatures.

Therefore, esotericism permits access to a higher level of intelligence, where dualities of all kind are transcended in a unity that is in no respect passivity. It is a unity not under the jurisdiction of an identific schema or regime, but subject to a "dualitude" operating in a dynamic, or rather, in an energetic fashion. To designate that active state various words have been proposed: the inner man (St. Paul), the supramental (Sri Aurobindo), illuminative intuition (René Guénon), the transcendental Ego (Husserl), enstasis (Mircea Eliade). There is also the "infusion" of Raymond Abellio, who has also drawn up a list of these terms and spoken in this regard about "concrete and permanent participation in universal interdependence" in view of the fulfillment in man and woman of the mystery of incarnation. Enstasis aspires to be expressed, to be



diffused, to communicate, not in the form of effusions—whence the word "infusion"—but of transmission, oral or written, through a veil of symbols and in anonymity or at least with a concern to recreate and rediscover rather than to seek originality at any price. Humility, therefore, but intellectual and not sentimental. Love, as well, but which to find or preserve its strength keeps from being sentimental and is not merely desire or sensuous attraction. Desire for infinity? More likely, as Frithjof Schuon emphasized, the logical and ontological tendency of this love toward its own transcendental essence.

Gnosis calls forth the mystical, just as anything mystical always contains some gnosis. Mysticism, more nocturnal, would willingly cultivate renunciation; gnosis, more solar, would observe detachment and would practice systematization, although the mystic occasionally finds in his own path the same intermediary entities as the gnostic does. But while the gnostic first seeks illuminating and salvific knowledge, the mystic limits the number of intermediaries as much as he can and aspires above all to unite with his God—a union that, in the three Abrahamic religions maintains the ontological separation between God and Man. To esotericism thus understood are attached procedures or rituals that aim at eliciting the concrete manifestation of particular entities. Such is theurgy.

The esoteric attitude in the sense of "gnostic" is thus a mystical experience in which intelligence and memory participate, both being expressed in a symbolic form that reflects diverse levels of reality. Gnosis, according to a remark by theosopher Valentin Tomberg, would be the expression of a form of intelligence and memory that had effected a passage through a mystical experience. A gnostic would therefore be a mystic capable of communicating to someone else his own experiences in a manner that would retain the impression of revelations received in passing through the different levels of the "mirror." An example of a mystic proposition would be "God is love; he who dwells in love dwells in God and God in him;" or "my Father and I are one." An example of a first-level gnostic proposition would be "God is a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" or "In my Father's house there are many mansions."

### *B) Theosophy*

Theosophy is a gnosis that has a bearing not only on the salvific relations the individual maintains with the divine world, but also on the nature of God Himself, or of divine persons, and on the natural universe, the origin of that universe, the hidden structures that constitute it in its actual state, its relationship to mankind, and its final ends. It is in this general sense that we speak of theosophy traditionally. Theosophy, in the sense we are using it, confers on esotericism this cosmic, or rather cosmosophic dimension, thereby introducing the idea of an intentionality in the world, that keeps esotericism from suc-

cumbing to solipsism. Theosophy opens esotericism to the entire universe and by the same token renders possible a philosophy of nature.

"*Theosophia*" etymologically is "wisdom of God." The word is used by several Church Fathers, both Greek and Latin, as a synonym for "theology," quite naturally since "*sophia*" means at once knowledge, doctrine, and wisdom. The *sophos* is a "wiseman." The "*theosophoi*" are "those knowing divine things," and that, however, does not necessarily mean theologians! It would be interesting to systematically trace the use of this word by religious authors from the beginning of Christianity until the Renaissance. We would see that it occasionally differs from the sense of its synonym "theology" such as we understand it today. Theosophy is distinguished from theology to suggest more or less the existence of knowledge of a gnostic type. It is in this sense, for example, that Pseudo-Dionysus tends to use it in the sixth century, as well as, though somewhat less clearly in the thirteenth century the author of the astonishing *Summa Philosophiae*, who is perhaps not Robert Grosseteste, but who in any case, came from the same milieu as he did: theosophers are only authors inspired by the holy books, and theologians (like Pseudo-Dionysus or Origen) are those who have the task of explaining theosophy. We see that the terms are the opposite of the present-day meaning. We must wait until the Renaissance for more frequent usage but it is still synonymous, sometimes, with theology or philosophy. Johannes Reuchlin, who at the beginning of the sixteenth century did much to promote the Christian Kabbalah, speaks of "*theosophistae*" to designate decadent scholastics as does Cornelius Agrippa when both could have used the label in its present meaning. Du Cange instructs on the use, at the time, of "theosophy" for "theology" (*Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis*, 1733/1736). From 1540 to 1553, Johannes Arboreus (Alabri) published a *Theosophia* in several volumes, but hardly touches on esotericism.

The meaning of the word becomes clearly defined at the end of the sixteenth century, probably under the influence of the *Arbatel*, a book of white magic that appeared undated, but around 1550 or 1560, followed by numerous reprintings. Here, theosophy has already almost its present meaning. It begins to be used in this esoteric meaning by Henrich Khunrath at the very end of the sixteenth century. Boehme's theosophy always starts with Nature, which he conceives as essentially celestial and divine. Contemporary also is the title under which Valentin Weigel's *Libellus Theosophiae (Ein Büchlein der göttlichen Weisheit)* first appeared at Neustadt in 1618. This is not the author's title—he died thirty years earlier—but it is the one used for publication. We see from these examples that the meaning of the word becomes more precise at the same time that the notion receives its definitive elaboration in Germany from several contemporaneous authors, and its features are subsequently retained. This moment when theosophy acquires its patent of nobility corresponds to the apogee of German baroque literature as well as to the birth of



the "Rosicrucian" movement (ca. 1610–1620). Henceforth the word will be used often, e.g., by Johann Georg Gichtel and Gottfried Arnold. It is already accompanied by a kindred term, fashionable with Rosicrucians and Paracelsians, first used by the Platonic and Hermetist philosopher Francesco Patrizi: "Pansophy." This term combines two notions of theosophy, Wisdom by divine illumination and Light from Nature. In 1596, Bartholomäus Scleus opposed particularist or sectarian theologians with his "*Mystica Theologia Universalis und Pansophia*," which for him was the same as "*Magia coelestis*" or celestial magic. It is more customary to mean by "Pansophy," as it was defined a little later by Jan Amos Comenius, a system of universal knowledge, all things being ordered and classified by God according to analogical relationships. Or, if you prefer, a knowledge of divine things acquired via the concrete world, i.e., the entire universe, in which the "signatures" or hieroglyphics must first be deciphered. In other words, the Book of Nature helps us understand better Holy Scripture and God Himself. This would reserve the term theosophy for the reverse procedure, knowing the universe thanks to our knowledge of God. But, practically speaking, especially from the eighteenth century onward, "theosophy" is generally used to designate the Pansophic progression as well.

In the eighteenth century, the word and concept "theosophy" enter the philosophical vocabulary and become widespread. The two most important theosophical works at the beginning of the century are also German. They have wide-ranging repercussions, and their titles are explicit: *Theophilosophia theoretica et practica* (1710) by Sincerus Renatus and *Opus mago-cabalisticum et theosophicum* (1721) by George von Welling. It is in this sense once more that Franciscus Buddeus uses the word in his *Isagoge* (Leipzig, 1727). But especially pastor Jacob Brucker devotes a long chapter to theosophy in his *Kurze Fragen aus der Philosophischen Historie* (Ulm, 1735) in German, followed by his monumental *Historia critica Philosophiae* in Latin (Leipzig, 1741). All theosophers are represented there. We have the impression that he has left out none. It is the official consecration in the world of letters, so much so that Brucker will remain through the Enlightenment the obligatory reference in the history of philosophy. Few authors, even among the esotericists, will have contributed as much as he to promote theosophy, which he himself did not find congenial!

At the same time, the word is missing from most of the major French dictionaries during the Enlightenment. We do not find it in Furetière, nor in either the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* or Bayle's *Dictionnaire*. In Trévoux' dictionary there is a brief, though inoffensive, mention. But Denis Diderot, makes up for lost time. In a long article in his great *Encyclopaedia*, entitled "Theosophers," which he himself wrote, he repeats entire passages of Brucker's texts in French without citing his source, while committing some misinterpretations, which free translation does not altogether excuse. His

French is indeed more elegant and charming than the cumbersome Latin of its model, but the content is superficial also. Diderot meanwhile wavers between sympathy and disdain. At any rate, despite an attraction for the representatives of this form of esotericism, he himself does not have a theosophical cast of mind. At any rate he contributed to spread the use of the word in France. It will continue to be used occasionally in other senses. For example, Kant calls "theosophism" the system of philosophers who like Malbranche believe they can see everything in God, and Antonio Rosmini uses "theosophy" to designate the general metaphysics of being (in *Teosofia*, 1859). But even with somewhat vague connotations, it is almost always the esoteric sense that prevails from then on. Thus, Friedrich Schiller titles one of his first texts *Theosophie des Julius*, which appeared in *Thalia* in 1787. Some confusion is introduced in 1875 when Madame Blavatsky founds the "Theosophical Society," which took its highly syncretist teachings chiefly from the East.*

By "theosophy" as by "esotericism, " we mean then first a hermeneutic, i.e., an interpretation of divine instruction, e.g., from a revealed Book, founded both on an intellectual and speculative operation and upon a revelation caused by an illumination. (The mode of thought here is analogic and homologic, with both the human being and the universe considered as symbols of God.) In the case of theosophy, properly speaking, this interpretation of divine teaching has bearing on the inner mysteries of the Divinity itself (theosophy *strictu sensu*) or of the entire universe (theosophy *lato sensu*, as used here).

The theosopher starts with a revealed given, his myth—for example, the narrative of Creation in the Book of Genesis—from which he evokes symbolic resonances by virtue of his active imagination. Understood as a way of individual salvation, gnosis implied already an idea of "penetration." But this time that means going down not only into the depths of self. This catabasis or anabasis is presumed to be effected also in the depths of Nature and of the divine itself. Nature aspires to a deliverance the key to which is held by Man. Since the Alexandrian *Corpus Hermeticum*, Western esotericism has tended to hold the principle of the divine origin of the human *mens*, which makes it contain also the organization of the universe. Our *mens* has a nature identical to that of the stellar governors of the universe described in the *Poimandres*. Therefore it is identical to that of the reflections and projections of those in the more concrete world that surrounds us. And the Deity that "rests in itself" as Boehme says, i.e., dwelling in its absolute transcendence, at the same time

* On the history of the word *theosophy*, and of the movement of that name, see my article "Le courant théosophique (fin XVIè–XVIIè siècles): essai de périodisation", in *Politica Hermetica*, nr. VI, 1993 (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme), pp. 6–41. Forthcoming translation in *Theosophical History* (journal published by the California State University, Fullerton).



comes from itself. God is a hidden treasure who aspires to be known. He lets himself be partially revealed by halving himself at the heart of an ontological sphere, situated between our created world and the unknowable which is allegedly the place of encounter between Him and the creature. Thus transcendence and immanence are reconciled.

"Imagination and mediation": this category of esotericism, cited earlier, represents an essential aspect of theosophy. Indeed, no more so in the Abrahamic theosophies than in the others, truth is not manifested in abstract ideas but takes on visible forms and envelopes. In itself Divinity is immutable, and yet it makes itself manifest. There is the paradox! We know Divinity but only by living images of its manifestation. The infinite is "fixed" in limits. (*"Der Urgrund fasst sich im Grund,"* says Boehme.) But the creature losing itself through dedication to the infinite, going beyond limits to the infinite, means going to an evil infinite, as happened to Lucifer.

Let us cite Boehme once more for he is characteristic of this form, this current of thought, while at the same time he is a model, at least in a poetic mode, for modern theosophy. He tells us that Nature is one of the specific modes of Revelation. By starting from our most concrete nature in order to raise ourselves to the science of higher Nature, we practice a gnosis that is specifically theosophic because this gnosis is not only abstract knowledge but is accompanied by a transformation of ourself. Earlier we recalled that theosophic discourses are partially tributaries of the cultural milieus in which they flourish. This is something we must keep in mind whenever we study such a discourse. Thus, Boehme's theosophy is an amalgam between the medieval mystical tradition (that of fourteenth-century Germany) and the *Naturphilosophie* inspired by Paracelsus. What Boehme retains from German mysticism, in a properly theosophic turn of mind, is the theme of the second birth, which for him is equivalent to the alchemists' *Great Work*. It is the birth of the Christ in Man through the Holy Spirit and the Father. But with Boehme a philosophy of Nature serves to materialize in some respect that notion of the second birth through meditation on symbols to achieve the "fixing" of Holy Spirit in the body of light. We see the relationship to mysticism. However, the theosopher does not limit himself to describing the itinerary he has followed through torments and joys, as does, for example, St. John of the Cross. The theosopher starts with a personal event, which he subsequently objectifies in his own way, projecting it backwards on a macrocosmic soul in the image of celestial totality, and practices thus a form of exemplariness in reverse. The difference with mysticism appears especially, of course, in the fact that the contemplative claims to abolish images, while for Boehme and theosophers generally, the image is, on the contrary, the fulfillment.

In this respect we could call theosophy a theology of Revelation, if we realize that this Revelation is that of God in the interior of a creature at the same time it is the Revelation of God to Himself. Theosophy would thus be,

at least in this cultural context a theology of the image, since the latter, far from being a simple reflection, truly represents the ultimate reality to the extent that the finality of each being is to produce its image, which in the last analysis is the best of itself. In realizing our perfection, or rather our integrality, we incarnate ourselves. Each being possesses a finality of perfection, which passes through the image and its incarnation. (In the seventeenth century, *Bild* still signified both "image" and "body.") Thus the letter of Holy Scripture is the very body in which God is manifest and, consequently, Christian theosophers are almost all "*bibelfest*": they want to be "scriptuary" like the Jewish Kabbalists.

We understand better the success of theosophy and pansophy in the intellectual and spiritual climate of the late Renaissance, if we juxtapose it with the need, found in so many men in the seventeenth century, to seek the explanation of the structure of the universe and its cohesion. Both theological and scientific thought tried to define the relationship of the microcosm and the macrocosm, i.e., of Man and the world, and to integrate everything in a general harmony according to perspective of synthesis truly able to favor a solidarity of spirit. This is why pansophy, total science, as its name indicates, appears as a branch of theosophy, indeed, as its synonym. On the other hand, the Reformation included, undoubtedly in embryo, if not theosophic elements, never discernable in the thought of its founders—at least a disposition to encourage its presence by virtue of an original or constitutive mixture of the mysticism and rationalism in Protestantism. Moreover, the recommended reading of Scripture, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, could only favor bold and individual speculations, especially arising at the moment men began to see in their Lutheranism more a moralizing catechism than a teaching for life.

Behind the complexity of the real, the theosopher seeks the hidden meanings of the ciphers and hieroglyphics of Nature. A quest inseparable from an intuitive plunge into the myth to which he belongs through faith, where his active imagination sends forth resonances appropriate for being gathered into a bouquet of meanings. At the same time that he starts from a reflection on things in order to understand God, so he tries to seize the becoming of the divine world—his question is not "*an sit Deus*," but "*quid sit Deus*"—in order to understand the world at the same time and to possess thereby the intimate vision of the principle of the reality of the universe and its becoming. The aspects of myth he emphasizes are quite naturally those that the established churches have tended to neglect or ignore: the nature of the fall of Lucifer and of Adam, androgyny, sophiology, arithmosophy. . . . He believes in a permanent revelation directed to him, and his discourse always gives the impression that he receives knowledge and inspiration simultaneously. He inserts each concrete observation into an integral system that is not the least totalitarian but is indefinitely open, always based on the triptych of



origin, present state, and ultimate ends, i.e., his system is based on a cosmogony (bound to a theogony and an anthropogony), a cosmology, and an eschatology. St. Paul himself would have justified in advance this active and operative quest, affirming that "the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (I Cor. 2:10). The theosopher, like the gnostic generally, accompanies the acquisition of deep insight with a change in being, a felicitously inevitable process as soon as he *plays the part* in theogonic and cosmic dramas or seeks, like Boehme, to achieve a "second birth." His discourse, akin to a recital or recitative, gives the impression of being less his work than that of a spirit speaking through him. It is only in his choice of images, in the form of his discourse, that we can discover each time his own originality. Moreover the essential for him is not so much to invent or to be original, as to remember, or to devote his energy to rediscovering the living articulation of all things visible and invisible, by scrutinizing both the Divine and observed Nature often in its most infinitesimal details, and becoming the hermeneut of theosophers who have scrutinized these details before him.

In the archaic epoch of Greece, *mythos* and *logos*—which together make up mythology—did not contradict each other but called forth a sacred narrative of gods and heroes. Little by little, *logos* took precedence over *mythos*, philosophy over mythology, to the detriment of metonymy and meaningful displacements of sense. Recent contemporary hermeneutics has at least recovered the plurality of meaning, but though "plural," it does not have the same ends as the theosophic project. By nature the latter avoids impasses because, instead of juxtaposing the translations of the senses, theosophy practices advancing a discourse that does not pretend to speak about anything other than itself. The revealed narrative of myth, on which it rests is there to be relived, under penalty of dissipating in abstract notions. Thus theosophy has often, albeit tacitly, supported theology, revitalizing it when it risked sinking into the conceptual. The conceptual, for Boehme, Oetinger, Baader, and other theosophers, always waits for its reinterpretation in and through a *mythos–logos* wherein the concept, bereft of its privileged status, retains at best the status of a provisional, methodological tool. Because, much more than recourse to abstraction, it is the experience of the symbol that assures the grasp of the mythic experience. Any myth to the extent it is complete, i.e., consists of the triptych mentioned earlier, is presented by the same stroke as a narrative of origins. It reports on events happening *in illo tempore*, as Mircea Eliade has so pertinently noted, which establish ritual acts and theosophic discourses.

The theosopher exploits thoroughly the exploratory range of the mythic narrative in unveiling the infinite richness of its symbolic function—the "natural tableau of relationships uniting God, Man and the universe," as expressed in the title of a splendid work (1782) of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin. This richness gives us the means to live in our world as in a Baudelairean "forest of

symbols." Symbols, not allegories, because it is not a matter of extracting from the images clothing the revealed narrative a sense other than the narrative itself and that could be expressed—or reduced—by another kind of discourse. Permanent renewal in the latent sense of the Book, a sense that the Book only allows us to approach with the help of the Spirit, theosophy ties together the origin and the end, i.e., the theogony, indeed the anthropogony, and the eschatology. But, of course, a "complete" theosophy adds to these dimensions that of cosmology or, rather cosmosophy, endless reflection on the different material and natural levels, a gnosis perpetually nourished by the discovery and explanation of analogies. Thus, human existence is apprehended as a totality wherein our life finds its East and its Meaning.

Comparable in this to prophesy, although by different modes, theosophy is an "*ex-plicatio*" of Revelation. Christianity especially lends itself to such an "amplification." Does not the Gospel of Luke (1:1–13) begin with these words: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses of the Word . . ." In Judaic tradition, the function of *midrash* is to actualize Revelation by interpreting it as a function of the present. Christianity keeps, as a need inherent in its basic nature, this necessity of a continuous Revelation because, although definitive for the essential (Heb. 10:12–14), it remains necessarily veiled in part, apophatic. On the theophany of Jesus, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa explain that His glory was made manifest in the mist. This means that Revelation remains until the last day, the object of prophetic elucidation, theosophy raising the value of the mist itself. In both cases entering into an increasingly profound understanding of the "mystery" is neither an insoluble enigma nor problem but a message proposed, support for endless meditation.

We could say that two forms of theology exist. First of all, teaching by various denominational churches of what revealed Truth is. But there is also another form of theology that corresponds to the attempt to acquire knowledge (*gnosis*) of the immense domain of reality deep within which occurs the working of salvation. A knowledge that bears on the structure of the physical and spiritual worlds, on the forces operative within time, the relationships among these forces, both micro- and macrocosmic, the history of their transformations, the relation between God, humanity, and the universe; a domain which in itself deserves exploration for the glory of God and the good of fellow men; an exploration that also responds to the demands of talents made fruitful (Mat. 25:14–30). In Christianity there have been theologians, like St. Bonaventure, who devoted themselves to a theosophic approach to Nature because deciphering the "signature of things" constitutes one of the two complementary directions of theology, the theosopher being a theologian of that Holy Scripture we call the universe.



We can distinguish with Valentin Tomberg, two modes of that theosophic approach based on the idea of universal correspondences. First of all there is a theosophy bearing on temporal relationships, what he calls a "mythological symbolism" where the mythological symbols express the correspondences among the archetypes in the past and their manifestation in time. For example, the nature of Adam's sin, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and their glorious original state are the object of a theosophic projection on the nature of man as such, the task he must accomplish, notably the redemptive work he must effect on Nature. A myth of this type is the expression of an "eternal idea" emerging from time and history. On the other hand, there is a theosophy bearing on space, the structure of space, and what Tomberg calls a "typological symbolism." The latter concerns essentially the central panel of the "complete" theosophic triptych mentioned earlier (theogony and cosmogony, cosmosophy, eschatology). This time we are dealing with symbols that link their prototypes on high to their manifestations down below. Ezekiel's vision, for example, expresses a typological symbolism that implies a universal cosmological revelation. The *Merkaba* or the mystic way of the Chariot, which comes out of the Jewish Kabbalah, is based entirely on that vision of Ezekiel. The author of the *Zohar* sees in the living creatures and wheels Ezekiel describes a complex of symbolic images interpretable as a key to cosmic knowledge. Of course, the two modes of approach (mythological symbolism and typological symbolism) usually coexist in the same discourse.

The revelations thus described evidently give the impression of "objectifying in a macrocosm what passes in the individual *psyche* out of touch with God." This is the reason, Pierre Deghaye recalls, that the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach reduced theosophy to the status of "esoteric psychology." Deghaye prefers to see, notably in Jacob Boehme whom he has studied especially, "a veritable psychology of depths," but without taking a stand on the objective reality of what Boehme's revelations purvey to us, i.e., without reducing these revelations to a single dimension that would be of a purely psychological order. To be sure, we have quickly detected in theosophers the alliance of desire and concept, so much so that mystics could find theosophy nourished on Nature speculations too scientific, and that those holding a purely objective rationality tend to consider Nature philosophers—in the Romantic sense of *Naturphilosophie*—too mystical, in any case like people whose discourse, at best, reveals nothing other than the movements at work in their unconscious. It seems that there would be more people today to take theosophy seriously because our epoch considers ever more seriously the possibility of a connaturality of our spirit and the universe. In other words, we do not exclude the possibility that some of our images reflect hidden structures of this universe and that the great founding myths correspond to them. . . . Thus it remains that the theosophic glance can be extraordinarily fecund, counterbalancing dualisms and ideologies of all kinds. Indeed, theosophy

does not pretend that we must go beyond Man in order to transform him into something else. Theosophy only reminds humanity of what our true powers were and tries to give them back to us. It teaches that nothing is gained, finally, in wanting to scale heaven in contempt of earth or in wanting to be satisfied with the descent of the gods without trying to visit Olympus with them: anabasis and catabasis, like Castor and Pollux, are inseparable and complementary. Thanks to theosophy also, the fragmented, splintered "multiverse" becomes the universe once more, a world bearing meaning and composed of living pluralities.

### *C) Secrecy*

Are all esotericisms necessarily bound to the notion of secrecy? Do they contain elements that must not be disclosed in contrast with exotericisms whose discourse is meant for the public forum? Let us be careful not to reduce esotericism, to *disciplina arcani*, as we have seen might happen. Limiting esotericism to that single dimension proceeds often from bad faith, ignorance, or even intellectual sloth—it is less difficult to restrict one's field to simple questions of vocabulary! Most of the time there is no desire for "secrecy" in the conventional sense of the term. A secret needs no one to protect it. In fact, we may speak of confidential teaching Jesus allegedly gave his disciples or of teaching kept jealously at the heart of initiatory societies. *Disciplina arcani* means chiefly this: the mysteries of religion, the ultimate nature of reality, hidden forces in the cosmic order, hieroglyphs of the visible world—none of which lends itself to literal understanding. Neither do such lend themselves to a univocal explanation but rather must be the object of progressive multileveled penetration.

In an essay published in 1906, Georg Simmel gave a statement on the sociology of secrecy, showing that even apart from esotericism, a secret is a component of the structure of social interaction. Thus secrecy does not seem to us a component of esotericism qua esotericism. A so-called "secret" society is not created in view of some kind of hocus-pocus, but—as Raymond Abellio has put it so well—to give a small group of people transparency because the world itself is globally opaque. And generally it is not a doctrine that the initiate is supposed to keep hidden, but at most the details of a ritual. Nevertheless, nearly all those of Freemasonry have been published for a long time and this is hardly considered as a breach of "Masonic secrecy"! If a Freemason or a member of any esoteric society whatsoever must conceal the name of his affiliated brothers, that is at most a measure of discretion. In the Hellenist religions, the situation was comparable. What an initiator was to keep to himself did not deal with an ineffable religious instruction, comprehensible to him alone anyway, but a ritual in its purely material aspect. Indeed, if we take the sacred seriously, we must always put up a slight partition, simply theoretical really, between the



sacred and the profane, precisely in order not to profane what is held dear, what has been obtained with difficulty in undergoing diverse trials.

This paradox is illustrated best, in my opinion, in a beautiful engraving by Achilles Bocchi. His *Symbolicae quaestiones* (1555) presents a Hermes (symbol LXII) holding in his left hand a seven-branched candelabra while his right index finger seals his lips. By this gesture Bocchi wanted to attribute to this god of language, discourse, and exchange, the same gesture as Harpocrates makes! A hermeneutic tension is established between veiling and unveiling, silence and speech, hiding and revealing, by the device of a pregnant image that no conceptual explanation could equal.

On an individual level, we could establish a rapprochement between silence or secrecy, and the famous "melancholic" humor so ubiquitous in the hermeticism of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola or Cornelius Agrippa, bound also to the alchemical *nigredo*, first stage presided over by Saturn of the alchemical path. This is an introversion, comparable to a dryness retaining light, exemplified by crystals, and which can remain only provisional. How to carry on discourse, indeed, while applying laboriously, even painfully, the precept from the *Emerald Tablet*: "Separate the subtle from the gross"? The incandescent melancholy mentioned by Aristotle hardly furthers interchange, while the *furor divinus* of Plato would encourage communication. But one and the other are partly bound. When subjected to them, it is better to live them, not as a contradiction, but as a paradox inscribed in our nature for it is in that of gods as well.

By the same token, we can juxtapose esotericism and exotericism. What is reserved for an elite versus what is addressed to all. A valuable and fruitful distinction, so long as we avoid considering this a case of incompatibility. We must remember that there exists an esotericism of exotericism and an exotericism of esotericism, as if each of them were understood only as a function of the other or represented the other side of the same medal. I can attempt to penetrate a teaching open to all, e.g., an elementary catechism, by trying to uncover the spirit hidden behind the letter; on the other hand, a text, obscure for those not prepared to read it and addressed to readers familiar with the difficult arcana it contains, can be the object of a unilateral, moral, utilitarian reading. Basically it is a question of different levels of reading. The exoteric corresponds to the literal or moral level, the esoteric to the anagogic level, the allegorical and symbolic situated in between. But the problem of relationship between esotericism and exotericism is posed today in a more interesting way, especially of the notion of Tradition (cf. below).

### *D) Occultism*

In a broad sense, occultism is a dimension of esotericism. Indeed, once esotericism integrates the whole universe into its spiritual praxis, i.e., Nature

entire, visible and invisible, it is not surprising to see it take up very concrete practices. Each has its own method, but the laws establishing them rest on an identical principle, just as the branches of a tree are nourished by the same sap. Essentially this is the homo-analogical principle matching like to like, and this means one of the two can act on the other. This occurs by virtue of "correspondences" that unite all visible things and likewise unite the latter with invisible realities. Experimental science is hardly capable of accounting for them.

Among these practices it is conventional to arrange all forms of "mancies" with astrology at the head of the list. But it must be realized that on the most elevated plane, the esoteric, astrology is less a science of divination than a body of knowledge—a gnosis—of invisible relationships between the stars and men. Likewise, alchemy is a gnosis. To the extent that the Adept undertakes to direct a parcel of matter, and by that act, himself as well, to its glorious state "before the Fall," it is magic in the noblest sense. But when its project is limited to metallic transmutation alone, or to spagyria, we would say it is occultism. Let us mention also occult medicine, which rests on the properties of certain stones or plants gathered at a propitious moment and, more generally, magic in all its forms, white or black. For example, theurgy or the practice of invoking intermediate entities, generally angelic, is a form of white magic. (In this respect, we speak of *evocations* apropos of occultism, and more appropriately of *invocations* in a traditional theosophic context.) All these branches of occultism rest on the doctrine of correspondences, or the law of universal interdependence, which expresses a living and dynamic reality. They truly make sense only when directed by the active imagination, which like a catalyst or a chemical indicator puts into action networks of cosmic and divine analogies and homologies. In the most noble sense, an occultist is simultaneously an esotericist, or a theosopher.

The distinction between esotericism and occultism did not really enter the vocabulary until the middle of the nineteenth century, a time when a need was felt to create this second substantive, which coincided precisely with the appearance of a trivial esotericism. Moreover, esotericism has its practical dimension also. It is not pure speculation to the extent that active knowledge, illumination, and imagination which compose it, correspond to a form of praxis—just as occultism brings back necessarily to a form of universality. The problem in terminology is complicated by the fact that "occultism" is sometimes used in the sense of "esotericism."

Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875) is credited with the coining of this term. He derived it from "*philosophia occulta*," in the sense promulgated by Henricus Cornelius Agrippa in *De Occulta philosophia* (1533), to designate a group of investigations and practices having to do with such "sciences" as astrology, magic, alchemy, and the Kabbalah. "Occultism" is used in these two meanings: a) any practice dealing with these "sciences." If esotericism is a form of thought, occultism would instead be a group of practices or a form of action that would derive its legitimacy from esotericism. Thus "occultism" is sometimes a synonym of "esotericism" (e.g., Robert Amadou, *L'Occultisme: esquisse d'un monde vivant*, 1950), but "esotericism" serves more generally today to designate the type of thought that informs these "sciences." b) A current appearing in the second half of the nineteenth century with Eliphas Lévi and reaching its apogee at the turn of the century (cf. *infra, History of Esoteric Currents*, II, 3).



### *Hermeticism, Hermetism, Hermesism*

In English, the word "hermeticism" (adjective "hermetic") designates: a) the Alexandrian Greek texts and teachings (called *Hermetica*) from the beginning of our era, associated with the name of Hermes Trismegistus, as well as works and currents directly inspired by the *Hermetica*, chiefly from the sixteenth century onwards; b) Alchemy; c) Both a) and b) simultaneously and in a general manner most of the forms taken by modern esotericism (e.g., Christian Kabbalism, Paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy).

Nevertheless, to designate a), the word "hermetism" is much more appropriate. This is the word that is now used in this sense by most scholars to avoid confusion.

I have suggested using "hermesism" (adjective "hermesian") to designate a frame of mind placed under the sign of Hermes, the god with the caduceus. The "hermesian" attitude thus refers more generally to Hermes Mercury than to Hermes Trismegistus alone. (Cf. also *infra*, apropos of the "three ways" that I distinguish in present-day esotericism.)

## III) REFLECTIONS ON "TRADITION," OR THE THREE PATHS OF ESOTERICISM TODAY

The word "Tradition" with a capital "T" became dominant in the West at the end of the last century. In the Middle Ages, there was occasionally the need to draw up lists of initiates, or alchemists, serving as a reference, hence authorities, e.g., in the famous text called *Turba Philosophorum* (thirteenth century). At the beginning of the Renaissance we see emerging a chronology of divine envoys and men through whom "true philosophy," in the "traditional" sense of the term, was expressed, or so it was believed. The most commonly recognized chain of initiates at that time included Enoch, Abraham, Noah, Zoroaster, Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, the Brahmins, the Druids, David, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and the Sibyls. From this arose the expression "*Philosophia perennis*," proposed by Augustino Steuco in 1540, in his book by the same name, borrowed by Leibniz in a philosophical sense that extended way beyond its use in esotericism. The extreme interest shown in this succes-