



THE Occult World

Edited by CHRISTOPHER PARTRIDGE

THE OCCULT WORLD

This volume presents students and scholars with a comprehensive overview of the fascinating world of the occult. It explores the history of Western occultism, from ancient and medieval sources via the Renaissance, right up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and contemporary occultism. Written by a distinguished team of contributors, the essays consider key figures, beliefs and practices as well as popular culture.

Christopher Partridge is Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University, UK. His research and writing focuses on alternative spiritual currents, countercultures and popular music.

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Christopher Partridge

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INTRODUCTION



Christopher Partridge

Throughout Western history, from late antiquity to the present, there have been a number of related theological and philosophical currents that have been rejected as profane within some religious cultures and as regressive or irrational within certain secular discourses. However, following the rediscovery of ancient texts during the Renaissance, which led to the scholarly revival of occult subjects in the West, not only did aspects of these intellectual and spiritual currents become widely accepted, but they have been deceptively influential within the history of ideas. Moreover, as a result of the erosion of Christianity's hegemonic position in Western societies, the modern turn to the self, and the questioning of deference to traditional authorities, many of the 'fields of discourse' (Stuckrad, 2005: 7) generated by the 'occult sciences' have survived into late-modernity. Not only that, but, having experienced a significant revival in the nineteenth century, they have been subsequently adopted and developed in ways that can hardly be ignored by contemporary scholarship. 'The occult', broadly defined, haunts the twenty-first century imagination, permeates popular culture, and contributes to new spiritual trajectories.

Drawing together the work of a distinguished team of international scholars, the aim of the present volume is to provide an accessible, but scholarly overview of these currents, focusing particularly on their influence since the occult revival of the nineteenth century. Although, of course, any comprehensive treatment of the history of occult thought would run to many volumes, and although readers will, no doubt, bemoan the omission of favourite theorists, practitioners, authors, artists, traditions, texts and practices, it is hoped that this collection of essays reflects enough of the occult world, past and present, to indicate its significance as an important area of research.

I

The claim that the occult has been significant in Western history usually meets with a raised eyebrow from colleagues in the academic community who simply assume, often with uninformed contempt, that it has little to do with very much that has been formative in our culture. Indeed, there are many who simply reject the very suggestion

that the study of the occult has anything to do with what passes for serious scholarship and are bemused by the notion that intelligent, sane people might be interested in studying it. To some extent, this is, of course, understandable. Certainly, it has to be recognized that, in everyday cultures, the word ‘occult’ has become an unhelpfully broad umbrella term, under which is collected a constantly recycled hodgepodge of spiritual, paranormal and transgressive beliefs and practices, many of which are widely dismissed as perverse, profane, ephemeral, irrational, or childish. Central to the construction of this understanding has been a number of ‘occulturally’ influential books published since the 1960s, the most significant being probably Colin Wilson’s trilogy, *The Occult* (1971), *Mysteries: An Investigation Into the Occult, the Paranormal, and the Supernatural* (1978), and *Beyond the Occult* (1988), each of which discusses a wide range of subjects, from Spiritualism to UFOs (see also Freedland, 1972). Needless to say, widely held assumptions informed by such literature hardly provide a propitious starting point for those wanting to argue that occultism is a subject deserving of respectable intellectual scrutiny.

In order to help the reader towards an appreciation of the significance of the subject, perhaps the best place to begin is with the terminology itself, which, over the last couple of centuries, has become ‘tainted’ in a way that its sister term ‘esotericism’ has not (see Hanegraaff, 2012: 153–91). Certainly, the latter term, which lacks the peculiarly profane signification of ‘the occult’ in Western popular culture, does not elicit the same emotional response. This may, I suspect, be an underlying reason for abandoning the terminology of ‘occultism’ in much academic discourse. It carries too much unhelpful/embarrassing baggage. That is to say, over the last couple of decades, efforts have been made by a number of scholars to establish some degree of terminological coherence and consistency, the result of which has been the adoption of ‘Western esotericism’ as the general category, rather than ‘occultism’.

The term ‘occult’, of course, simply refers to that which is ‘hidden’ or ‘concealed’. For example, in astronomy, ‘stellar occultation’ refers to the passing of an object before a distant star, thereby partially obscuring it. Again, within religion, for Shī‘a Islam, occultation (*ghaybah*) refers to the hidden state of the twelfth Imam, a messianic figure whose eschatological return is anticipated by the faithful. However, ‘occult’, as it is used in this volume, has acquired a particular set of meanings related to gnosis, mystical experience, ancient wisdom, and the secrets of antiquity. Derived from the Latin *occultus* (‘hidden’, ‘concealed’, ‘secret’)—from *celare* (‘to hide’)—the word ‘occult’ first appeared in French (*occulte*) in 1120 in the *Psautier d’Oxford* and then in other European languages during the sixteenth century, when we see it beginning to refer to spheres of knowledge beyond everyday understanding, such as the mysterious operations of God. As the sixteenth century progressed, it began to be used for a specialized sphere of knowledge relating to the hidden properties of the natural world. During the Italian Renaissance, *occolto* was used in a related sense in the philosophical work of the Dominican friar Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), having previously been used by Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535) in his seminal work *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (1533). Hence, by 1593, the English scholar Gabriel Harvey (c. 1552–1631) was able to freely speak of ‘the greatest empirics, spagyrics, cabbalists, alchemists, magicians, and occult philosophers’ (1593: 71). However, by 1842, when the noun ‘occultism’ was coined in a dictionary article by A. de LeStrange and then quickly taken up by Éliphas Lévi in 1856, the signification had shifted.

‘Occultism’ now represented a particular construction of a coherent countercultural wisdom tradition, following a linear pattern, rather than a dynamic complex of rhizomatic currents. Indeed, it is this construction of ‘the occult’ as a linear, countercultural tradition that informs contemporary popular understandings. It is a construction that was initially articulated by Protestant and Enlightenment thinkers who sought to establish their own identities over against the opposing Other of irrational *superstitio*; it was then developed by occultists themselves seeking the intellectual and theological respectability of a specific identity and an ancient tradition. These nineteenth- and twentieth-century articulations of ‘occultism’ and the subsequent development of the terminology within ‘occulture’ (see below) have led some scholars to limit its application to developments within the last 150 years or so. In other words, in current scholarly usage, the term ‘occultism’ is often restricted to nineteenth-century developments and succeeding esoteric trajectories, including fields of discourse related to spiritualism, Theosophy, magical initiatory orders (such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), and the New Age. ‘Occultism in this sense’, notes Wouter Hanegraaff, ‘has its pioneers in 18th-century authors such as, notably, Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Anton Mesmer, and covers the great majority of esoteric currents from at least the mid-nineteenth century on’ (2006: 888). ‘Esotericism’, on the other hand, a term coined in 1828 by the historian Jacques Matter in his work on early Christian Gnosticism, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme et de son influence*, originated within academia. Consequently, ‘Western esotericism’ became the term preferred by academics—particularly in France (*l’ésotérisme occidental*). Hence, *The Occult World* is, nowadays, a rather controversial title for an academic volume that begins its survey in late antiquity, rather than in the nineteenth century.

Having said that, although we should be careful not to read back contemporary popular understandings of ‘the occult’ into pre- and early modern texts, it is significant that the terminology is used in those texts. Not only does it have an interesting history stretching back to the medieval reception of Aristotelian natural philosophy, but it has been, certainly since the publication of the first volume of Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia* in 1531, the preferred terminology of many of the principal architects of occult thought. Indeed, the same is true of the previous generation of scholars, such as Francis Yates, who did much to establish the occult as a field of academic research. They used the terminology with which they had become familiar in their studies of Renaissance and early modern magic. Less controversially, perhaps, the title of the present volume can also be defended on the grounds that, although it spans the history of occult thought, it is deliberately focused on the modern period, from the nineteenth century on. As such, it follows the current convention of limiting the terminology to this period, with the earlier chapters functioning as important historical material. That said, again, ‘occult’ is widely used prior to the nineteenth century and attending to the history of the idea, rather than attempting to be too prescriptive, can be instructive.

II

‘The occult’ may have been both common sense and ubiquitous in early modern Europe, but attitudes towards the study of it were often ambiguous. There was a sense that the study of the occult constituted ‘edgework’, it being a transgressive

discipline that operated at the boundaries of the sacred and the profane. Consequently, the occult sciences were not without risk. For example, not only were angelic and demonic entities believed to be themselves adept occultists, but, in a Christian, biblically circumscribed culture, ‘Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light’ (2 Corinthians 11:14). In other words, because the Devil is the ‘father of lies’ (John 8:44) who has significant expertise and power in the field, any foray into the occult world could become treacherous: ‘do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world’ (1 John 4:1). It is not surprising, therefore, that in his influential *Daemonologie*, James VI of Scotland (later James I of England), who had been troubled by the North Berwick witch trials, warned of those spiritual beings which are ‘farre cunninger then man in the knowledge of all the occult properties of nature’ (1597: 44). Likewise, a few years later Sir Walter Raleigh reminded his readers (not that they needed reminding) that ‘the Devill from the beginning hath sought to thrust himself into the same employment among the ministers and servants of God, changing himself for that purpose into an Angell of light’ (1614: 205). As such, says Raleigh, ‘he hath led men into Idolatrie as a doctrine of religion; he hath thrust in his Prophets among those of the true God; he hath corrupted the Art of *Astrologie*, by giving a divine power to the Starrs, teaching men to esteeme them as Gods, and not as instruments’ (Raleigh, 1614: 205). It’s not that astrology is considered to be profane, but rather that the study of astrology could be guided by malign spiritual entities. Consequently, as Lauren Kassell comments of the early modern period, ‘great learning and suspicion of its demonic sources are inseparable’ (2006: 109). In a society, genuinely concerned about the possibility of demonic interference, any sense that the sources of one’s learning might be profane could lead to serious social and religious consequences (see, Briggs, 1996; Johnstone, 2006; Russell, 1986). That is to say, because these were societies in which individuals imagined themselves to be embroiled in spiritual warfare, in which neutrality was not an option, demonstrating that one was on the right side was of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, of course, the very nature of the occult made determining this difficult, both for occultists themselves and for those observers who might, at any moment, condemn them as pagan servants of the Devil – an accusation that scholars were wise to avoid in early modern societies.

Consequently, during this period, a discussion of the occult often included an apologia, which distinguished between the angelic and the demonic, the sacred and the profane. For example, Giambattista della Porta makes a clear distinction between ‘two sorts of Magick; the one is infamous...because it hath to do with soul spirits and...Inchantments...and is called Sorcery...The other Magick is natural...The most noble Philosophers...call this knowledge the very...perfection of the natural Sciences’ (quoted in Copenhaver, 2008: 454). This difference between knowledge gained through natural magic – the source of which is God – and that acquired through demonic agency is conspicuous in the work of Raleigh, who is keen to rescue the occultist, the *magus*, from accusations of witchcraft: ‘It is true that many men abhorre the very name and word (*Magus*) because of *Simon Magus* [see Acts 8: 9–25]: who being indeede, not *Magus*, but...familiar with evill spirits, usurped that title. For *Magicke*, Conjuring, and Witcherie are farre differing arts...*Magus* is a Persian word primitively, whereby is exprest such a one as is altogether conversant in things divine. And...the art of *Magicke* is the art of worshipping God’ (1614: 205). Hence, in a

response to James VI's 'first booke of *Demonologie*', he encourages his readers to remember 'that under the name of *Magicke* all other unlawful arts are comprehended... For the *Magicke* which *His Majestie* condemneth is of that kinde whereof the Devill is a partie' (1614: 201). His point is simple. While one ought to beware of 'corruptions, which have made odious the very name of *Magicke*' (1614: 202), in actual fact the study of the occult is a sacred vocation with significant utilitarian value. For example, '*Astrologie*' is useful 'to sowing and planting, and all kinds of agriculture and husbandry', which is, he says, 'a knowledge of the motions and influences of the Starres into those lower elements' (1614: 202). More importantly, the biblical patriarch Abraham discovered astrology to be a helpful tool in the pursuit of the 'knowledge of the true God' (1614: 202). In the final analysis, '*Magicke* containeth the whole Philosophie of nature...that which bringeth to light the inmost vertues, and draweth them out of natures hidden bosome to human use, *Virtutes in centro centrilatentes, Vertues hidden in the center of the center*, according to the *Chymists* [chemists]. Of this sort were *Albertus* [Magnus], *Arnoldus de villanova*, *Raymond* [Lull], and [Roger] *Bacon*, and many others' (1614: 202). In short, 'a *Magician*...is no other then *divinorum cultor & interpres, A studious observer and expounder of divine things*' (1614: 205), his overall point being that '*the good knowledge in the ancient Magicke is not to be condemned; though the Devill here as in other kinds hath sought to obtrude evill things under the name and colour of good things*' (1614: 205).

Again, the above highlights the perennial problem for 'the occult'. It has been constructed as theologically ambiguous in a Christian culture. Although, in premodern societies, the occult sciences were theologically justified along the lines of attending to God's general revelation in nature, which had significant instrumental value, there was always the problem that, as James VI had warned, 'the Devill (who knoweth more than any man) doth also teach Witches and Poysoners the harmefull parts of hearbs, druggs, minerals, and excrements' (1614: 205). However, as we will see later, once empirical science had distanced itself from the occult, dismissing it as *superstitio* (i.e. irrational), the earlier apologetic responses of such as Raleigh no longer appeared credible and, slipping into the sphere of the amateur enthusiast, it became, irredeemably, the profane Other.

That this was so accounts, to some extent, for the fact that the same concerns about 'sorcery', 'Black Magic', 'the dark arts', and the 'left-hand path' continued into modern occultism. For example, as well as those within the Christian community whose scholarship sought to expose and combat diabolism in the world, such as, most famously, the Catholic priest Montague Summers, influential occultists of the period, such as Éliphas Lévi and Helena Blavatsky, also warned of the dangers awaiting the 'student of the *Divina Sapientia*' (Blavatsky, 1939: 13). In Blavatsky's discussion of 'the conditions under which alone the study of Divine Wisdom can be pursued with safety, that is without danger that Divine [Magic] will give place to Black Magic', she insists that 'it is the motive, *and the motive alone*, which makes any exercise of power become black, malignant, or white, beneficent Magic' (1939: 12; cf. Lévi, 1923: 167–69).

Hence, while we should be careful to avoid anachronism, understanding the dualistic Christian cultural context of occultism helps toward an understanding of its sacred–profane ambiguity. Whether the occult was explicitly developed with reference to its Christian theological context – as in the case of some early discussions of

qualitates occultae or, later, in New Thought – or whether it was demonized as the profane Other and vice versa, or whether it was articulated as an interpretation of particular Christian theological ideas – as in Annie Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity or the Lesser Mysteries* (1905), Alice Bailey’s *The Reappearance of the Christ* (1947), Levi H. Dowling’s *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1964) and Anthony Duncan’s *The Christ, Psychotherapy and Magic* (1969) and Dion Fortune’s *Esoteric Orders and Their Work* (2000) – it is difficult to understand its construction in the West without reference to Christian religion and culture. Even Aleister Crowley, one of the most influential and creative occultists of the modern period, needs to be understood in relation to his Christian context. The explicit rejection of his upbringing within the Plymouth Brethren, the not infrequent references to Christian theological ideas (e.g. Crowley, 1977: 11–13), the enthusiastic embrace of discourses of profanation made available to him by Christian demonology – most notably, his identification as ‘Master Therion’, ‘the Great Beast, 666’ (Greek: θηρίον, therion, beast), taken from the biblical Book of Revelation (e.g. Crowley, 1996: 75) – and his ‘profound respect for Christ as an individual who had attained enlightenment’ (Bogdan, 2012: 100), are all important for understanding the development of his thought.

III

While much discussion in *The Occult World* focuses on the spiritual and the metaphysical, its constructive relationship with early modern science should not be forgotten. Despite attempts by some scholars, such as Brian Vickers (1984), to reject any significant continuity between Renaissance occultism and the emergence of the new science, the boundaries between the two were in fact porous and the relationship conspicuous. Hence, although there have been anachronistic attempts to demonize pre-modern occultism over against the rigorous logic of modern science, in reality there were significant areas of overlap between core fields of discourse. It is not surprising, therefore, that the intellectual and moral status of the occult found support in authoritative early modern texts. As Copenhaver discusses, ‘practical interest in astrology, alchemy, and other departments of the occultist tradition ran strong throughout the early modern period among serious thinkers in many disciplines...’ (2008: 455). This concord, however, was not to last.

As occult ideas were typically embedded within religious and mythological narratives, it wasn’t too long before the relationship between the occult sciences and the new empirical sciences became strained. As Hanegraaff notes of Blaise de Vigenère (1523–96) – possibly the first person to refer to ‘the occult sciences’ – he situates occultism ‘within a more general context entirely dominated by the ancient wisdom narrative’ (2012: 182). This link between the occult and theories of ancient universal wisdom is important. The ‘occult sciences’ were occupied with the formulation of rigorous methods for understanding the secrets of nature, informed by a unifying notion of ancient wisdom. Hence, whereas, ‘seen merely “from the outside”, the domains of magic, astrology, kabbalah, and alchemy might look like relatively distinct disciplines’, as Hanegraaff comments, ‘referring to them as “occult sciences” carried the deliberate suggestion that they were unified at a deeper level, because they reflected one and the same, comprehensive, hidden, but universal knowledge about the true nature of reality’ (2012: 183). Occultism thus emerged as a specialist field

devoted to the excavation of knowledge about the underlying unity of the cosmos and the energies and agencies with which it was animated. Its aim was to access truths that had been ‘hidden from the vulgar, but revealed to the wise as “higher knowledge”’ (Hanegraaff, 2012: 182).

As the early modern period progressed, however, it was increasingly difficult for such notions to avoid conflict with the new ideas of the scientific revolution. Although there were, of course, interests and areas of enquiry that overlapped with new scientific thinking, the study of the occult was becoming theoretically and methodologically distinct. Of course, initially, there was some ambivalence about the scientific validity of occult ideas, just as there was about their theological validity. For example, while, on the one hand, many early modern theorists, such as Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727), failed to detach themselves entirely from the influence of esoteric ideas (see Coudert, 1995; Dobbs, 1991), on the other hand, it is revealing that, for example, Leibniz dismissed Newton’s theory of gravity as the reintroduction of the *qualitates occultae*, which, he insisted, René Descartes had so successfully trounced (see, Hall, 1980: 146–67). In other words, ‘the occult’ was slowly becoming a derogatory term, used to indicate, not profanity as such, but irrationality. In the early modern scientific milieu, it mattered less that occult ideas transgressed Christian constructions of the sacred, and more that they transgressed objective, rational, scientific thought. In a climate in which ideas about nature were shifting towards increasingly secularized notions of a deterministic system governed by natural laws, a system in which observation, empirical evidence, and logic were paramount, any theories that seemed to rest on *qualitates occultae* were dismissed.

Thinkers such as Newton are, therefore, peculiarly interesting. As John Maynard Keynes described him, he is ‘not the first of the age of reason’, but rather ‘the last of the magicians, the last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago’ (1947: 27). Indeed, although a major influence on the development of modern science, Newton spent at least 20 years studying Hermetic materials and over two-thirds of his writings discuss ideas relating to alchemy and to religion (see, Dobbs, 1991). For Newton, physics and magic were generally understood to be part of the same natural philosophy (see, McGuire & Rattansi, 1966; Webster, 1982). Even Leibniz, who Keynes might have considered a more likely candidate for ‘the first of the age of reason’, was, nevertheless, ‘not willing to pay the high price of eliminating mind, spirit, or soul from his scientific world picture’ (Coudert, 1995: 123).

The times, however, were changing. As the modern period progressed, the idea that science might be rooted in magic was an increasingly uneasy one. As Randall Styers notes, while, in the seventeenth century, ‘there was no clear line of demarcation between occultism, philosophy, religion and science’, by the mid-eighteenth century, the situation had fundamentally changed, in that ‘natural magic was abandoned, and all forms of demonic and occult causation were effectively expelled from the natural world. Moreover, the natural and the supernatural realms were clearly differentiated, and the role of the supernatural was severely constrained’ (2004: 50). Eventually, ‘magic’s erasure from the philosophical agenda of the Enlightenment was so complete as to conceal its significance in earlier periods. Just as Fontenelle found Newton’s early curiosity about astrology too embarrassing to mention in his obituary, so later

historians of philosophy seldom bothered to ask whether the elders of their profession were interested in topics so contemptible’ (Copenhaver, 2008: 503).

This, of course, is not to argue that scientific and occultic fields of discourse never again overlapped. They did. As well as scientists with a keen interest in the occult, such as Jack Parsons (1914–52), there have been more subtle moments of cross-fertilization. For example, as Mark Morrisson has argued, not only was the alchemical revival in the nineteenth century shaped by the emerging science of radioactivity, but it informed it. ‘Stunning landmarks of atomic science occurred alongside an efflorescence of occultism that ascribed deep significance to questions about the nature of matter and energy. And perhaps more surprising, the broad alchemical revival had an impact on the way some scientists understood and portrayed their research programs’ (Morrisson, 2007: 5).

IV

The assessment of the occult as irrational, along with the sacred–profane ambiguity that made it vulnerable to accusations of heresy, hindered its progress as an academic discipline in Christian societies. ‘The occult is *rejected knowledge*’ (Webb, 1974: 191). Although there is little doubt that occult subjects were researched and taught in some early modern European universities (see, Feingold, 1984), because the study of religion in academia had been dominated by Christian theology since the Middle Ages, any objective analysis of that which the Church suspected as ‘pagan’ was culturally and theologically problematic. This position was further exacerbated as the modern period progressed. When it was eventually abandoned as irrational, resistance to the occult hardened on both fronts – theological and scientific. As a result, during the eighteenth century, the study of the occult became the domain of the amateur enthusiast. This led to a final parting of the ways. The mainstream discourses of both science and theology othered the occult. As such, there emerged a popular perception of it as an unsafe, profane, spiritual culture. Added to this, in some quarters during the twentieth century, the occult became associated with far-right totalitarian discourses, which added to its reputation as irrational and dangerous. For example, the influential Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno was particularly concerned about the malign influence of the irrational in Western societies. As a Jewish intellectual during the Second World War, he was understandably concerned about tendencies towards totalitarianism and barbarism. He associated occultism with a regression toward barbarism, in that it seemed to constitute resistance to reason, progress and the whole Enlightenment project: ‘the tendency to occultism is a symptom of the regression in consciousness’ (Adorno, 1994: 128). Occultism is, in short, antithetical to modernity and the future of Western civilization. Interestingly, one of the first to make this connection was George Orwell. In an essay on William Butler Yeats, he sought to establish a direct relationship between his interest in the occult and his fascist sympathies (1946: 115–19; see also Pasi, 2009: 59–62). It should be noted, however, that these discussions are somewhat naïve and, although it is not difficult to find examples of the confluence of occultism and far right politics in the modern world, the two are not necessarily related. Moreover, recent scholarship has shown that occultism did not always represent ‘a flight from reason’, as James Webb famously summed up the occult (1974: 5). As discussed in several of the

following chapters, during the modern period there has often been dialogue and negotiation between occult and scientific fields of discourse. Nevertheless, the point here is that such associations have tainted the reception of ‘the occult’ in the West and biased scholarship in the area.

In more recent years, however, for a number of intellectual and cultural reasons, the fortunes of the occult in the academy have changed. As modernity has progressed, so there has emerged a climate in which Christian theology itself has had to struggle for legitimacy as an academic discipline. Within this climate, any defence of theology in secular universities must be careful to avoid the suspicion of special pleading. Christianity is simply one expression of a universal human phenomenon. As such, it is difficult to exclude other expressions, such as those of occultism. Moreover, within the humanities and social sciences, there is now a wealth of research demonstrating the importance of the quotidian and the value of understanding those experiences and ideas that shape everyday lives. This has led to a broadening of the scholarly gaze to include commitments to the occult and the paranormal (see Bader, Mencken & Baker, 2010; Jenzen & Munt, 2013; Partridge, 2013b; 2005; 2004).

In particular, during the twentieth century historical scholarship led to a revision of the occult’s significance in Western history (Broek & Hanegraaff, 1998; Faivre, 1994). Historians of antiquity and the Renaissance began to discover a rich heritage of Neoplatonic and Hermetic thought and practice. Important studies, most of which were initially produced by scholars at London University’s Warburg Institute, such as Edgar Wind, Ernst Cassirer, Daniel Pickering Walker, and Frances Yates, led to renewed thinking. Walker’s *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (1958) and particularly Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), *The Art of Memory* (1966), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979), pioneered a history of ideas in which the influence of the occult was central. Further careful historical work by scholars such as Keith Thomas in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) revealed the widespread influence of popular occultism. Although, of course, nowadays, we might not agree with all of their conclusions, this scholarship, followed by that of other scholars such as Henry Corbin and Antoine Faivre (who established ‘Western esotericism’ as a field of interdisciplinary scholarship), did important work. For example, it demonstrated that, not only did the Gnostic, Hermetic, and Neoplatonic ideas of late antiquity survive into the Middle Ages (as a result of their relationship with the Abrahamic religions), but, having been significantly developed during the Renaissance, they have continued to have an influence on the formation of Western religion and culture. This research has continued apace. It is now relatively well established that, whether we consider the important role occultism played in the development of science and philosophy, or its shaping of modern religious traditions, such as Mormonism, or its contribution to National Socialist ideology, or its significance in the work of influential writers, artists, musicians and poets, from W. B. Yeats and André Breton to Kenneth Anger, Jimmy Page and Alan Moore, it is difficult to deny its cultural significance.

In the countercultural embrace of ‘the Other’ over the last century or so, and particularly since the 1960s, the occult as a signifier of the profane and the irrational has become dominant. In a way quite distinct from earlier periods, the profane nature of the occult has been articulated as a systematic challenge to hegemonic religion,

culture, morality, and rationality. Again, this reification of the occult as a profane discourse that challenges hegemonic constructions of reality has its roots in the rhetoric of Christian demonology, which has since been developed and recycled in popular culture. Central to this discourse is the notion that the occult is a hidden, malign influence within Western culture, a distillation of the profane, a threat to all that a society holds sacred. As such, it functions as the perfect foil for Christian morality and modern rationality. Within literature, for example, the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), not only reflect his deep Roman Catholic convictions, but also a fascination with the Other, *fin-de-siècle* occultism. *Là-Bas* (1891), in particular, betrays the influence of his friend, Abbé Joseph-Antoine Boullan, a Roman Catholic priest whose occult interests led to accusations of Satanism. The protagonist of *Là-Bas* discovers that, far from Christianity and science expelling occultism from the modern world, they have merely driven it underground, where black masses and exotic rituals thrive. Similarly, in the 1930s, the fiction of Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977) became central to the construction of the popular image of occultism in Britain. Influenced by Montague Summers (1880–1948) – another clergyman with occult interests – Wheatley’s work is conspiratorial, arguing that, not far beneath the thin veneer of Christian culture, occultists manipulate dark forces which threaten the very fabric of Western civilization. Respected members of society, particularly the powerful and wealthy, are ritually giving themselves to dark occult forces. Through some ritualized contractual arrangement with a demonic entity, often Satan, in which an occultist’s soul may be exchanged and obedience secured, *gnosis* is imparted and, with it, access to power. These are common and influential themes within ‘occulture’.

V

What is ‘occulture’? Several years ago, I began trying to make sense of a social and cultural environment within which there seemed to be a meaningful confluence of competing spiritual and paranormal discourses, many of which appeared to be related in some way to everyday life through popular culture and the media. On the one hand, it was difficult to ignore the force of the sociological arguments and the evidence marshaled in support of widespread secularization driven by the currents of modernization. It is, for example, irrefutably the case that traditional forms of institutional Christianity in Western liberal democracies (particularly in Europe) are experiencing a significant decline in power, popularity and prestige. Institutional religion may be flourishing beyond the West and it may still occupy a place of significance in the public life of the United States, but, generally speaking, the evidence seems to support a narrative of secularization. On the other hand, within this progressively secular environment, where modernization appeared to be highly corrosive of religion, there is a conspicuous, widespread, and vibrant interest in the paranormal, the pursuit of experiences of transcendence, the acquisition of occult knowledge, and the development of some form of mysticism or inner-life spirituality.

While many of these ideas and interests may seem bizarre and exotic to the majority of our contemporaries, many, it would seem, do not. Occulture is often imperceptibly viral. As John Wilcock pointed out in 1976, in his popular *Guide to Occult Britain*, ‘you start by studying the zodiac and sooner or later you’re going to be a pushover for ESP, telepathy, telekinesis, spiritual messengers, mystic visions,

witchcraft, psychometry, and any of the hundreds and thousands of other magical themes. So, astrology (or any of the other subjects I've mentioned) is an introduction, if you want to look at it that way, to a whole new vision of life' (1976: 12). In particular, occult and paranormal ideas have become everyday and ordinary, thanks largely to the media and popular culture. From the advertising of products that claim to promote wellbeing to the ubiquity of musical and visual cultures fascinated with occultism and experiences of the paranormal, discourses antagonistic to secularization are being circulated within everyday life. Furthermore, there is evidence for a two-way relationship between, on the one hand, underground ideas emanating from what the sociologist Colin Campbell had identified as the 'cultic milieu' (1972) and, on the other hand, the wellbeing claims for beauty products, the themes of popular television series, the growth of interest in mind-body-spirit products, cyber-spirituality on the Internet, and yoga classes in the local village hall. In short, there is evidence for an influential culture of enchantment, which encompasses the marginal and the mainstream, the deviant and the conventional, and which circulates ideas, creates synergies, and forms new trajectories, all of which are driven by wider cultural forces, particularly those of popular culture and the media (Partridge, 2013a).

The point is that, although late-modern societies are different in many ways from their premodern antecedents, it would be unwise to claim an absolute distinction. Just as early modern Christian societies were host to a rich mixture of alternative ideas and practices, Christianity itself being shaped by a number of overlapping fields of discourse, so today there is a thriving occulture that shapes the contours of everyday life. Particularly during the nineteenth century, there emerged a common trade in stock occultural elements, which, primarily through the arts, began to shape the Western imagination: 'the mist-shrouded castle, the villain sworn to the Devil, ghosts, spectres, sorcerers and witches, a flirting with the weird, the uncanny, the bizarre, with sado-masochistic sexuality – and, underpinning all, the Burkeian obsession with dread and the infinite unknown. Supernatural elements like spectralization triggered new sexual frissons; the old demonological themes of possession, incubi and succubi were eroticized...Such disciplines as alchemy, astrology and animal magnetism, and the fringes of physiognomy and phrenology evidently enjoyed a certain vogue' (Porter, 1999: 249–50). Although these elements have, many times, been rebranded and transformed within occulture as a result of the influence of other fields of discourse, they continue to retain their power to enchant the everyday. Hence, while often rejected and marginalized by society's religious and intellectual gatekeepers, the esoteric ideas that are generated, articulated and disseminated within occulture are deceptively significant.

In summary much of the thinking discussed in the following pages has, in some way or another, contributed both to the history of ideas and to contemporary occulture. As such, some understanding of it is necessary for an informed appreciation of the social and cultural worlds that shape us. It is hoped that this volume will facilitate that understanding.

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PART I

ANCIENT AND
MEDIEVAL SOURCES



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CHAPTER ONE

ANCIENT ESOTERIC TRADITIONS

Mystery, Revelation, Gnosis



Dylan M. Burns

Gar das antike Leben! Was versteht man von dem,
wenn man die Lust an der Maske,
das gute Gewissen alles Maskenhaften nicht versteht!
Hier ist das Bad und die Erholung des antiken Geistes.
(F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §77)

INTRODUCTION

Ancient esoteric tradition is a modern scholarly term useful for designating currents in Hellenistic and Late Antique Mediterranean culture that are concerned with the mediation of some kind of absolute knowledge via a dialectic of secrecy, concealment, and revelation (cf. ‘esotericism’—von Stuckrad 2010: xi; for a different approach, see Hanegraaff 2012). These currents often occupy the fault-lines between ancient ‘magic’, ‘philosophy’, and ‘religion’. It is efficacious to use the second-order, etic word ‘esoteric’ to describe these myriad literary and ritual elements of ancient religious life, such as Graeco-Oriental mystery-cults, Neoplatonic theurgy, Christian mysticism and Gnosticism, Jewish apocalyptic and Merkavah literature, and more. While the contours of esoteric discourse in the Renaissance, Modern, and contemporary eras are to a large extent defined by their marginalization in mainstream religious and academic institutions, many (although certainly not all) esoteric traditions occupied central, respected and publicly acknowledged places in ancient life.

ANCIENT MYSTERY-CULTS,
PYTHAGOREANISM, AND ORPHISM

Esoteric discourse has always played a role in religious life in the West (taken here to extend to the Mediterranean basin, including Egypt, Israel/Palestine, and Syria, regions deeply Hellenized following the conquests of Alexander the Great and afterwards usually ruled or contested by Greeks or Romans through the end of antiquity). Priests in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian religion were highly trained

specialists who formed their own elite scribal culture; the disparity between their education and that of the rest of society lent them and their craft an aura of mystery, enhancing their sense of power. The iconographic nature of their alphabets was highly regarded as mysterious, powerful and even dangerous (Lenzi 2008). Egyptian mythology also offered its own analogue to the later, transcendent God of the Platonists with its descriptions of a god ‘whose name is hidden’ and paradoxically unbegotten, although his shroud of secrecy was not bound to his role as source of divinity and unity until the later second millennium BCE (Assmann 1998: 12–25). Greco-Roman philosophers would later enshrine ‘barbarian’ speech, script and emphasis on the transcendence of the deity as ‘oriental’ wisdoms contributing to Greek wisdom, often phrased as secret, ‘esoteric’ doctrine.

Greco-Roman religious life, meanwhile, was full of traditions inundated with and governed by secrecy (Martin 1995). Primary amongst these were, of course, the ‘mystery cults’, which were widespread and diverse. Nonetheless, one can distinguish general features usually found amongst them (Burkert 1987; Johnston 2004). These cults enforced secrecy of one’s experience(s) in their rites, which (ostensibly) had positive effects upon one’s existence—both during and following life—through eliciting a special encounter with a deity. They did not challenge everyday civic religion as much as supplement it, and, since they were usually open to individuals of any class, ethnicity, age or gender, they occupied a significant and public role in ancient life.

Moreover, despite the injunctions to keep the rites secret, the content of the rites themselves appears to have been something of a public secret; divulging them was not itself illegal as much as was the ‘impiety’ of profaning them in public (Heraclid. Pont. Frag. 170; Thuc. 6.28, 6.61; Martin 1995: 109). Certainly the myths connected to them were usually well-known: the Eleusinian mysteries, for instance, appear to recreate for initiates the experience of Demeter’s reactions to Hades’ kidnapping of Persephone—descent into the underworld, grief, fasting, and eventual recovery, culminating in the presentation of a symbol of life to the initiates (Hipp. *Haer.* 5.8.39ff Marcovich), who obtained a ‘password’ to a happy afterlife. These transformative rites resemble more than anything what anthropologists term ‘rites of passage’, practices whose performance changes a child into an adult. Such rites are strangely absent from Greco-Roman life, so perhaps mystery-cults filled this gap (Johnston 2004: 106).

In themselves the Eleusinian mysteries (like those of Mithras, Isis, the ‘Great Mother’, etc.) are of little importance for the history of ‘Western Esotericism’, because their institutions and myths perished along with other Greco-Roman cults during the rise of Christianity. The same is true of their religious competitors, Orphism and Pythagoreanism. Plato’s Socrates refers to cryptic ‘books’, associated with the primaeval musician Orpheus, invoked by wandering soothsayers to support their exhortations to a life governed by ritual purity and vegetarianism (*Resp.* II 364a ff). Much later, the ‘Neoplatonists’—a movement of systematizing readers of Plato, starting with Plotinus (mid-third century CE)—would quote cosmogonic poetry referred to as ‘Orphic’, the oldest body of which could go back to the sixth century BCE (West 1983). Modern reconstructions of this poetry portray an ‘Orphic’ mystery-religion whose initiates came to learn of a secret myth concerning the dismemberment of Dionysus and the birth of humankind from the blood of the evil Titans. However,

the same evidence may rather indicate a family of disparate but related myths that were marketed by itinerant ritual specialists (Brisson 1995; Radcliffe 1999).

Nonetheless, even in antiquity the adjective ‘Orphic’ connoted secret teachings about salvific knowledge regarding the cosmos and human life. Archaeologists have unearthed funerary texts that interpret Orphic poetry in the context of the afterlife, or even provide instructions for successful descent into the underworld—the *Derveni Papyrus* and ‘Orphic’ *Golden Tablets* (Betegh 2004; Radcliffe 2011). Yet most cosmological poetry associated with Orpheus would not have survived but for the importance placed upon them by the Neoplatonists, who adopted him as one of their Hellenic culture-heroes. The same is true of thinkers who devoted themselves to the teachings of the mathematician Pythagoras, adopting vegetarianism, communal life, and a vow of silence (Cic. *Nat. d.* 1.74; Burkert 1972: 178ff). While few of their writings survive, their teachings about geometry and lifestyle exerted enormous influence over the Neoplatonists, who even composed hagiographies of Pythagoras. The incorporation of Orpheus and Pythagoras into the ranks of the Platonic authorities, not any particular ‘esoteric’ teaching, made them attractive to admirers of the Greeks in later eras. Similarly, the content and rites of the ‘mysteries’ themselves may have been lost, but the accounts of their salvific importance and esoteric trappings provided ample fodder for later, ‘esoteric’ thinkers who sought to ‘revive’ what they thought ancient, Pagan wisdom to be.

MAGIA, SUPERSTITIO, THEURGIA

The concept of ‘magic’, too, obtained part of its ‘esoteric’ valence in the modern world by virtue of its association with ‘Paganism’, yet some forms of ancient private ritual life can be aptly described as ‘esoteric’ in the same sense as the secret rites of salvation we find in the mystery-cults. Private ritual practices aimed at alleviating disease, cursing enemies, or obtaining one’s desires by supernatural means were commonplace in the ancient world. However, thanks to the rise of new ways of organizing knowledge (like ‘philosophy’ and ‘medicine’) in the sixth century BCE, Greeks began to use the set of terminology that we would commonly translate today as ‘magic’ (*magia*, *goeteia*, etc.) to denote and distance these competing ritual specialists (Graf 1995). Meanwhile, Greek ‘religion’ was largely a public, civic affair. Rituals were usually carried out as part of greater festivals that reinforced the bonds between a local municipality, its greater political sphere, and the gods. Even at home, worship remained decidedly exoteric—a public custom shared with the community. This religious exotericism was based in part upon the depth of belief in supernatural powers: prayers and rites that were uttered or conducted in secret were assumed to be motivated by selfish, or even anti-social concerns.

The subversive nature of ‘magic’ was twofold, insofar as it appeared to come from the east and to reside in the private, and therefore potentially criminal, sphere—indeed, ‘*magia*’ is a Persian word, and ‘*goetia*’ initially referred to Persian funerary laments, which were imagined by the Greeks to possess necromantic efficacy (Aesch. *Pers.* 684–88). Thanks to Greek influence, the Romans, too, stigmatized private ritual practice. While the mystery-cults were generally not seen as magical sects, they could be targeted when it was politically convenient, as with the crackdown (186 BCE) on a cult of Bacchus in Rome, on charges of secret orgies, cannibalism, magic,

and conspiracy against the state (Liv. *Hist.* 39.8–19). In the following century, Romans began using the term *superstitio* to denote foreign or private religions in Rome, in juxtaposition to the civic cult (Martin 2004: 130ff), replicating the double stigma of magic in Greek culture as alien and secret. One of these was Christianity, a barbarous ‘superstition’ shrouded in the mystery of its closed meetings in house churches (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96). Christians would be accused of secret, conspiratorial activity in charges recalling those leveled against the Bacchantes of Cicero’s day (ibid.; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 8; Orig. *Cels.* 1.1, 1.3). Apologists replied that the Christian churches were innocent political clubs (*collegia*)—private, but safe (Ter. *Apol.* 39).

Nonetheless, mystery-cults grew in popularity under the Roman Empire, as worship of ‘oriental’ deities—most famously, Isis, the ‘Great Mother’, and Mithras—spread far and wide. Our knowledge of these mysteries is slight, but the paradigm of a ritual drama plunging the initiate into darkness before a restoration to new, greater life, as we saw at Eleusis, held enough currency to be used by Apuleius of Madaura in our only first-person (albeit fictional) description of (Isaic) initiation (*Metam.* 11). Nor did private ritual specialists cease operations; some went corporate, as when an Egyptian priest accompanied Emperor Marcus Aurelius on a German campaign (Cass. Dio 72.8.4).

The sands of Egypt have preserved spells used during the Hellenistic and Roman periods which offer a window into the ancient marketplace of private ritual life (Betz 1992; Meyer/Smith 1994). Many charms possessed an esoteric force through their use of the medium of the written word. While estimates of the degree of ancient literacy in everyday society vary widely (anywhere from .5 per cent through 10 per cent, before allowing for the ‘semi-literate’—Humphrey 1991), the culture of writing, largely limited to the aristocratic and priestly strata of society, possessed an iconographic beauty and mystery to the unlearned. The allure of letters was particularly intense in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where scribal culture was doubly sacred and whose alphabets were seen as unintelligible but potent symbols even to educated Greeks and Romans (e.g. Plot. *Enn.* 5.8.6). The efficacy of many spells is therefore premised upon the power of decorative arrangements of letters in shapes, strings of vowels to be chanted (Dornseiff 1925), and especially so-called *nomina barbara* (PGM III.1–164, IV.3007–86)—foreign or nonsensical words simulating the powerful holy tongues of Egypt, Syria and Israel (*Corp. herm.* 16.1–2). Other spells could be regarded as ‘esoteric’ insofar as they do not grant practical benefits, as much as abstract knowledge of or a mystical confrontation with the transcendent God (PGM IV.1115–66, VII.756–94; Betz 1995), which can even bestow immortality (as in the so-called ‘Mithras Liturgy’—PGM IV.475–829).

The Neoplatonists drew from this wellspring of Graeco-Egyptian magic and the fetish of ‘oriental’ wisdom in formulating a ritual culture premised on the practice of ‘divine works (theurgy)’. Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 300 CE) theorized these practices aimed at facilitating the ascent of the soul by adopting the pose of an Egyptian priest in an exchange of letters with his elder contemporary, Porphyry of Tyre (Shaw 1995; Clarke et al. 2003). Porphyry, following his teacher Plotinus, believed that the soul communed with the divine intellect, and therefore needed to avoid engagement with the world in order to practice contemplation; Iamblichus responded that the soul had fully descended into matter, and must navigate and master the cosmos by means of proper symbolic manipulation of objects (Iamb. *An.* 6–7; Damasc. *Comm. Phaedo*

105). His admixture of Neoplatonic metaphysics, valorization of Hellenic culture (particularly Pythagoreanism and Orphism), and ‘orientalizing’ ritual trappings (drawn from the Middle Platonic hexameter poetry of the *Chaldean Oracles*) proved to be popular and effective at a time when Hellenic philosophers sought to define themselves against Christianity. Julian the Apostate (361–63 CE) attempted to institutionalize theurgic cult during his brief reign (O’Meara 2003: 120–24), and the Neoplatonic school persisted in rituals like the animation of statues up through its closing by the Emperor Justinian in 529 CE (Proc. *Comm. Tim.* 3.155.18–22). Yet all Neoplatonists, Plotinian and theurgic, Hellenic and Christian, agreed on the importance of meditative contemplation of God (The One) as negotiated by the esoteric wordplay of ‘negative theology’ (Mortley 1986).

Iamblichus distinguished ‘theurgy’ from ‘magic,’ although it was clearly a product of contemporary private ritual culture. Porphyry charged that the use of *nomina barbara* to subdue demons was superstitious and barbaric; no true philosopher would claim, like a ‘sorcerer’ (*goēs*), to have power over the gods (*Aneb.* 2.10). Iamblichus replied that theurgic power belonged not to the theurgist, but the providential divine activity which raises humanity to heaven (*Myst.* 1.12). The *Chaldean Oracles* excoriate popular divination (frag. 107). While Iamblichus’ adoption of theurgy was motivated by philosophical concerns and remained relevant thanks to anti-Christian polemics, it also marked a turn to esotericism in the Platonic tradition. ‘Theurgy’ as equated with ‘magic’ (Iamblichus’ protestations notwithstanding), would later take on the status of a forbidden system of absolute, oriental knowledge passed on by ancient heathens. Yet the theurgic tradition also exemplified a particular blend of Platonic metaphysics, heathen mythologoumena, and esoteric pedagogy that flourished in the second–fifth centuries CE (Lewy 2011).

THE PLATONIC UNDERWORLD, ORIENTALISM, AND HERMETISM

A textbook on ancient philosophy includes an appendix concerning an ‘Underworld of Platonism’: literature that discusses elaborate Platonic metaphysics, but describes the universe through ‘mythologizing’ soteriological schemata that feature the ascent of soul (a divine ‘spark’) out of evil, material existence (Dillon 1977: 384; Majercik 1989: 4–5). These texts include the aforementioned *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Hermetica*, and Gnostic literature. This grouping oversimplifies much (e.g., the ‘spark’ is hardly the most common metaphor for the fallen soul during this period), but also presents a fundamental insight into one ‘Pagan intellectual milieu’ (Fowden 1986: 114), a Platonic worldview emphasizing divine transcendence and a cognate epistemology struggling to know the unknowable, while embracing a diversity of Greco-Roman and ‘oriental’ mythologoumena. Our conceptualization of the range (Greek, Persian, Egyptian) and function (philosophical, theurgic, polemical) of myth and symbolism in these circles, and how important they were for articulating the social reality behind the texts, remains controversial.

The Platonic corpus itself contains no ‘secret’ doctrine; references to oral tradition address the deficiency of textual production and exalt personal dialectic, rather than esotericism per se (*Phaedrus* 276a), although a spurious letter (*Ep.* 2 314b–c) does describe a secret theology orally transmitted at the Academy. This epistle is commonly

regarded to be a forgery stemming from the revival (first century CE) of the thought of Pythagoras; indeed, another ‘Neopythagorean’, Numenius of Apamea (second century CE), would have agreed with modern critic Leo Strauss that Plato, recalling the execution of Socrates, had employed an esoteric ‘art of writing’ to conceal his more controversial thoughts while providing clues for careful readers (Num. frag. 23 des Places; Strauss 1952). Part of Plato’s brilliance is that many of his narratives *can* be read as esoteric puzzles which, properly unlocked, yield radically unexpected readings; the Neoplatonists followed Numenius in holding that these readings concerned ideas about cosmogony and theology synthesized from the dialogues, Pythagorean teaching, and allegorical readings of ‘Orphic’ poetry, but which agreed with their conception of the *prisci theologi* (Lat., ‘ancient theologians’), the great teachers of the Orient. Numenius appeals to the authority of ‘the justifiably famous nations...the Brahmins, Jews, Magi, and Egyptians’, thanks to their elder stature, rich ritual tradition, and, most importantly, their concordance with Plato’s theology (frag. 1a). Although such notions of the superiority of the ancient wisdom of the east go back to Plato himself (Baltes 2005), this ‘Platonic Orientalism’ became, with Numenius, typical in Platonic circles, even through the medieval period and beyond (Burns 2006).

The content of these Platonic systems naturally varies, but the general paradigm is the same (Dillon 1977): in the first century CE, Platonists became interested in fusing the concept of the transcendence and unknowability of the first principle—‘The One’ (or ‘monad’) as discussed in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*—with the concept, drawn from the *Timaeus*, of the cosmos as created by a divine craftsman (‘demiurge’), occasionally identified with the divine creative intellect. The ambiguity in the latter text regarding the material with which this craftsman worked begat speculations on a separate, passive, occasionally evil principle of matter, often termed ‘The Dyad.’ The objective of the human mind and soul is to go beyond the material principle and reunite, whether in mystical contemplation in this life or in post-mortem release, with their source, God.

Platonists thus (mostly) agreed upon the basic schema of the cosmos and the role of humanity in it, upon the identity of human and divine with respect to soul and intellect, and upon the ultimate unknowability of The One, God. While accepting the importance of contemplation, they disagreed about the character of other means to access this divinity—clearly one kind of ‘absolute knowledge’—and the relative value of the authorities that claimed to possess it. Although he championed the goal of union with The One, Plotinus, for instance, staunchly defended the tradition of exoteric Greek education as the best road there, particularly against the Gnostics (*Enn.* 2.9.6, 9–10).

Hermetic dialogues like *Poimandres*, perhaps the ancient esoteric text *par excellence*, also offered Platonized accounts of cosmogony and salvation, but as transmitted by Hermes Trismegistus, a semi-divine culture-hero of Hellenistic Egypt vested with the authority of Thoth (the Egyptian god of writing) but employing a particularly Greek idiom (Festugière 1950–54; Fowden 1986; Copenhagen 1995). While some ‘Hermetica’ are fairly dry philosophical discourses, others deal with practical ‘occult’ techniques (such as magic or astrology); still others portray Hermes leading an interlocutor to acquire an indescribable vision of the divine, even in an out-of-body experience (*Corp. Herm.* 13.11–13). The Hermetica sometimes describe

the experience as the acquisition of ‘knowledge (*gnōsis*)’ or ‘mystery’ (ibid., 10.5–6), although the terminology varies widely (e.g., NHC VI, 6.3–25: ‘contemplative vision...wisdom (*theōria...sophia*)’; cf. Hanegraaff 2008). Like the *Chaldean Oracles*—whose content and even mythologoumena is largely Greek notwithstanding (its God is ‘Mind’; its prime intermediary, ‘Hecate’)—the Hermetica ‘auto-orientalize’, authorizing their Platonism by clothing themselves in the garb of the hoary ancient east.

The theurgic Neoplatonists, like Numenius and other ‘Orientalizing’ Hellenes (mentioned by Diog. Laer. 1.1–3), ultimately saw the Greeks and Plato as first amongst equals; they respected Trismegistus and considered the *Oracles* fully valid revelations (Fowden 1986: 201–5; Mar. Vit. Proc. 916–19), yet their authoritative texts claimed usually Greek heritage: Pythagorean, Orphic, Platonic. Their teaching revolved around an esoteric hermeneutics of the Platonic dialogues that would disclose total understanding of material and metaphysical reality, beginning with ethics, proceeding to (meta)physics, and culminating in allegorical interpretations of Orphic myths as describing the matters of high theology (Proc. Theo. Plat. 1.5ff). As with the *Oracles* and Hermetica, the presence of myth alone does not denote esotericism; rather, it is the assignment of authoritative, urgent content to the myths, and their mediation through secrecy and disclosure (revelation or, in this case, allegory). Moreover, the theurgists were themselves ambivalent auto-orientalizers, brandishing the wisdom of Hellas above all others. ‘Chaldean’ and ‘Egyptian’ Platonism appeared safe, because Greeks traditionally regarded these nations as authoritative. In later times, the association of Persia and Egypt with ‘magic’ would tar these ‘Orientalizing’ Neoplatonists with the brush of sorcery. In their own day, meanwhile, they were consumed by the threat of Christianity.

MYSTERY, ESOTERICISM, AND REVELATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Early Christian literature and rituals are replete with esoteric discourse, sometimes dominant, sometimes coexisting with an exoteric *kerygma* (Christian message). The latter current is commonly associated with ‘proto-orthodox’ groups, although they also traded in esoteric leanings in Scripture, popular use of the language of ‘mysteries’, and mysticism. The Gospel of Mark is undergirded by the so-called ‘Messianic Secret’ (Jesus’ concealment of his identity—Wrede 1901) and emphasizes the esotericism of the parables (Mk 4:3–34). The Gospel of John, too, makes wide use of parables and riddling language (Dunderberg 2011). Yet both texts, like the other canonical gospels, are centered upon the exoteric theophany of the Son of God, his death, and resurrection. The bizarre symbolism of The Revelation to John appears decidedly esoteric but actually trades in popular cryptography (such as *gematria*—coding words with numbers, e.g., ‘666’ = ‘(Emperor) Nero’, widely feared amongst Christians) to express reaction to crisis. The apostle Paul deals particularly often with esoteric language. He combats his opponents’ claims to esoteric authority in favor of the exoteric gospel of love (esp. 1 Cor 13), while invoking his own heavenly journey (2 Cor 12:1–10) and making wide use of the term *mystērion* to describe the allure of Christian experience and initiation (Bultmann 1933: 709; Morray-Jones 1995; Pearson 2011). This ‘mystery-language’ was widespread in the Apostolic Era, and

while it could have roots in both Jewish and Hellenic culture (cf. Stroumsa 1996: 156), early modern Protestant polemics opted for the latter, hoping to marginalize a supposed ‘Paganized’ esoteric Hellenism of the early Church (Smith 1990: 54ff).

One thesis holds that ‘esoteric’ language of divine mysteries and ‘secrets’ (*arrēta*) in early Christianity disappeared in the fourth century with the downfall of Gnosticism. The terms became more common, but referred no longer to ‘secret doctrine’, as much as the ineffable knowledge negotiated by mystics (Stroumsa 1996: 147–68). In the fourth century and beyond, there is indeed a very public (e.g., exoteric) and ‘orthodox’ emphasis on divine ineffability, as in Constantine’s remarks on the mystery of the Trinity (Eus. *Vit. Const.* 2.69), the Neoplatonic mysticism of the Cappadocian Fathers (Greg. Naz. *Or.* 28.5), or the Miaphysite contention that the single, divine nature of the Incarnation is *arrēton* (Cyr. Alex. *Ep.* 4 [PG 77.44–50]). Yet ‘esoteric’ Christianity was hardly limited to or even chiefly associated with Gnosticism. Anti-Gnostic teachers like Clement and Origen focused on divine ineffability, but also developed Greek allegory for enlightened exegetes of Scripture (Pépin 1958), an esoteric hermeneutics that would become commonplace in the Church. In other literature, like the pedagogical letters of the Platonist monk Evagrius of Pontus (Brakke 2011), one can hardly distinguish between ‘esotericism’ and ‘mysticism’, and the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite draws on not just the contemplative language but the esoteric pedagogy of the theurgists (Burns 2004). Early Christian esotericism is therefore not to be strictly identified with Gnosticism, whose communities and practices were often no less exoteric than their proto-orthodox contemporaries (De Jong 2006: 1052).

Perhaps most importantly, the identification of ‘esotericism’ and ‘Gnosticism’ misleadingly implies that any non-orthodox revelation is ‘Gnostic’ by virtue of its esotericism. This is particularly acute in the case of clashes about authority and canonicity between the proto-orthodox and groups who were authorized by a different ‘revelation’ (Gk. *apokalupsis*, ‘uncovering’: the acquisition of divine knowledge completely altering one’s understanding). The Hellenistic and Roman eras saw a proliferation of revelatory texts in Judaism and eventually Christianity that used the genre ‘apocalypse’—pseudepigraphic accounts of revelations transmitted by a supernatural mediator to a seer (Collins 1979; Charlesworth 1985). Such texts and their readers directly challenged the proto-orthodox claim to authority transmitted instead via apostolic succession. The proto-orthodox thus opposed groups who held different views based upon different revelatory authority, such as the Syrian baptists known as the Elchasaites. They sharply distinguished the canon from the worthless ‘secret books’ (*apocrypha*—Athan. *Ep. Fest.* 39) like the apocalypses, and opposed new prophecies, such as the ecstatic millenarianism of Montanism. Elchasaism, the apocrypha, and Montanism each have relationship (or lack thereof) to Gnosticism, yet each also possesses an esoteric flair, by virtue of association with ‘heretical’, revelatory, knowledge of secret things (Hipp. *Haer.* 9.13.2ff; 1 *En.* 37:2–5; Ter. *An.* 9). Yet while every revelation was once a secret—and conversely, esotericism is nothing more than the promise of revelation—not every revelation is ‘Gnostic’, for ‘Gnosticism’ is not just about *gnōsis*, but creation.

GNOSTICISM, MANICHAISM, AND THOMASINE MYSTICISM

‘Gnosticism’ is a modern term used by scholars to denote groups known in antiquity as ‘Gnostics’ (*gnostikoi*, ‘knowers’) and related individuals sharing a distinctive mythography that distinguishes God from an imperfect creator-deity, identifies the human essence with the Godhead, and holds salvation to be ‘knowledge’ (*gnōsis*) of God and one’s divine origins (Brakke 2010). ‘Gnostic’ literature and thought is of particular importance for the understanding of ‘esotericism’. Since Gnosticism became regarded as heresy, information about it survived into the modern era, until recently, only through the writing of its orthodox opponents. Its focus on salvation via knowledge and its wide use of Platonic thought (in the form common to the ‘Platonic Underworld’) led to its association with ‘Pagan’ Neoplatonism, ‘Hermetism,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘theurgy,’ leading both exponents and detractors to identify these disparate ancient religious discourses under a variety of terms, such as an ‘underworld,’ *l’ésoterisme*, or, as often in German scholarship, *die Gnosis*. Yet the 1945 discovery of a cache of ancient literature—much of it Gnostic—preserved in the Coptic language at Nag Hammadi (Egypt) offers us a rare glimpse, unclouded by the heresiographers, into this supposedly ‘esoteric’ Christianity (Layton 1987; Meyer 2007).

Chief amongst the Gnostic teachers was Valentinus (ca. 150 CE), whose theology appears to revise earlier, ‘Classic Gnostic’ myths in light of Platonic-Pythagorean thought (Layton 1987). Students such as Ptolemy or Theodotus developed his thought into a potent rival to ‘proto-orthodox’ churches. Irenaeus of Lyons (late-second century CE) claims that Valentinian communities employed an esoteric soteriology which divided up humanity into nonbelievers, learners (other Christians), and elite individuals (Valentinians) who were already saved (Ir. *Haer.* 1.6). The criterion for membership in the elect was ‘initiation’ into the Gnostic ‘mystery’ of the production of the cosmos and humanity through the fall of divine Wisdom (Gk. *Sophia*) from heaven, underlying the Christian message found in various New Testament writings, often expressed through the esoteric hermeneutics of allegory. Indeed, some Valentinian exoteric literature—such as the *Epistle of Ptolemy to Flora* or the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3)—only make oblique, vague references to the story of the Fall of Sophia, so perhaps Irenaeus was correct to identify the Gnostic myth as ‘secret knowledge’ only granted to the ‘initiates’ in Valentinian communities. A version of the myth by another teacher, ‘Justin the Gnostic’, begins with an injunction to keep its contents secret (Hipp. *Haer.* 5.27).

Nag Hammadi revealed two other major Gnostic literary traditions, Ophitism and Sethianism, together commonly referred to as ‘Classic Gnosticism’; the paradigmatic ‘Gnostic’ text, the *Apocryphon of John*, blends both traditions. Ophite thought focuses on the serpent (Gk. *ophis*) in the Garden of Eden, regards Adam and Eve’s eating of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge as positive, and employs a distinctive set of mythologoumena, chiefly comprised of beastly demons (Rasimus 2009). Sethianism, meanwhile, is uninterested in the Garden-narrative and deals with the incarnations of Seth (the third child of Adam and Eve), drawing widely on the Jewish apocalypses (particularly Enochic traditions) in forming its own mythologoumena of the divine world and the revelators and saviors that descend from it. Some Sethian texts weld apocalyptic genre and literary motifs to the contemplative praxis of

Neoplatonism, producing *sui generis* apocalypses whose revealers discuss technical metaphysics (Turner 2001; Burns 2014). Christian ‘heretics’ circulated these texts in the school of Plotinus in Rome, producing controversy over revelatory authority (Plato vs. Seth et al.) and estranging themselves from the philosophers (Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 16). The Sethian literature thus presents a particularly strong conjunction of ancient esoteric traditions (Gnostic apocalypse vs. Neoplatonism) and furnishes a case-study of the breakup (into Christian and Hellenic parties) of an ‘interconfessional’ circle (Wasserstrom 2000) once united by shared interest in these esoteric traditions.

Sethian thought appears to have grown out of a Syrian baptismal circle like the Elchasaïtes, deeply influenced by Jewish pseudepigrapha but regarding Jesus of Nazareth as one of many salvific figures (Burns 2012). Elchasaïsm also birthed the prophet Mani (mid-third century CE), who synthesized a religion which, like Gnosticism, regarded the material world as a negative creation, but differed in viewing its creator as a good being appointed by heaven (Gardner/Lieu 2004). Manichaean use of mystery-language is entirely consonant with contemporary Christian language, and its pedagogy, lifestyle, and missionary activity (extending to East Asia) were decisively exoteric (Pedersen 2011; De Jong 2006: 1052). At the same time, Manichaeism popularized esoteric traditions from Gnostic and apocalyptic literature. For instance, Manichaean salvation-history is traced by a line of *prisci theologi* who transmit revelation (e.g., Adam, Enoch, Jesus, the Buddha, et al.), a development independent of the ‘Oriental wisdom’ esteemed by the Platonists but derived rather from (Elchasaïte) Christian speculation about multiple descents of the savior (Burns 2012: 388ff).

Mani was also influenced by Thomasine literature. The *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II, 2; early second century CE), like the famous *Hymn of the Pearl* (embedded in the *Acts of Thomas*, chs. 105–8) strongly affirms that one can be saved by the secret knowledge that one is in fact divine (*Gos. Thom.* log. 3) and thus escape the trappings of the body. Thomasine traditions say nothing about the creator of the world or the fall of Sophia, but they emphasize salvation by knowledge, a secret revealed by a certain favored apostle: Jesus’ divine twin, Judas Didymus Thomas (Aram., *tā’mā*; Gk. *didumos*, cf. John 11:16). We do not know if there was a ‘school’ of St. Thomas; like Sethianism and Ophitism, Thomasine Christianity is a literary tradition that, unlike Valentinianism and Manichaeism, cannot be traced to any ancient community known to scholarship. Nonetheless, despite its lack of Gnostic myth, the *Gospel of Thomas* has been marketed and received as the most popular ‘Gnostic’ text recovered from Nag Hammadi, generating controversy and commentary amongst churchgoers, scholars, and even New Age exegetes alike, who ‘find’ in it what they ‘seek’ (Burns 2007).

JEWISH ‘GNOSTICISM’ AND ‘THEURGY’ FROM QUMRAN TO THE HEKHALOT

The literary frame of Jesus secretly passing on esoteric knowledge to one of his disciples was a common tool of self-authorization in early Christian pseudepigrapha, viciously opposed by the proto-orthodox (e.g., Ir. *Haer.* 1.25.5). Scholars once referred to such texts as comprising their own genre—the ‘(Gnostic) revelation dialogue’—although they are really apocalypses, ‘revelations’ granted on this world (by Jesus) rather than during a heavenly journey (Collins 1979). Literary traditions of the Jewish apocalypses deeply influenced early Christian literature, particularly in

Gnosticism, which drew on apocalyptic topics (ranging from wild cosmological speculation to the ‘historical eschatology’ of the end of days) as well as popular motifs (a seer’s ascent to heaven via cloud or assimilation to angelhood). The apocalypses’ strong claims to revelatory authority made them controversial in proto-orthodox circles but popular amongst Gnostics.

The ascent traditions of the apocalypses survived into the so-called ‘Hekhalot’ or ‘Merkavah’ literature, sometimes argued to be the earliest instance of Jewish esotericism. These texts, whose manuscripts go back to the early medieval period, provide information about visionary ascent to the celestial palaces (*hekhalot*), culminating in worship before God’s chariot-throne (*merkavah* – Davila 2013). The ascent is said to be difficult and potentially fatal (Schäfer 1981: ch. 259); the texts paradoxically call it a ‘descent’, and its practitioners ‘descenders to the chariot’. The merkavah-vision follows upon long and prolix descriptions of the heavenly gates, their angelic guards, and rivers of fire, all of which must be carefully navigated using the correct passwords and keys. A famous passage describes how visionaries made their ‘journeys’ through what appears to have been an ecstatic, out-of-body experience, ‘like going up and down a ladder in a house’ (Schäfer 1981: ch. 199; cf. 225ff, 560). Useful comparison to some methods and goals of ascent in Gnostic and magical literature once led scholarship to dub the Hekhalot-texts ‘Jewish Gnosticism’ (Scholem 1960), misleadingly implying a direct historical relationship between these disparate textual traditions. Similarly misleading is the unfortunate designation (common in Judaic studies) of such practices as ‘theurgy’; as noted earlier, *theourgia* in ancient sources denotes not just any visionary or self-deifying practice, but a specific body of spiritual techniques used in the later Neoplatonic school and derived from the culture of ‘Orientalizing’ Hellenism.

Gnostic, apocalyptic, and Merkavah literature each probably drew separately upon a common well of scribal and/or priestly traditions developed in Israel during the Second Temple Period (Alexander 2006: 135). Ezekiel’s vision of the *merkavah* (Ezek 1) was the cornerstone of these speculations, which developed into various accounts of the heavenly palaces, ranging from participation in the celestial liturgy (as in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls—García Martínez/Tigheelaar 2000) to the culmination of Enoch’s flight to heaven in pursuit of cosmological secrets (1 *En.* 14). In many apocalypses, sages are transformed into angels, or even the celestial vice-regent, Metatron (3 *En.* 4ff). The Rabbis frowned on such dangerous practices, without forbidding them outright (m. Hag. 2.1). Merkavah-speculations appear to have been a kind of open secret, since the texts themselves never describe their contents as esoteric. Kabbalah sprang from these variegated traditions, which, together, thus form crucial opening chapters in the history of Jewish mysticism (Schäfer 2009).

GNOSIS, REVELATION, ESOTERICISM

These ancient esoteric traditions emerged from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds: Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery-religion, private magical practice, Pythagorean and Orphic revival, Hellenic (but ‘orientalizing’) Platonists, early Christian initiation, theology, and apocrypha, Gnostic literature, and the development of Jewish mysticism. These traditions employed secrecy, concealment, and revelation about

absolute knowledge for very different and even conflicting ends. Most importantly, the content of their ‘absolute knowledge’ was in no way identical. Why, then, group these highly disparate ancient traditions under a single moniker, ‘esoteric’? Certainly scholars have long recognized that an emphasis on revelatory or secret knowledge is a marked feature of religious life in the Hellenistic and Late Antique periods (e.g., Hengel 1996: 1.210–18); they have simply disagreed on how best to term it.

For instance, a recent reference work discusses ‘esotericism’ in ancient religions, but is unable to define the term, or the rubric under which various Egyptian, Neoplatonic, Jewish, and Gnostic trends fall into the same chapter (Johnston, ed., 2004: 640–56). Older scholarship, meanwhile, has often opted for the language of *gnōsis*. Most often, ‘gnosis’ designates any tradition that considers knowledge of God the key to salvation (Festugière 1954: 4.ix; Majercik 1989: 4; Marksches 2000: 1045; Hanegraaff 2012: 12). However, scholars disagree about the *object* of this knowledge: ‘gnosis’ can thus refer to knowledge whose knowledge is of itself (Filoramo 2000: 1043), elite secret knowledge (Scholem 1960: 1), knowledge opposed to mere faith (Rudolph 1987: 55–56), experiential knowledge of the divine (Jonas 2001 [1958]: 286; Hanegraaff 2004: 492, 510; Hanegraaff 2008; DeConick 2006: 7), or knowledge of divine origins (van den Broek 2006: 404–5).

Each of these definitions is unsatisfying. First, none of the primary sources testify to a ‘gnosis’ which has no specific content outside of itself; a classic example (*Corp. Herm.* 1.27–29) does state that ‘gnosis’ is salvific without defining its content, but the rest of the tractate makes clear that it is ‘knowledge’ of divine origins. Second, the charge of ‘elitism’ fails to capture the goal of many esoteric claims, which is namely to become revealed (exoteric); Hermetic or apocalyptic literature, for example, is replete with the themes not just of secret knowledge but paraenesis and even mission (*Corp. Herm.* 1.29; 2 *En.* 39). Third, the juxtaposition of ‘gnosis’ and ‘faith’ encodes a juxtaposition between proto-orthodox Christians (identified with ‘faith’—Matt 10:32; Acts 2:44, 4:32) and their ‘Gnostic’ opponents, clumsily grouping ‘gnosis’ with any and all Christian heresy. Yet ancient religious literature, Christian or not, often equates ‘knowing’ (*gnōsis*) with ‘believing’ (*pistis*—e.g., Just. Mart. *Dial.* 69.1; Athan. *Vit. Anth.* 77; *Corp. Herm.* 4.4; Porph. *Marc.* 21–24). Fourth, ‘experience’ is a category whose hermeneutic utility is questionable (for a critical discussion, see Sharf 1998), particularly in antiquity, and in any case, the use of the term ‘gnosis’ for it misleadingly implies that ‘Gnosticism’ was the mystical tradition of Late Antiquity *par excellence*.

Salvation through ‘gnosis’ of ‘divine origins’ is a stronger definition with wide textual evidence in Gnosticism and Hermetism (Clem. Alex. *Exc. Theod.* 78.2; Hipp. *Haer.* 5.10.2). It has nothing to do with secrecy and thus is not necessarily esoteric (van den Broek 2006: 406), but is predicated upon the axiom of the identity between the human and the divine; knowledge of this identity elicits—indeed itself is—access to the divine (Filoramo 2000: 1044; Marksches 2000: 1045; Hanegraaff 2012: 372). The objection to this approach is twofold: ‘gnosis’ is a misleading term for such knowledge, and the lack of emphasis on ‘secrecy’ hides the importance of the concept of ‘revelation’, which is in turn tied to concealment.

Ancient literature used various terms to designate what modern scholars would like ‘gnosis’ to describe. For instance, the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus calls the ‘theurgic virtue’ associated with mystical experience produced by negative theology ‘faith’ (Gk. *pistis*), not *gnōsis* (*Theo. Plat.* 1.25). A seminal Sethian Gnostic text uses the

term *gnōsis* for salvific knowledge in general, but ‘primary revelation’ for esoteric, intimate knowledge of the Great Invisible Spirit (*Allogenes* NHC XI, 3.53.8, 60.37–61.1). Conversely, early Christians commonly used the word ‘gnosis’ without a ‘Gnostic’ sense (Brakke 2010: 30–31 re: 1 *Clem.* 36:2; *Ep. Bar.* 19:1; etc.). Moreover, modern coining of the term ‘gnosis’ implies an association with Gnosticism, which is both historically misleading (e.g., the Hermetic literature commonly considered representative of ‘gnosis’ was produced by circles distinct from the *gnostikoi* known to Irenaeus and Plotinus) and plays into the hands of the heresiologists, who preferred to group a variety of heretics under the umbrella of ‘gnosis falsely-so-called’ (Ir. *Haer.* Pref.).

The exclusive focus on the language of gnosis in the ancient traditions addressed here thus masks the variety of terms in the sources themselves and shuts us off from other, useful comparisons (e.g., between Gnosticism and the apocalypses) which could be governed by another term. The language of ‘esotericism’ is useful precisely because it addresses the importance of revelation (and in turn concealment) that is central to these traditions. Indeed, the same currents have often been described as a spike of interest in ‘revelation’ in antiquity, and studies of ‘gnosis’ often remark on its ‘revelatory’ character (Bultmann 1933: 693, 702; Rudolph 1987: 55; Marksches 2000: 1051; van den Broek 2006: 403). Regardless, any revelation, whether it became mainstream or not, must have seemed strange and esoteric when first proclaimed, and thus employed secrecy in the interests of both security and allure (King 2011: 82ff). Thus ‘esoteric’ tendencies are integral to revealed religion.

Yet the term ‘esoteric’ is useful in the ancient context for the particular traditions surveyed above because of the role they played in the flowering of ‘Esotericism’—Renaissance Platonism, Hermeticism, alchemy, occultism, theosophy, etc. These esoteric discourses developed out of the reception-history, beginning in the Renaissance, of precisely the materials addressed in this essay—Hermetic texts, Neoplatonism and its association with the mysteries of Orpheus and Pythagoras, theurgy and ancient magic, Kabbalah and its ancestry in the apocalypses and Merkavah-speculation, and, sometimes thanks to their heretical reputation, the thought of the Gnostics themselves. Because the term ‘esotericism’ (like ‘occultism’) does not appear until the eighteenth century and after, and is used today to denote these relatively recent historical developments, it would perhaps be anachronistic to speak of ‘ancient esotericism’ per se. At the same time, recalling the debt of ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’ to the secret revelations of the Hellenistic and Late Antique worlds, one might speak of ‘ancient esoteric traditions’.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE OCCULT MIDDLE AGES



Peter J. Forshaw

This chapter introduces some of the arts and sciences generally subsumed under the notion of occult thought during the Christian Middle Ages, roughly defined as the period from 500 to 1500 CE. As a working definition, ‘occult’ is understood as that which is hidden, secret or concealed, but also that which is insensible, not directly perceptible, indeed at times incomprehensible to the human intellect (Kwa 2011, 104). This encompasses the concept of ‘occult qualities’ (*virtutes occultae*) in nature, as a way of accounting for qualities in an object that were not explicable by knowledge of their manifest physical qualities (e.g., light, heat, motion, taste, colour, odour). Occult qualities at times appeared to be incompatible with the general expectations people had about the normal behaviour of the four elements on which Aristotelian scholastic philosophy was based. Some properties could not be explained in those terms. A popular example was the power of loadstones to attract iron, a property visible to the eye, but its cause occult because magnetic virtue did not result from the specific mixture of the four elements. Other examples were the belief in influences emanating from the planets, the sympathies and antipathies believed to exist between animals, vegetables and minerals, the wondrous (electrical) rays of the torpedo fish, or the occult, i.e., ‘interior’ properties of alchemical substances (Eamon 1994, 24; Newman 1996).

Nature, then, was a repository of occult powers and the studies involved in discovering and harnessing them came to be known as the ‘occult sciences’, knowledge kept secret from the uninitiated and profane. While the list of occult sciences can extend into the many divinatory arts, there are generally three main representatives: astrology, alchemy and magic. The gifted practitioner of these occult sciences, capable of recognizing nature’s secrets, could manipulate them in order to produce wonders surpassing the abilities of his less informed peers.

During the ninth and tenth centuries much Greek material relating to these arts and sciences was translated into Arabic, followed by a flood of translation from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The transmission of Arabic learning to the West, through, for example, the scriptorium of King Alfonso X of Castile (1221–84), introduced scholars to new conceptions of the occult sciences and an impressive new corpus of works on astrology, alchemy and magic (García Avilés

1997; Dominguez Rodriguez 2007; Fernández Fernández 2013). The impact of Arabic knowledge on the West is particularly apparent from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, during the High Middle Ages, and was to have a profound influence on the learned Christian West, indeed the impact of this material was so widespread that European scholars had to ‘undertake fundamental reconsideration of their views on magic’ (Kieckhefer 1989, 18).

While much could be said about the presence of occult theories and practices in the Greek, Arabic and Jewish worlds, the main focus of this essay will be on occult thought in the Latin Christian West: the terrestrial and celestial ‘occult sciences’, alchemy and astrology, and the broad category of learned magic, with the aim of introducing important figures, significant works, and outlining influential themes that were to be of continuing influence in the Renaissance.

ASTROLOGY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In the Early Middle Ages, there were few developed textbooks on either astronomy or astrology in the Christian West; indeed detailed observations of the heavens appear to have been rare in Europe until the twelfth century (Tester 1987, Chapter 5; Flint 1990). What knowledge there was of classical astrology existed in two main sources, the *Consolatio philosophiae* – *Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 523) of the Roman Christian and Platonic philosopher Boethius (480–524) and the encyclopedic *Etymologiarum libri XX* – *20 Volumes of Etymologies* of Isidore, Bishop of Seville (c. 570–636) (Von Stuckrad 2007, 187–88). These two works were major conduits of late antique thought for medieval Christian scholarship. Isidore’s distinction between *astrologia superstitiosa* and *astrologia naturalis* became the standard argument for medieval scholars to justify ‘licit’ astrology. ‘Superstitious’ astrology makes use of horoscopes and seeks to predict the character and the fate of an individual; ‘Natural’ astrology, on the other hand, concerns itself with meteorological predictions, for instance of flood or drought and includes iatromathematics, or astrological medicine (Tester 1987, 124–26). Isidore’s assertion, in keeping with the classical medical authorities Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BC) and Galen (129–99/217 CE), that every physician ought to be familiar with astrology, which indicates the appropriate times for purgations, venesections, and the preparation and administering of medicine, retained an influence in Christian culture right into early modern times (Pioreschi 2003, 64). A common manifestation of this influence, in medieval manuscripts of astrological medicine, is the presence of the *melothesia*, the image of the astrological man, whose body parts are governed by the signs of the zodiac, from the head ruled by the first sign, Aries, down to the feet ruled by the last sign, Pisces (Clark 1982).

It was only, however, with the twelfth-century translation of Arabic treatises into Latin that Christian thinkers gained access to essential reading for more sophisticated practice of astrology. This became possible with the Latin translations of the *Almagest* and the *Tetrabiblos*, two of the most famous classical textbooks of astronomy and astrology by the second-century Greco-Roman astrologer Claudius Ptolemy (90–168). The *Tetrabiblos* was translated in 1138 and became one of the most popular astrological manuals of the Middle Ages (Barton 1994; Tester 1987, Chapter 4). There, in addition to Ptolemy’s philosophical arguments in support of astrology, the novice astrologer

learned of the powers of the seven planets of the Ptolemaic cosmos (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon), the twelve constellations of the Zodiac, and the essentials of both mundane and judicial astrology (on these, see Page 2001).

This boom in translation did not just provide the West with copies of classical Greek and Roman material preserved in Arabic, but also opened up a wealth of knowledge from medieval Islamic culture, with works that introduced new genres of astrology, such as the doctrine of 'Revolutions'. A key proponent of this theory was the Persian philosopher Abu Mashar (Latin Albumasar, 787–886), whose encyclopedic treatment of all aspects of astrological theory and practice in his *Introduction to Astrological Prediction* (known in the West as *Liber Introductorius maior*) appeared in Latin in 1133 (Albumasar 1997). His *De magnis coniunctionibus – On the Great Conjunctions*, was an elaborate treatise on mundane astrology with special regard to the conjunctions of the outermost planets of the Ptolemaic cosmos, Jupiter and Saturn. In this work Abu Mashar set forth his chronosophical theory of the impact that the coming together of these two most slow-moving planets exerted on major natural, political and religious terrestrial events, from the growth and decline of religions and empires to the outbreak of wars, plagues and floods (Albumasar 2000). These ideas were taken up by both Christians and Jews in order to calculate, respectively, the return of Christ or the beginning of the messianic era (Boudet 2005, 61). Whereas the casting of horoscopes of individuals underwent periods of condemnation by the church due to concerns about the question of free will, influential medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon and Bonaventure considered this form of astrology legitimate, arguing that it was in fact easier and more accurate to predict such 'universal' events (Zambelli 1986, 21–22).

By the end of the twelfth century, astrology was prevalent in almost all monasteries, and interest began to spread from the clergy to the court, and other layers of society. It attracted the attention of influential thinkers. The Platonist philosopher Bernardus Silvestris's *Cosmographia* (1147–48), with its two parts, Megacosmus and Microcosmus, concerning respectively the greater world and the creation of man, became one of the most important works of the High Middle Ages for its adaptation of Abu Mashar's ideas to a Christian context (Silvestris 1990). In the *Liber introductorius – Introductory Book*, Michael Scot (fl. 1217–35) presents his readers with a history of astrology stretching back to the first magician, Zoroaster, and instructs them with a great deal of medieval star lore. One of the most famous astrologers of his time, the Italian Guido Bonatti (d.c. 1297) wrote a comprehensive textbook, the *Liber astronomicus*, described as 'the most important astrological work produced in Latin in the thirteenth century' (Thorndike 1929, 826). By the mid-thirteenth century, astrology had been incorporated into the standard philosophical curriculum of Western universities, as part of the quadrivium with mathematics, music and geometry; and was firmly allied with medicine by the fifteenth century (Kusukawa 1993, 34).

ALCHEMY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Two early Latin references to the 'science of alchemy' can be found in the works of the scholastic philosophers Dominicus Gundissalinus (fl. 1150) and Daniel of Morley (c.1140–1210). In *De divisione Philosophie – On the Division of Philosophy*,

Gundissalinus introduces the ‘*sciencia de alquimia*’ as one of the eight parts of natural science, while in Morley’s *Liber de naturis inferiorum et superiorum – Book on the Natures of Lower and Upper Things* we discover that the ‘*scientia de alckimia*’ is, apparently, one of the eight parts of astrology (Forshaw 2013, 147).

The West’s initiation into the mysteries of alchemy begins in 1144 with Robert of Chester’s *Liber de compositione alchemiae – Book on the Composition of Alchemy*, a translation of instructions on how to make the Philosophers’ Stone, allegedly given by the Christian monk Morienus Romanus to the Umayyad prince Khalid ibn-Yazid (Principe 2013, 51f). The work is presented in at times highly allegorical language, which leaves open the possibility that there are various levels of interpretation at play in the text, particularly with the presence of such assertions as that the matter needed for the work ‘comes from you, who are yourself its source’, alongside discussions of alchemical terms and procedures (Morienus 1974, 27).

Another early alchemical work to become available to Western readers in the twelfth century was the short enigmatic text known as the *Tabula Smaragdina* or *Emerald Tablet*, attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, alleged author of hundreds of treatises on astrology, magic and alchemy. There the reader is introduced to the classic Hermetic formulation ‘What is below is like what is above; and what is above is like what is below’, to the notion that the sought-for goal of the alchemical ‘operation of the sun’, be that the elixir or the Philosophers’ Stone, has, for example, the sun as its father, the moon as its mother, and the earth as its nurse (Principe 2013, 32; Kahn 1994; Ruska 1926). Such opaque, poetic language was to represent a major style of transmission of the occult science of alchemy for the rest of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Although some alchemical writers chose to express themselves in down-to-earth language, alchemical forms of communication in many medieval works can be particularly ‘occult’, in the sense that their authors made use of cover-names to conceal the identity of the substances and processes employed in the Great Work from the profane. Hence, rather than discuss work with quicksilver, an alchemist would write about the ‘dragon’, or simply speak of the necessary ‘water’; instead of advising the use of volatile salts, an author would speak of eagles with bows in their talons. Colour changes would be implied by the mention of black ravens, white swans, multicoloured peacocks, and golden eagles, much to the puzzlement of the uninitiated (Ferrario 2009; Read 1995, Chapter 4). Given the highly visual nature of alchemical metaphor, it was only a matter of time before the emergence of a new genre of alchemical images in the Late Middle Ages, one of the earliest examples being Constantine of Pisa’s *Book of the Secrets of Alchemy* (c. 1257), succeeded by far more elaborate image sequences in such fifteenth-century manuscript works as the *Aurora consurgens – The Rising Dawn* and *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit – Book of the Holy Trinity* (Constantine of Pisa 1990; Obrist 1982; Gabriele 1997). The occultation, as it were, of alchemical communication was deepened by the substitution of signs for substances and processes. The alchemical symbols for the seven metals (gold, silver, copper, etc.), were shared with the astrological signs for the planets (sun, moon, Venus, etc.), but other signs or ‘hieroglyphs’, such as those for minerals like antimony, sulphur and cinnabar were specific to alchemy. A further method contributing to the concealment of knowledge was ‘*dispersa intentio*’ (dispersion of knowledge), when instructions for an alchemical operation would be written in the wrong order, some parts only

fragmentary, sometimes with the full process distributed in different books. A major exponent of this approach is the medieval author Geber, who in his *Summa perfectionis magisterii* – *Summation of the Perfection of the Magistry* (c. 1300), generally agreed to be the most influential medieval work of practical transmutational alchemy, writes of scattering information here and there in different chapters of his work and has ‘hidden it where we have spoken most openly’ (Newman 1991, 784f; Principe 2013, 45).

GOALS OF MEDIEVAL ALCHEMY

There have been many different interpretations of the *Emerald Tablet*, ranging from readings of it as a text of *Chrysopoeia* (Gold-Making), *Chymiatría* (Chemical Medicine), or indeed Spiritual Alchemy. The first of these represents the major form of alchemical endeavour in the Middle Ages, the amelioration of base-metals with the aim of their ultimate transmutation into gold. Most medieval practitioners were concerned with this *Opus Magnum* (Great Work), the production of precious metals through the art of transmutation by means of a series of laboratory processes, involving, for example, calcination, dissolution, sublimation, coagulation, fixation, and projection, and the quest for the *Lapis Philosophorum* (Philosophers’ Stone) and the *Elixir*, for the healing of either ‘sick’ metals or human beings. These ideas were taken up by Pseudo-Lull, whose *Testamentum* (c. 1330) spoke of metallic transmutation, the enhancement of human health, and the production of artificial stones and precious stones (Principe 2013, 47, 72; Pereira & Spaggiari 1999). In his *Liber de consideratione quintae essentiae omnium rerum* – *Book on the Consideration of the Quintessence of All Things* (1351–52), the Franciscan John of Rupescissa (c. 1310–c. 1362) described the distillation of quintessences of various things, including the preparation of alcohol distilled from wine, to produce the paradoxical ‘fiery water’ of the alchemists. Rupescissa’s popular work is one of the most widespread of the Middle Ages (DeVun 2009). Lest anyone think, however, that alchemy was always considered purely natural, it is worth mentioning that Petrus Bonus, the author of another popular work, the fourteenth-century *Pretiosa margarita novella* – *New Pearl of Great Price* (1330), claimed that alchemy was natural, supernatural and divine, and that a knowledge of the generation of the Philosophers’ Stone enabled pagan philosophers to predict the virgin birth of Christ (Crisciani 1973; Principe 2013, 68).

MAGIC IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The Latin West inherited a rich tradition of magical literature from antiquity. Although far less documentary evidence survives from the early Middle Ages, some important early classifications of magic are available. In Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, for example, we read that mankind learned the magical arts from bad angels. Despite his overall negative attitude towards magic, Isidore’s entry on ‘magi’ contains a catalogue of magical arts that would remain a standard topos in medieval writings: necromancy, the forms of divination linked with the four elements (hydromancy, pyromancy, aeromancy, geomancy), well-known methods of classical divination, including observation of the flight of birds (augury), the entrails of

sacrificial animals (haruspicy), and the positions of stars and planets (astrology) (Kieckhefer 1989, 11).

As with astrology and alchemy, magical literature was profoundly influenced by the influx of new learning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Arabic philosophical and astrological corpus provided Western scholars with a theoretical framework well suited to supporting numerous forms of magical practice. The focus of the following sections will be on the diversity of learned magic in the Middle Ages, an introduction to the most important genres: natural magic, astral magic and ritual magic.

NATURAL MAGIC

Despite the opposition of theologians like Hugh of St Victor (c.1096–1141) to the idea that any type of magic should be included in the curriculum of legitimate learning (Eamon 1994, 59), the influence of newly translated Arabic treatises in the domain of natural philosophy almost inevitably introduced the concept of a new branch of science, ‘natural magic’, to learned discourse. Rather than simply rejecting all magic as demonic, after the manner of Saint Augustine (354–430), some writers argued for a distinction between a licit form of natural magic and an illicit demonic magic. Natural magic enabled human beings to know and make use of the occult virtues of natural things, the properties of stones, metals, plants, and animals, the sympathies and antipathies existing in the whole of nature, without the assistance of or manipulation by demons. Not only could discerning scholars know about these natural virtues, and offer naturalistic explanations for the phenomena, but they could apply the knowledge for the benefit of mankind through a practical magic that made use of the things of nature (Lang 2008, 51–78; Page 2013, 31–48).

An influential voice in this natural magic worldview was the theologian William of Auvergne (c. 1180–1249). In *De Legibus – On the Laws* (1228–30), William introduced the term ‘natural magic’ as the eleventh part of natural philosophy, justifying its inclusion by arguing that it operates merely through natural virtues, inherent in the objects of nature. In the slightly later *De Universo – On the Universe* (1231–36), he discussed *experimenta* related to these occult powers and the notion of magical correspondences, implying an underlying network of secret relationships between the three kingdoms of nature (animal, vegetable and mineral), celestial configurations and the parts of the human body (Lang 2008, 25). The Dominican theologian and natural philosopher Albertus Magnus (ca. 1193–1280) similarly acknowledged the possibility of natural magic in philosophical writings, such as *De animalibus – On Animals*, though in his theological work he was cautious about distinguishing it from the demonic kind (Thorndike 1929, Chapter LIX, esp. 548–60). Probably the most widespread medieval treatise on natural magic was the *Experimenta*, frequently, if falsely, attributed to Albertus, and later known as the *Liber aggregationis seu secretorum de virtutibus herbarum, lapidum et animalium – Book of Collection or of Secrets of the Virtues of Plants, Stones and Animals*. Another pseudo-Albertan work, *De mirabilibus mundi – On the World’s Marvels*, likewise contributed to an interest in the hidden properties of nature. Indeed, a whole culture of popular books of secrets developed, containing collections of *secreta*, *experimenta* and recipes, predominantly concerned with practical recipes for producing cosmetics

or dyeing textiles, preparing drugs or brewing beer. The *Liber Secretum Secretorum* – *Book of the Secret of Secrets*, pseudonymously attributed to Aristotle, a work that has been called ‘the most popular book in the Middle Ages’ (Thorndike 1929, 267), its full translation dating from the mid-thirteenth century, is filled with material from the occult sciences, on alchemy, information from lapidaries and herbals, medical astrology and the fabrication of talismans (Eamon 1994, 45ff; Williams 2003).

ASTRAL MAGIC

With this reference to talismans we enter the domain of one of the most important new categories of learned magic introduced into the Christian West from mainly Arabic sources during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a genre that has been variously termed astral, astrological, celestial, or image magic, a set of practices that occupy a midpoint between tolerated natural and illicit demonic magic.

The ninth-century works of the Iraqi mathematician, physician and ‘first philosopher of the Islamic world’, Abu Yusuf Ya-qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d. c. 870), in particular his influential combination of Platonism and Aristotelianism in *De radiis stellarum* – *On the Rays of the Stars*, were to have a profound impact on Western theories of occult influence (Al-Kindi 1974). In *De radiis*, which circulated widely in Latin translation from the thirteenth century through to the Renaissance, Al-Kindi promotes the theory that not only do all material things in the natural world, the stars included, send out rays, but so too do words and actions, such that ritual, prayer and sacrifice can all be powerful magical ways of influencing the cosmos (Travaglia 1999). Here astral magic is presented as working through a cosmic harmony of interconnected rays, with the informed practitioner having the ability to direct the virtues of the celestial bodies (planets, constellations, fixed stars) down into terrestrial objects for magical purposes, on a natural rather than supernatural basis.

Al-Kindi’s theoretical work on magic was complemented by another ninth-century work, *De imaginibus astrologicis* – *On Astrological Images* by the Sabian scholar and philosopher Thabit ibn Qurra (826–901). By ‘Astrological Images’, Thabit means ‘talismans’ (hence the frequent reference to this genre as ‘Image Magic’) and his book is a work dealing with the practical issues of creating astral magical talismans, an activity that Thabit declares is the height and summit of the science of the stars. In Al-Kindi, there is no suggestion of rituals directed to planetary spirits, but instead an emphasis on the creator of talismans drawing down celestial virtue. Such is the case, too, if the reader consults the Latin translation by ‘Magister John of Seville’; if, however, the reader possesses the translation by Adelard of Bath, made slightly earlier in the twelfth century, there one finds prayers to spirits (Burnett 1996, 6). Here, then, we have slightly ambiguous instructions for rituals to be performed over a three-dimensional object (image, talisman or statue) in order to induce a spirit or heavenly body to imbue it with power under well-defined astrological circumstances. Some argued that these were purely natural talismans, incorporating the combined power of a star, stone, herb and character; others, however, were more dubious.

Although, following Al-Kindi, image magic ostensibly depended on occult powers in nature, especially those of celestial origin, ‘many of its sources of power – words, characters, images and spirits – were more controversial’ and astral magical techniques and practices could also be identified with far more subversive genres

such as necromantic texts and manuals, creating affinities between astral magic and the invocation of demons (Page 2013, 48). Such was certainly the case with the most complex work of astral magic available to the West, the Arabic compendium drawn from 224 magical sources, the *Ghayat al-Hakim* or *Goal of the Wise*, composed in Spain in the eleventh century. This work, better known in the Christian West in its Latin translation as the *Picatrix*, introduces itself as a book of necromancy and includes far more dangerous practices, including animal sacrifices directed to spirits and rituals using human blood, although the translator omits certain passages, such as one for creating a divinatory head from a decapitated prisoner (Boudet et al. 2011, 156).

One of the most important medieval works on astrology, the *Speculum astronomiae* – *Mirror of Astronomy* (1255–60), usually attributed to Albertus Magnus, contributed to learned interest in astral magic with its survey of newly translated Greek and Arab astronomical and astrological practices (Zambelli 1992; Paravicini Bagliani 2001). The author's primary interest is in establishing the philosophical legitimacy of astrology, in accordance with both Aristotelianism and Christianity. In the process he differentiates between useful and innocent astrological texts and dangerous necromantic works concerning images, characters and seals (Zambelli 1992, 241ff; Lang 2008, 27). The *Speculum*'s eleventh chapter, devoted to the *Scientia Imaginum* (Science of Images) distinguishes three categories of texts, respectively 'abominable' Hermetic images, 'detestable' Solomonic images, and acceptable astrological images. The first group, represented by such Hermetic works as the *Liber praestigiorum* – *Book of Talismans* and the *Liber Lunae* – *Book of the Moon*, constitutes the most dangerous category, being idolatrous, including rites that require suffumigations and invocations to spirits. The second group, including *De quatuor annuli Salomonis* – *On the Four Rings of Solomon* and the *Almandal of Solomon*, is 'less unsuitable', avoiding ceremonies, but nonetheless encouraging the use of unknown characters of dubious origin, and performed by inscribing characters and the use of demonic seals, which are to be exorcized by certain names (Véronèse 2012). What remains is a third group of two acceptable works: Thabit's *De imaginibus* and Pseudo-Ptolemy's *Opus imaginum* – *Work of Images*, works that provide practical information about fashioning images at a suitable astrological moment, concerned (according to the author of the *Speculum*) solely with utilizing stellar influxes without any suggestion of resorting to idolatrous rituals, suffumigations or invocations, exorcism or inscription of characters.

A decade or so later, similar concerns about discriminating between licit and illicit forms of talismanic magic were discussed by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). In *De occultis operibus naturae* – *On the Occult Works of Nature*, Aquinas conceded that some bodies, such as magnets, have workings that cannot be caused by the powers of the elements and their actions must be traced to higher principles (either to heavenly bodies or to separated intellectual substances). In *Summa contra gentiles* (esp. Book 3, Chapters 104 & 105), he appears to accept that some power from celestial bodies may be present in natural, unfashioned amulets; he rejects talismans that include signs, figures or images, for they receive their efficacy from an intelligent being to whom the communication is addressed, and that being is most likely demonic (Thorndike 1929, 602ff; Walker 2003, 43; Skemer 2006, 63f).

RITUAL MAGIC IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

The later middle ages was witness to increasing numbers of a new kind of work, manuals of ritual magic, concerned with the conjuring of spirits, be that the summoning of infernal demons or the invocation of celestial angels. The reliance on spiritual, demonic, or angelic assistance and the magicians' use of prayers and conjurations as means of communicating with these supernatural powers clearly differentiates this genre of magic from its more licit natural and astral forms. The boundaries between these various genres, however, are permeable, indeed it is extremely common to find ritual magicians, busy with their angelic, theurgic or demonic operations, incorporating astrological practices, ranging from simple attention to specific planetary days and hours, or the transits of the moon through the zodiac, to more sophisticated calculations of planetary events; likewise, a knowledge of the *materia magica* of natural magic was essential both for the sacrifices employed in certain forms of necromantic ritual and for the fabrication of the at times elaborate instruments and weapons employed in some ceremonies.

While these texts of ritual magic, like those of other forms, clearly show the influence of earlier Greek, Arabic Neo-Platonic, and Jewish traditions, the extant manuscripts draw for the most part on Christian biblical and liturgical texts and practices, most notably exorcism, for their structure and justification. In contrast to many of the practices of natural and astral magic, one identifying characteristic of this genre is that the rituals are often long and complex, sometimes taking months to complete (Fanger 1998 a, vii–ix; Lang 2008, 162–88).

Ritual magic manifests in two fundamental forms, along the lines of classical distinctions between *theurgia* and *goetia*, namely, a magic concerned with angelic powers and another involving angelic and demonic powers.

The first form of ritual magic, angelic or theurgic, described rituals concerned with revelation, techniques for inducing dreams and visions, for speaking to spirits, for a direct infusion of knowledge and experience of the celestial realm, for the development of the practitioner's memory, eloquence and understanding, with the ultimate aim of improving the practitioner's chances of salvation. This normally involved intensive and extensive rituals for the purification of the practitioner's soul, preparations in the form of fasting, confession, periods of silence and meditation, lengthy prayers to the Holy Trinity and accompanying angels (Page 2011; Page 2013, 93–129; Klaassen 2013, 89–113).

Although the word 'magic' is not found in the text, one of the most important representatives of this angel magic is the *Ars notoria* – *Notory Art*, with its claim to enable the solitary practitioner, the student intent on bettering himself in his studies or the monk earnestly hoping for visionary experience, to acquire spiritual and intellectual gifts from the Holy Spirit by means of angelic intermediaries. According to the *Ars notoria* it is a set of holy prayers revealed to Solomon by an angel in order for the successful practitioner to become the beneficiary of a divine infusion of knowledge of the liberal arts, philosophy, theology, medical and divinatory knowledge. This involves the recitation of prayers, some recognizably orthodox, others containing mysterious *verba ignota*, purificatory rituals, contemplative exercises involving the inspection of *notae* – complex figures composed of words, shapes and magical characters – drinking of special decoctions, and so forth,

extending over a four-month period (Véronèse 2007; Camille 1998). The earliest version of the *Ars notoria* probably originates in Northern Italy and dates from the latter half of the twelfth century; its influence can be seen in the fourteenth-century *Liber visionum* – *Book of Visions* of John of Morigny (Fanger 1998 b, 216–49), as well as other forms of Christianized magic, like the *Anacrisis* and the *Ars crucifixi* – *Art of the Crucifix*, both attributed to the Majorcan hermit Pelagius (d. 1480). The latter text, for example, in a combination of magic technique and pious devotion, provides a ritual of dream incubation in order to grant the earnest practitioner a vision of Christ during sleep (Gilly & van Heertum 2002, vol. 1, 288–89; Véronèse 2006). In general, these manuals of Christian ritual magic are so orthodox in tone that manuscripts of the *Ars notoria* and its derivatives have been mistaken for prayer formularies.

The same could not be said, however, of another influential treatise of angel magic, the *Liber sacer sive iuratus Honorii* – *The Holy or Sworn Book of Honorius*, an original composition in Latin dating from probably fourteenth-century southern France. This work claims to provide a twenty-eight day ritual that will result in no less than the Beatific Vision (Hedegård 2002; Mesler 1998); the complete Honorius ritual, however, requires seventy-two days! In the prologue to the *Liber iuratus*, we learn of a general council of eighty-nine Masters of Magic from Naples, Athens and Toledo, who defend the magical art and reject the unjust charges of misguided bishops and prelates who have been led astray by demons (despite the fact that the magic in question is one of binding and loosing spirits). Their argument is that such spirits are constrained only by pure men, not the wicked. What follows is a detailed set of instructions for fashioning a *Sigillum Dei* (Seal of God), directions for the rituals of consecration (involving blood of a mole, dove, bat or hoopoe), and the requisite prayers and invocation of a set of around one hundred divine names, so that the operator can conjure angels and demons for various purposes, the highest activity being the *opus visionis divine*, an operation leading to the radical transformation of the practitioner with a vision of God, while still in mortal frame (Mathiesen 1998). Subsequent parts of the manual include further rituals for conjuring planetary, aerial and terrestrial spirits, the construction of a magic circle, use of magical equipment, such as a hazel wand, swords, a whistle, use of *voces magicæ* and so forth. Significant parts of this material are also found in the impressive fourteenth-century compendium of magic, the *Summa sacre magice*, by the Spanish scholar Berengarius Ganellus, which similarly assures the operator that the use of the *Sigillum Dei* will grant a vision of God, knowledge of God's power, the absolution of sins, sanctification, and dignification over all spirits (Veenstra 2012; Klaassen 2013, 102).

The other, potentially far more subversive form of ritual magic, frequently accused of idolatry, is most often referred to as necromancy, literally translating as 'divination by the dead', but generally understood as the conjuring of demonic beings, through practices inspired by religious rites of exorcism, in order to constrain them to do the operator's will. The aims of necromantic practitioners range from the relatively anodyne goals of locating hidden treasure and stolen goods (or the thief), or discovering secret information, through gaining invisibility, creating illusions, to the more malign desires to manipulate human emotions, cause physical or mental harm, dominating others to gratify sexual desires (Klaassen 2013, 115–55; Kieckhefer 1989, 151–75).

The early history of necromancy, however, is fragmentary and the earliest surviving British dedicated manuscript collections date from the fifteenth century (Klaassen 2013, 123). As with angelic magic, necromantic rituals are also derived from the liturgy, with multiple invocations of God, the Virgin Mary, the saints and angels. The operations, loosely based upon exorcism, conjure and bind demons through the power of the Christian operator, who has ritualistically prepared himself through a strict regimen of abstinence, prayer, confession, communication, and penance. The fifteenth-century *Liber Consecrationum*, for example, advises fasting and prayer, providing many pages of prayers replete with divine names and words of power, to be said over periods of weeks. These are followed by pages of adjurations and conjurations of Satan, details on how to obtain knowledge from a magical mirror, lists of demons, and detailed instructions for conjuring spirits (Kieckhefer 1997). Far more visible, moreover, in these goetic rites, is the use of suffumigations, creation of magic circles with pentagrams, astrological characters, demonic seals, and the inclusion of an impressive array of *instrumenta magica*: the rings, mirrors, wands, swords, knives, lances and so forth found in works like the *Clavicula Salomonis* – *Key of Solomon*, of which few copies survive from the middle ages, but which was to become the most popular magical manuscript in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards.

CONCLUSION

The Middle Ages received a wealth of occult material from antiquity, particularly so due to the industrious programme of translation of Arabic texts, although it should be said that texts translated into Latin in the twelfth century and initially seen as repositories of valuable new knowledge and useful practical arts were already being treated with suspicion by the end of the thirteenth century. The Dominicans issued condemnations of alchemy in 1272, 1287, 1289, and 1323 (Newman 1989, 439). In 1312, all members of the Franciscan order were forbidden to possess occult books of any kind, or to engage in alchemy, necromancy, or the invocation of demons, or face the consequences of prison or excommunication. Just five years later, in 1317, a papal Bull banned the practice of alchemy (Page 2013, 30).

Fortunately, a great deal of manuscript material survives in the archives, many of the treatises from these different occult currents (astrological, alchemical and magical) can be found bound together, although some genres, such as the conjurations of ritual magic, tend to follow their own separate stream of transmission. This being said, many of these occult practices were clearly interrelated, sometimes in an obvious way: for example, a fashioner of talismans would doubtless benefit from the products of the alchemical laboratory; likewise at least some alchemists paid attention to the specifics of correct astrological timing, seeking the most propitious celestial moment for their ‘lower astronomy’. At other times the connections are less obvious: many historians of alchemy would be surprised to discover that the necromantic *Picatrix* provides insights into some of the enigmatic terms in the *Emerald Tablet*. All this material was waiting for the next stage of assimilation when, in the Renaissance, it was finally dignified with the name ‘Occult Philosophy’.

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PART II

THE RENAISSANCE



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CHAPTER THREE

THE HERMETIC REVIVAL IN ITALY



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TWO MISCONCEPTUALIZATIONS WITH SIGNIFICANT CONSEQUENCES

Ironically, the hermetic revival in Italy, which proved to be so important in the ensuing history of the European Renaissance, started with a misunderstanding. Further adding to this irony, the modern historiographical appreciation of this hermetic revival also included a great deal of misconceptualization, which, nevertheless, also exercised a great influence on Renaissance research, from intellectual history and the history of science, to the appreciation of magic, and a new understanding of some of the roots of Western esotericism. It is thus particularly appropriate to start the present survey with the recollection of this double misconceptualization, one in recent scholarship, the other in fifteenth-century Italy.

In 1964 the Warburg Institute scholar, Frances Yates, who had already been well established among Renaissance researchers, but was little known outside those circles, published a large monograph entitled, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. The book, which was built on the scholarship of P.O. Kristeller, Eugenio Garin, D.P. Walker, and other Renaissance scholars, offered such an idiosyncratic and challenging interpretation of some Renaissance texts that it soon became a scholarly bestseller. It not only called for a completely new understanding of Giordano Bruno, up to then the hero of the proto-Enlightenment and the martyr of scientific investigation sent to the stake by the Catholic Inquisition, but also suggested a then bold rethinking of the origins of the scientific revolution, looking for its roots in Renaissance hermeticism and magic. In a later article Yates defined hermeticism as follows:

When treated as straight philosophy, Renaissance Neoplatonism may dissolve into rather vague eclecticism. But the new work on Ficino and his sources has demonstrated that the core of the movement was hermetic, involving a view of the cosmos as a network of magical forces with which man can operate. The Renaissance magus had his roots in the Hermetic core of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and it is the Renaissance magus, I believe, who exemplifies that

changed attitude of man to the cosmos which was the necessary preliminary to the rise of science.

(Yates 1967 in Yates 1984, 228)

It is clear that her reevaluation of Bruno was closely connected with her reconceptualization of Ficino's Neoplatonism and her enthusiasm about this 'new, magical' Ficino can be compared to Ficino's own enthusiasm about the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Ficino Rediscovered and Recycles the Corpus Hermeticum

As is well known, around 1460 a Greek manuscript was delivered to Cosimo de' Medici from Macedonia, containing the mysterious tracts, attributed to the exalted mystic, Hermes Trismegistus, who had supposedly gained his wisdom and knowledge directly from the divine Nous, Pimander, and who later himself became deified. The aging and weak Cosimo became so excited about the apparent occult profundity of these treatises that he directed Ficino to suspend the translation of Plato, which he had been engaged with, and translate the *Corpus* into Latin prior to his death. The excitement of Ficino and the Florentine Neoplatonists, however, was based on a misconception. According to their conviction (relying on Lactantius and other classical Christian Fathers as well as on various medieval speculations) Hermes Trismegistus was a historical figure who had lived at the time of Moses, and while the Hebrew patriarch received from God a public teaching summarized in the ten commandments, Hermes became the immediate recipient of a secret, occult lore. In his introduction to the Latin translation, Ficino set up a genealogy of this ancient theology (*prisca theologia*): '*Primus igitur theologie apellatus est auctor*' (Ficino 1576, 1836) – Trismegistus is identified as the first theologian who was followed by Orpheus, then Aglaophemus, then Pythagoras, who was the master of our divine Plato.

In reality – as later proved by Isaac Casaubon in 1614 – the hermetic texts were much more recent, dating from the late-Hellenistic period, contemporaneous to the philosophy of Plotinus. However, this was not known to the Florentine Neoplatonists and as they saw certain convergences among the Christian doctrines, the teachings of Plato, and hermetic lore, they were inspired to forge a syncretic philosophy in which the ancient elements were not only precursors of Christian truth, but in many ways contained a shortcut to the deepest mysteries of the anthropological standing of humans in the great work of creation (Vasoli 2010; Walker 1958).

Ficino and his colleagues were greatly impressed by Plato's doctrine of divine frenzy that could catapult humans from the prison of matter back to the divine spheres. On countless occasions Ficino expressed his high esteem about this exalted state of mind. Even in his letters he comments that

Plato considers, as Pythagoras, Empedocles and Heraclitus maintained earlier, that our soul, before it descended into our bodies, dwelt in the abodes of heaven where it was nourished and rejoiced in the contemplation of the truth. Those philosophers I have just mentioned had learnt from Mercurius Trismegistus, the wisest of all the Egyptians, that God is the supreme source and light within whom shine the models of all things, which they call ideas...But souls are

depressed into bodies through thinking about and desiring earthly things...They do not fly back to heaven, whence they fell by weight of their earthly thoughts, until they begin to contemplate once more those divine natures which they have forgotten.

(Letter 7 to Peregrino Agli *On Divine Frenzy*, in Ficino 1975, 43)

In another letter he elaborated on the process, discussing how the soul could regain its lost, originally perfect state, even before physically leaving the body upon death:

By certain natural instruments [Philosophy] raises the soul from the depth, through all that is compounded of the four elements, and guides it through the elements themselves to heaven. Then step-by-step on the ladder of mathematics the soul accomplishes the sublime ascent to the topmost orbs of Heaven. At length, what is more wonderful than words can tell, on the wings of metaphysics it soars beyond the vault of heaven to the creator of heaven and earth Himself. There, through the gift of Philosophy, not only is the soul filled with happiness but since in a sense it becomes God, it also becomes that very happiness.

(Letter 123 to Bernardo Bembo, *Oratorical, moral, dialectical and theological praise of Philosophy*. In Ficino 1975, 189)

Strictly speaking, this concept, which is part of a contemplative theological philosophy, is, on the one hand, pure Platonism and, on the other, a syncretic Christian theory of *unio mystica*. But the Florentine philosophers were not fully contented with such a rather passive, meditative technique. The acknowledgement of a more active willpower on the part of the human host of the soul needed a theological anthropology somewhat bolder than the biblical concept of the creation and fall of man and its medieval Christian interpretation. This bold encouragement could be derived from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which offered an alternative creation myth with a much more dignified First Man than the failing Adam. In the initial act of Creation, the Mind-God (Nous-Theos) manifested itself as a cosmos, then by speaking gave birth to a second, Craftsman-Mind (Demiurge) who then created the seven Governors, 'which encompass the sensible world in circles and their government is called fate' – here one encounters the idea of astrological determination over the material existence (CH I.8–9, see Copenhagen 1995, 2). Later the Mind-God once again creates, this time the first human who will be beautiful, delighting all the ranks of existence, and will be allowed to become himself a creator god:

Mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a man like himself whom he loved as his own child. The man was most fair: he had the father's image...And after the man had observed what the craftsman (Demiurge) had created with the father's help, he also wished to make some craftwork and the father agreed to this...Having all authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals, the man broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework thus displaying to lower nature the fair form of god. Nature smiled for love when she saw him whose fairness brings no surfeit and who holds in himself all the energy of the governors and the form of god.

(CH I.12–14, Copenhagen 1995, 3)

The treatises in the *Corpus Hermeticum* reconfirmed in various ways this dignified image of humans as well as encouraging belief in the possibility of reverse emanation, the *exaltatio* of the soul. In the longest tract, the *Asclepius*, which survived in its entirety only in Latin, one finds the famous sentence that became one of the most oft-quoted commonplaces of Renaissance philosophy and anthropology: '[O] Asclepius, a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god; he knows the demonic kind inasmuch as he recognizes that he originated among them' (*Asclepius* 6 in Copenhaver 1995, 69). The notion of human dignity is even intensified and suggests magical capabilities when Trismegistus reminds Asclepius about the man-made statues of gods, which are 'ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves' (*Asclepius* 24, Copenhaver 1995, 81). Taking into consideration the above passages from the *Corpus Hermeticum* and adding those which could not be recalled here, one should not be surprised at registering the enthusiasm Ficino and his scholarly friends felt while recognizing the potential the Hermetic ingredient catalyzing Plato's teachings could release for the true Christian philosopher. And the mistaken understanding according to which the *Hermetica* was to be as old as the books of Moses, only increased their reverence and admiration for these texts.

Frances Yates Rediscovered and Recycles Ficino's Hermeticism

Frances Yates, studying Ficino's enthusiasm for the Hermetic teachings and registering the significant influence these ideas exercised on generations of Renaissance thinkers from Pico della Mirandola, through Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus, to Giordano Bruno and beyond, became equally enthusiastic about these ideas, but this feeling also led her to some misconceptions. In her papers and books following her 1964 monograph, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, she increasingly tried to explain many intellectual developments of the Renaissance, especially major achievements of the scientific revolution, in terms of the impact of Renaissance intellectual magic, specifically the Hermetic teachings. As Paolo Rossi in the so-called 'Hermeticism debate' has remarked, 'to explain the genesis – which is not only complicated but often confused – of some modern ideas is quite different from believing that one can offer a complete explanation of these ideas by describing their genesis' (1975, 257). Frances Yates and her followers definitely opened up new vistas and contributed to doing away with looking at Western esotericism as a residue of murky medieval superstition. On the other hand, the conclusions based on this discovery were misguided, to some extent, by concentrating almost entirely on a rewriting of science history. No doubt, Hermeticism had some impact on the new scientific ideas, but it also had an important influence on the understanding of humanity, on the nature of artistic expression, and, last but not least, on theological thinking, especially that of mysticism, pietism, and some other radical, often countercultural trends of religiosity.

Furthermore, when examining the origins of the Italian Hermetic revival, Yates also had a narrow lens, focusing primarily on the *Corpus Hermeticum*. More recently,

scholarship has established that Hermeticism was only one trend within a complex syncretic development. To understand what happened in Italy after 1460, one has to take into consideration the prominent authors of the later Neoplatonic schools as well as the great variety of medieval magical theories and practices, including, amongst much else, the following: technical Hermetica; certain trajectories springing from Jewish merkabah mysticism and the Kabbalah; the Arabic works of magic which were translated into Latin during the scholastic period; and popular magical practices of the ‘clerical underground’. Finally, one should not forget about the changing sociocultural contexts, such as the following: the crisis of the medieval universities; the free, sometimes subversive spirit of the private academies and the rise of humanism with its increased interest in Antiquity; and those socio-psychological changes which produced an early modern occulture, leading to the new, Faustian type of Western hero emerging in the sixteenth century. The following survey of the Italian Hermetic revival is intended to pay attention, even if in a hopelessly concise way, to all these factors outlined above.

THE KEY FIGURES OF THE HERMETIC REVIVAL: FICINO AND PICO

If we approach the title phenomenon from a traditional angle, two towering figures overshadow a lot of minor, but also important issues: these are Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), founder of the Florentine Neoplatonic Academy (on the historical and mythical aspects of the Academy see della Torre 1902 and Field 1988), and his younger friend, to some extent a disciple, but no less a severe critic, who at the same time also inspired the older philosopher, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), the aristocrat who during his short life first became a herald of the new, human-centred Renaissance philosophy, then a convert to Savonarola, the ascetic theocrat of Florence (1494–98).

Ficino was a native of Florence, son of a physician close to the circle of the town’s untitled ruler, Cosimo de’ Medici. In 1439 Cosimo managed to invite the Ecumenical Council to Florence and the city witnessed the visit of many outstanding Greek scholars, among them Gemisthos Pletho, who was considered a direct heir of the ‘divine Plato’. Cosimo, who was not only a merchant and politician, but a humanist himself, desired to boost Greek studies in order to promote the cult of Plato in his surroundings. The task was accomplished by young Marsilio, whose Humanist tuition was sponsored by the Medici lord (on the role of Cosimo in patronizing Ficino’s programme of Neoplatonic revival, see Field 2002). When Marsilio’s great talents in Greek and philosophy became manifest, Cosimo acknowledged this by addressing his father as follows: ‘You, Ficino, have been sent to us to heal bodies, but your Marsilio here has been sent down from heaven to heal souls’ (Giovanni Corsi, *The Life of Marsilio Ficino*, quoted from Ficino 1981, 138). Ficino himself commented on this situation later. In the dedication to Lorenzo de’ Medici of his *Three Books on Life*, he recalled, ‘I had two fathers, Ficino the doctor and Cosimo de’ Medici. From the former I was born, from the latter reborn. The former commended me to Galen as both a doctor and Platonist; the latter consecrated me to the divine Plato. And both the one and the other alike dedicated Marsilio to a doctor – Galen, doctor of the body, and Plato, doctor of the soul’ (Ficino 1989, 103). The chronology of Ficino’s

translations and his own works display a constant oscillation between Christian theology, Platonism, Hermetic esotericism, and again Platonized Christianity. Among his early works, the translation and commentary of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1463) stands out, together with his translations of Plato, Alcinoüs, Xenocrates, and a treatise on love that comments on Plato's *Symposium* (1469). In 1473, Ficino was ordained a priest, and declared that, from a pagan, he had become a soldier of Christ (Corsi, *Life of Ficino*, in Ficino 1981, 140). This turn resulted in his treatise *On the Christian Religion* (1476) and his work on the *Platonic Theology*, which was printed in 1482 (see Ficino 2001–6). Two years later he published his complete translations and some commentaries on Plato, while he was working with full energy on translating further Neoplatonists, some of them also magically imbued: Iamblichus, Porphyry, Proclus, Psellus, and, above all, Plotinus – apparently encouraged and urged by the young Pico (Farmer 1998, 12 n.35). The complete Plotinus was published in 1492, preceded and followed by his own works, *Three Books on Life* (1489) and *On the Sun and Light* (1493).

In 1496, he published his translation of *The Mystic Theology* and *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius and, a year later, he collected in one volume all his translations that can be considered as an 'anthologia esoterica' (see below). His last work was a commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul, which he left unfinished at his death. (The chronology of Ficino's works can be found in Ficino 2009, 95–96; important editions are: Ficino 1989; 2001–6; and his letters published between 1975–2009. Key studies include: Allen 1995; Allen and Rees 2002; Canziani 2001; Clucas, Forshaw, and Rees 2011; Raffini 1998.)

Giovanni Corsi, in his near-contemporary biography of Ficino, has an interesting remark: 'Here is something not to be left out: he had a unique and divine skill in magic, driving out evil demons and spirits from very many places and putting them to flight. Always a very keen defender of religion, he was extremely hostile to superstition' (Corsi in Ficino 1981, 145). How does one reconcile these apparently contradictory statements? This will lead us to the evaluation of Ficino's esotericism according to thematic issues, but first something needs to be said about his compatriot, Pico.

Without wanting to be tautologous, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was a genuine Renaissance man. According to Eugenio Garin, if one desires to examine just one of his works, the *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, he will have to be well versed in poetry, mythology, the figurative arts, religion and philosophy, as well as being conversant in Tuscan vernacular, Latin, Greek, Arabic, and ancient Hebrew (Garin 1995, cited by Borghesi 2008, 203). Furthermore, Pico was a child prodigy, already, at the age of ten, receiving a title of apostolic protonotary and starting his studies of canon law at the age of fourteen. His early studies in Bologna, Ferrara and Padua led him to the study of Aristotle and his early acquaintance with some Arabo-Judaic philosophers, such as Elia del Medigo, who directed him to the Arabic commentators of Aristotle.

Around 1480, he befriended Angelo Poliziano, a member of Ficino's humanist circle in Florence, at the same time an admirer of Savonarola, who then was a Franciscan preacher in Ferrara. Through Poliziano, Pico asked for Ficino's *Theologia Platonica* and thus he also entered the circle of Italian Neoplatonists. But Pico never took sides in the rivalry between the followers of Plato and Aristotle. Having said that, his aim was to reconcile the two classical thinkers and, furthermore, to found a

syncretic philosophy by which all knowledge and even the wildest ambitions of humans could be realized. In 1484, Pico moved to Florence and stayed near Ficino to study Plato and Plotinus with him. At the same time, he entered into a warm friendship with the magnanimous patron, Lorenzo de' Medici. In spite of his great reverence for Ficino, Pico remained an independent intellectual, who was ready to absorb other fields of intellectual thinking, from the poetry of Dante to the mysteries of the Jewish Kabbalah and the *Zohar*. He had Jewish teachers at his side, notably Elia del Medigo, then the converted Guglielmo Raimondo de Moncada – also known as Flavius Mithridates – and later on the learned Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno (for his knowledge of Hebrew and Judaica, see Wirszubski 1989). As well as the Hebrew and Aramaic, Pico learned from these scholars, he also studied Arabic. Fascinated by the esoteric aspects of these eastern philosophies, he became the first Western European representative of what later became known as the 'Christian Cabala' (in Christian contexts, it is more helpful to follow Pico's spelling as opposed to the common Hebrew transcription 'Kabbalah').

After a brief stay at the Sorbonne in Paris, in 1485, he decided to collect the common essentials of all philosophies in 900 theses and discuss them in a synod of scholars invited, at his own expense, to Rome (being an aristocrat with freshly inherited estates this was feasible), in front of the Pope. He came back to Florence and embarked upon an 'extraordinary year' in 1486 (Borghesi 2008, 212). First, he wrote the already mentioned complex commentary on the *Canzone* of his friend, Benivieni, then became involved in the abduction of a woman – the wife of a relative of Lorenzo de' Medici. Thanks to the benevolence of his patron, he got away without punishment and spent the following months quietly learning Hebrew and writing his *Conclusiones* and the preface to them, later entitled the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (*Oratio de hominis dignitate*). Later that year he moved to Rome and had his 900 theses published.

The outcome, however, turned out to be troublesome. Certain theologians became frustrated with some of these theses and Pope Innocent VIII decided to cancel the conference. In early 1487, Pico was tried by the inquisitorial committee set up by the Pope, who brushed aside Pico's hastily drafted *Apologia* and found thirteen of his theses outright heretical, resulting in the papal order of all the printed copies to be burned. Pico managed to flee to France and, although he was arrested there, thanks to the protection of the French king, he was released soon after, returning to Florence in April 1488. There he wrote some important and influential works: a commentary on the six days of creation in seven sessions (*Heptaplus*), a treatise *On Being and the One* (*De ente et uno*), and an enormous *Disputation Against Judicial Astrology* (*Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*) which was eventually posthumously completed by his nephew, Gianfrancesco.

In 1489 he became instrumental in persuading Lorenzo to invite the ascetic preacher, Savonarola, to Florence. In his last years he was in close friendship with Savonarola who was on his deathbed in 1494, the same day that Charles VIII entered Florence and shortly before Savonarola established his theocracy in the city (on Pico's life and work, see Pico 1971; 1998; 2004; Bacchelli 2001; Bori 2000; Blum 2008a; Dougherty 2008; Farmer 1998; Rabin 2008; Roulier 1989; Still 2008; etc.).

Both Ficino and Pico were instrumental in the Renaissance Hermetic revival in Italy. However, although Pico is generally considered to have been Ficino's faithful

disciple, they represented different trends and ambitions in developing an occult philosophy and advocating, at least in theory, some magical practices (on Pico's disputes with Ficino, see Aasдалen 2011; Blum 2008b; Farmer 1998, 12–13, 118–19). The next section deals with the main issues in their esotericism as well as with the most important differences.

THEMATIC ISSUES

To gauge the nature of Ficino's and Pico's esoteric ideas, we have to examine quite a large corpus of texts. Concerning Ficino, key texts include his Neoplatonic translations and commentaries, the *Corpus Hermeticum* translation and commentaries, many of his letters, and, above all, his most magical work, the third part of *De vita*, entitled *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens* (*De vita coelitus comparanda*). In the case of Pico one has to deal with practically his entire oeuvre, except perhaps the last part of his *Disputations*, which is particularly anti-magical and anti-astrological. That said, concerning the latter, there are reasons to think that his original thoughts were edited by Savonarola and his nephew Gianfrancesco (Farmer 1998, 154–59; Rabin 2008, 168–73). What remains is the *Commentary on Benivieni*, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the *900 Conclusions*, and the *Heptaplus*. Taking all these into consideration, one can see that, although their schooling was different, they both shared a general world picture and the image of the medieval cosmos. The most important difference manifests itself between their horizon of orientation concerning authorities: Ficino was fully saturated with Plato and the Neoplatonists and could become thrilled by only those occult sources that were offsprings, or closely connected, to Neoplatonism, such as the *Orphic hymns*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Egyptian mysteries of Iamblichus, and the demon-lore of Porphyry, Proclus, or Psellus. His attention to this latter group, actually, was drawn by Pico, who was proud of announcing his priority in distilling the magical contents of the Orphic hymns as well as the late Neoplatonist philosophers (Farmer 1998, 129 and annotations to p. 505). Beyond these, Pico was also examining Aristotle and the scholastics, Arabic and oriental philosophers, Jewish kabbalistic teachers. But the common ground between their approaches was an esoterically open world picture, based on the ideas of the Great Chain of Being, the analogical correspondences among the layers of the universe, and the image of man as microcosm, a mirror of the great cosmos. Furthermore, they also shared a desire to catapult the soul and reverse it along the Plotinian emanation to an exalted state and union with the divine. For this they needed an anthropological foundation that would not exclude the mobilization of occult willpower either. Last, but not least, both of them were devout Christians who, by the help of syncretic auxiliary means, only desired a better understanding and experiencing of the truth, incarnated in Jesus.

The Occult World Picture and the Doctrine of Exaltatio

The best concise description of the medieval cosmos and the Great Chain of Being can be found in Pico's Second Proem of his *Heptaplus*:

Antiquity imagined three worlds. Highest of all is that ultramundane one, which theologians call the angelic and philosophers the intelligible, and, of which, Plato