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## Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism

ARTHUR MCCALLA\*

Academic scholarship is increasingly recognising the existence and historical importance of a third element in Western culture in addition to Greek rationality and biblical faith in an externally received divine revelation. This third element, 'esotericism',<sup>1</sup> is a tradition of inner enlightenment as a revelatory experience bringing knowledge of one's true self in an encounter with the ground of being (see Broek and Hanegraaff 1998, p. vii). Antoine Faivre is a major contributor to the ongoing scholarly endeavour to recognise esotericism as a legitimate and fruitful area of academic research. He holds what was for over three decades the only chair in the world devoted explicitly to the Western esoteric tradition.<sup>2</sup> In 1965 a Chair of Christian Esotericism was established in the Religious Studies section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes at the Sorbonne. The first holder was François Secret, a specialist in the Christian Kabbalah. When Faivre assumed the chair in 1979, the name of the directorship became History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe.

Perhaps the most accessible introduction to Faivre's scholarship are the State University of New York Press volumes *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994) and *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (2000). These volumes are a translation of the second edition, in two volumes, of *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (1996; first edition in one volume 1986). Volume One of the English edition consists of a methodological statement, a short history of Western esoteric currents, a set of studies on esoteric subjects and an extensive bibliographical research guide. Volume Two contains a preface on esotericism and academic research; an essay on the periodisation of the theosophical current within Western esotericism; sets of studies on theosophy, the imagination, the concept of tradition; and an update to the bibliographical guide. For the most part, the content and arrangement correspond to the French edition. The notable exception is the short history of Western esoteric currents in volume one. In the English edition this section is divided into five chapters. The first consists of a six-page survey of ancient and mediaeval sources of modern esoteric currents, and the next four chapters carry the survey up to our own day. There is no corresponding material to these four chapters in the French edition, and the section corresponding to the first

\*Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*. Albany, SUNY Press, 2000, xxxv+259 pp., \$73.50 (hardback) ISBN 0 7914 4435 X, \$24.95 (paperback) ISBN 0 7914 4436 8.

Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany, SUNY Press, 1994, x+348 pp., \$75.50. Cited as 2000 (hardback) ISBN 0 7914 2177 5, \$25.50 (paperback) ISBN 0 7914 2178 3. Cited as 1994.

Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, 2 vols Paris, Gallimard, 2ème éd. 1996, 377 and 437 pp., FF175 ISBN 2 07 974293 8; FF190 ISBN 2 07 074126 5.

Antoine Faivre, *Philosophie de la Nature: Physique sacrée et théosophie XVIIIè–XIXè siècle*. Paris, Albin Michel, 1996, 33 pp., FF150 ISBN 2 226 07627 1.

Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin. Grand Rapids, MI, Phanes Press, 1995, 201 pp., \$18.95 (paperback) ISBN 0 933999 52 6. Cited as 1995a.

Antoine Faivre, *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy*. Albany, SUNY Press, 1993, ix+134 pp., \$19.50 (paperback) ISBN 0 7914 1410 8.

chapter covers eighty-five pages. An English translation of this material may be found in Faivre (1995b, pp. 1–70).

### **Definition and Periodisation**

Faivre has recently stated that ‘esotericism’, in the sense of a field of research,

refers to an ensemble of spiritual currents in modern and contemporary Western history which share a certain *air de famille*, as well as the form of thought which is its common denominator. Each of these historical currents has a name of its own, as will be seen. As for the underlying ‘form of thought’, we have elsewhere presented it as an ensemble of six constitutive elements. Four of these are intrinsic to ‘esotericism’: the doctrine of universal correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation. The other two are extrinsic (i.e., they may be absent in certain cases): concordance of traditions and transmission of knowledge. (Faivre 1998, p. 2)

In a second recent definitional statement, Faivre adds that esotericism as a field of research is in the process of entering with full rights into the academy, and itemises the historical currents as ‘spiritual alchemy’, neo-Alexandrian hermetism, Christian Kabbalah, the so-called *philosophia occulta*, Paracelsianism, theosophy, Rosicrucianism and a number of initiation societies, as well as later currents that flow more or less in the wake of these (1999, p. 155). These definitions incorporate a periodisation (modern and contemporary currents), geographical delimitation (Western), and a criterion (family resemblance based on a form of thought comprised of the six characteristics), and they allude to methodological issues (entrance into the academy).

Faivre has discussed the six fundamental characteristics that for him constitute the underlying form of thought, or the common denominators of the various esoteric currents, in many places (most extensively in 1994, pp. 10–5; see Faivre and Voss, pp. 60–2 for an abridged version). 1. *Correspondences*. Symbolic and real correspondences are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen (‘As below so above; as above so below’). Microcosm and macrocosm are linked by the principle of universal interdependence. The entire universe is a theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of correspondences to be read and decyphered. 2. *Living Nature*. The universe is alive, permeated by spiritual forces that circulate through a network of channels. The various esoteric sciences are simultaneously examples of the knowledge of the dynamic network of sympathies and antipathies that link multi-layered, hierarchical Nature together and concrete operations informed by that knowledge. 3. *Imagination and Mediations*. These complementary notions are corollaries of the idea of correspondences. Imagination, considered as an ‘organ of the soul’, enables access to different levels of reality through the use of mediations such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas and intermediary spirits. By means of these intermediaries the imagination decodes the hieroglyphs of Nature, and uncovers, sees, and knows the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world. It is the eye of fire that pierces the bark of appearances and renders the invisible visible. 4. *Experience of Transmutation*. The alchemical term ‘transmutation’ signifies the ontological metamorphosis, or purification of being, of the initiate effected along with and by means of knowledge of and participation in the hidden mysteries of the cosmos and God. 5. *Concordance of Traditions*. The attempt to establish a common denominator between several or all esoteric traditions. 6. *Transmission*. Esoteric teaching passes from master to disciple through initiation. The mark of authenticity of esoteric knowledge is filiation to an established line of transmission.

The qualifiers ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ are not arbitrary limits on a vast historical field but reflect Faivre’s conviction that esotericism is a historical phenomenon originating in the new and specific intellectual and cultural conditions of late fifteenth-century Europe, though possessing ancient roots. Faivre argues (see Faivre 2000, pp. xiv–xv) that the development of late medieval and early modern theological thought had increasingly eliminated cosmology from its scope of thinking. The investigation of Nature, cut loose from theology, became the territory of scientists, humanists and philosophers. Some of these thinkers produced secularising interpretations of nature which would lead to the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. Others speculated on the relationships among God, man and the universe in terms of universal correspondences and a living Nature. It is among these speculators that one finds the first ‘esotericists’ in the modern sense of the term. At the same time Renaissance scientists and humanists such as Robert Fludd, Tommaso Campanella and Michael Maier appropriated and linked various traditions of the past—Neo-Pythagoreanism, Neo-Platonism, Alexandrian Hermetism, Jewish Kabbalah—on the grounds that they enrich one another and represent more or less branches of a common trunk. This is the idea of a *philosophia perennis*, an ‘eternal philosophy’ that despite doctrinal variations represents a common attitude of mind. Just as esoteric cosmology interprets Nature in light of analogy, so *philosophia perennis* interprets the textual monuments of the traditions of the past in the light of analogy. The higher knowledge—gnosis—derived from these texts presupposed a human faculty capable of penetrating the mysteries of founding or revealed texts and of inspired glosses. The referential corpus of esotericism was gradually built up from texts belonging to ancient traditions that, at the dawn of the Renaissance, began to be compared with one another, and, starting at the end of the fifteenth century, compared with new texts that were often commentaries on the first and, beginning in the sixteenth century, readings of the Book of Nature.

New currents, Faivre continues (see Faivre 2000, pp. xvi–xvii), were added from the sixteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. They were situated marginally to Renaissance *philosophia perennis* because they made almost no claims to authorities belonging to a distant past. The three principal new currents arose in German-speaking lands: Paracelsism, theosophy and Rosicrucianism. Paracelsism, which is more or less at the origin of two other currents, blended an alchemical approach to Nature with an active and creative imagination. Theosophy is characterised by an illuminated speculation bearing on the relationships among God, man and the universe (Nature); the primacy of myths (biblical) of foundation or origin as a point of departure for this speculation; and the idea that human beings, by virtue of their creative imagination, can develop in themselves the faculty of acceding to the higher worlds. The theosophical current has its headwaters in the works of Gerhard Dorn, Valentin Weigel and Johann Arndt but becomes a great river with Jacob Boehme. It flows through the seventeenth century with the immediate successors of Boehme, such as Jane Leade, John Pordage, Quirinus Kuhlmann, Johann Georg Gichtel, dries up for a time; then gushes forth anew in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with Martinès de Pascally, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger and above all Franz von Baader. Faivre regards Emanuel Swedenborg as marginal in relation to the theosophy of the Neo-Boehmian type but recognises his considerable cultural and spiritual influence beyond theosophy proper. The third of the new currents is the Rosicrucian current, or that of initiatic societies. In the early seventeenth century Rosicrucianism was a reform movement designed to deepen Protestant spirituality by opening it to alchemy and occult philosophy in the sense of Henricus Cornelius Agrippa’s *De Occulta philosophia*

(1533). The myth of Christian Rosenkreutz, propagated in the *Fama Fraternalis* (1614) and Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz* (1616), perpetuated the Rosicrucian current. Initiatic societies proliferated from the eighteenth century, and while they often placed themselves—as, for example, the eighteenth-century *Gold- und Rosenkreuz* and the twentieth-century A.M.O.R.C. (*Antiquus Mysticusqua Ordo Rosae Crucis*)—under the sign of the Rosy Cross, they drew inspiration from other esoteric currents as well.

Faivre also sees the Western esoteric tradition as riddled with discontinuities, rejections and reinterpretations as new currents break away from those from which they issued (see Faivre 2000, pp. xvii–xviii). Two examples of this tendency are Occultism and the Perennialisms of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. The Occultist movement, which arose in the second half of the nineteenth century under the leadership of Eliphas Lévi, attempted to reconcile the gnosis of eighteenth-century Illuminism with elements of modern science. As such, it represented a transformation of esotericism in the context of a materialist and secularising world. Perennialism, the quest for a 'Primordial Tradition' that lies beneath all religions and philosophies, both encouraged, and was encouraged by, increased knowledge of Eastern religions and by the rise of comparative religions in the universities. While some Perennialists, notably Guénon, denounced aspects of Western esotericism, Faivre nevertheless considers the Perennialist current a transformation of esotericism rather than a repudiation of it.

Faivre began his career as a Germanist, with books on [Niklaus Anton Kirchberger](#) (1966) and [Karl von Eckhartshausen](#) (1969). His principal research interests within Western esotericism are those currents originating in German-speaking countries, particularly Boehmist theosophy, including *Naturphilosophie*, and Franz von Baader.

Faivre has outlined four periods in the evolution of the theosophical current. 1. The development of a specific textual corpus—above all the works of Jacob Boehme—from the end of the sixteenth century through the seventeenth. Six factors favoured the emergence of this kind of thought at this time. The first four are linked to Lutheranism: an openness to independent religious thought; emphasis on inner experience as means of reconciling mysticism and rationalism; desire for revitalisation of theology; and a certain freedom, in some circles at least, from pastoral control. The final two derive from contemporary philosophical and scientific debates: the widespread desire to unify science and faith into a harmonious whole, and the hope of reasserting the correspondence of the microcosm and the macrocosm in the face of mechanistic philosophies. 2. The spreading of that corpus and its reception by historians of philosophy in the first half of the eighteenth century. Two main tendencies characterise the theosophy of these decades. First, the original Bohemian current is represented by Oetinger, Gichtel and William Law. Second, a 'magical' type of theosophy, Paracelsian and alchemical in orientation, is represented by four German authors: Georg von Welling, A. J. Kirchweger, Samuel Richter and Hermann Fictuld. This is also the period in which theosophy receives recognition from historians of philosophy. Notable discussions include the *Theophilosophia theoretica et practica* (1710) by Sincerus Renatus, the *Opus mago-cabalisticum et theosophicum* (1721) by Georg von Welling, and, epochally as concerns mainstream thought, the *Historia critica Philosophiae* (1741) by Jacob Brucker. 3. Revival in the pre-Romantic and Romantic era. Theosophy once again springs to life during the 1770s and experiences a second Golden Age, which lasted until the mid nineteenth century. The theosophy of this period may be divided between authors who identify themselves or are identified as Boehmians—notably, Saint-Martin,

Eckhartshausen, Heinrich Jung-Stilling, Friedrich Salzmann and Baader—and initiates of secret societies such as Rectified Scottish Rite Masonry and the Order of Elect Cohens. 4. The decline of theosophy, but also its endurance, from the mid nineteenth century until the present. If the theosophical current dries up to a great extent in Occultism and Primordialism, it still flows, diversely, in a few twentieth-century representatives: Vladimir Soloviev, Serge Boulgakov, Nicolas Berdiaev, Rudolf Steiner, Valentin Tomberg and Robert Amadou.

While Faivre has written on numerous aspects and representatives of the theosophical current, he has returned again and again to *Naturphilosophie* and Baader. Inspired by Boehme and Paracelsus, the *Naturphilosophen* of the Romantic period, mostly German, investigate Nature as the code of God. Underlying their efforts is a conception of Nature as a system of correspondences, both within itself and linking humanity, God and Nature. Because Spirit permeates Nature and expresses itself through it, the key to the correspondences lies outside Nature itself, in Spirit. By means of this analogical hermeneutics (*imaginatio*), the *Naturphilosoph* penetrates directly the divine world, thereby acquiring the ability to explore all levels of reality and attain a body of light. Individual scientific facts are perceived as signs of the underlying spirit. Since the facts/signs must correspond to one other inasmuch as they reveal the same Spirit, *Naturphilosophen* freely identify notions from one scientific field with those from another, using observations from geology, for example, to understand botanic or chemical phenomena. *Naturphilosophie* further sets itself the task of relating Nature and Scripture to each other. Since both, correctly interpreted, reveal the same underlying Spirit, revelation confers on scientific facts new significations, and inversely a hermeneutic of scientific facts serves to enrich the content of Revelation. The idea of living nature as the code of God to be interpreted by an analogical hermeneutics was present in both Boehmistic theosophy and Paracelsism. What is new in Romantic *Naturphilosophie* is the idea that nature has a history embodying the progressive unfolding of Spirit (cosmic dynamism replaces cosmic structure) and the conviction, shared with Fichte and Schelling, that the Kantian critical philosophy allows one to conceive of the world as the product of the imagination, that is, as the result of the synthetic, spontaneous activity of Spirit. Faivre edited, with Rolf Christian Zimmerman, *Epochen der Naturmystik: Hermetische Tradition im wissenschaftlichen Fortschritt* (1979). More recently, he has published *Philosophie de la Nature: Physique sacrée et théosophie XVIIIè–XIXè siècle* (1996). The first third, roughly, of this book consists of studies on Franz von Baader; the balance of the volume contains various studies presented in chronological order of the authors treated: Oetinger and other theologians of electricity, Abraham Gottlob Werner, Johann Wilhelm Ritter and Johann Friedrich von Meyer.

The author to whom Faivre has devoted the most attention is the theosopher, minerologist, geologist and University of Munich professor Franz von Baader. Faivre argues that Baader towers over Romantic esotericism and indeed over that of the entire nineteenth century. As we have just seen, he is treated at length in the *Philosophie de la Nature* volume, but *Naturphilosophie* represents only one aspect of his work. Called 'Böhmius redivivus', Baader was the principal hermeneut of Boehme's writings in the Romantic period. He also commented at length on Saint-Martin's work, though his own interest in nature and alchemy distanced him from the *Philosophie Inconnu*. In study after study, Faivre explores Baader's thinking about the connections between faith and knowledge, and his original, yet traditional, treatment of themes such as the androgyne, Sophia, the successive Falls, magnetism and love.

## *Methodology*

Faivre observes that the field of esotericism has long been a subject of interest, but only recently has it begun to be approached in a neutral fashion, as one sector among others in the history of religions. Pioneers in the scholarly treatment of esoteric currents include Viatte (1928), Thorndike (1923–58) and Peuckert (1966–1973), while Yates (1972, 1979), Tuveson (1982) and Secret (1985) relate esoteric currents to religion, politics, art and literature. In the last decades of the twentieth century an outpouring of works—*inter alia* Benz (1968), Corsetti (1992), Frick (1978), Godwin (1987), Introvigne (1990), Laurant (1975, 1992), Riffard (1990, 1998) and Webb (1974, 1976)—suggests an at least implicit recognition that the study of esotericism represents an independent field of research (see Faivre 2000, pp. xviii–xx). Conferences and journals devoted to esotericism have similarly proliferated (see the bibliographical guide in Faivre 1994 and 2000). The names listed above represent a wide range of approaches to the study of esotericism. Faivre concludes that rigorous methodological reflection is required if the study of esotericism is to take its place in the academy (see Faivre 2000, p. xxi).

Faivre's principal methodological statement is the 'Criteriologies' and 'Methods' sections of the preface to *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition* (an earlier version of which appeared in English in Faivre and Voss 1995). Faivre dismisses essentialist, universalist, doctrinal and thematic criteriologies of esotericism as inadequate. Essentialist criteriologies define 'esotericism' as a universal and therefore trans-historical phenomenon; although its manifestations may differ, the essence of 'esotericism' is always and everywhere the same. An example of an essentialist approach is Gilles Quispel, for whom *gnosis* (his preferred term) is 'a basic structure of religious apperception [more or less the Jungian individuation process] . . . a human religious possibility among other ones, which emerges ever again from time to time' (Quispel 1972, p. 39). In Quispel's usage, neither the ancient gnosticism of Alexandria nor its later heirs in the West nor indeed any later historical movements or individuals who appeal to 'gnosis' in a wide sense fully exhaust the essence of *gnosis* (see Hanegraaff 1998, pp. 20–1). An essentialist criteriology is also characteristic of Perennialists such as Schuon (1953) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1986), who seek to rediscover the 'transcendent unity of religions'. In this usage 'esotericism' becomes a metaphysical concept applied to the comparative study of religions rather than a specific historical current.<sup>3</sup> Faivre is adamant that in order to establish the study of esotericism on solid academic bases, the perennialist approach must be rejected (see Faivre 2000, p. xxvii).

Essentialist criteriologies are universalist, but not all universalist criteriologies are essentialist. Faivre nevertheless rejects non-essentialist universalist criteriologies of esotericism. His example is Pierre A. Riffard's identification of esotericism as an 'anthropological structure'. This means that 'it is fundamental to being, one finds it in all societies, in all periods, on various levels, more or less hidden, but always there' (Riffard 1990, p. 135). Riffard identifies eight 'invariables' that characterise this anthropological structure wherever and whenever it manifests itself: authorial impersonality, opposition between the profane and the initiated, correspondences, the subtle, numbers, occult sciences, occult arts, and initiation. Faivre's objection is twofold. First, he rejects the concept of an esotericism *sui generis*. Each of the component elements of the form of thought that it has been agreed to call esoteric presents itself only as a theoretical generalisation starting from empirical data (concrete historical ideas). Second, Riffard's model aspires to be far too global. Using his model, the field of esotericism

would once more escape being made coherent, approachable and manageable (see Faivre 2000, pp. xxv, xxviii).

Doctrinal criteriologies start from sectarian presuppositions bearing on what esotericism 'should' be (see for example, [Vermette 1993](#)). Such criteria reproduce the various ways in which esotericists have themselves attempted to codify it, and are usually invoked for the purpose of placing their own sectarian programmes above those of others. Faivre rejects definitions of esotericism that reproduce the self-definitions of esotericists as inadequate for scholarly research and further notes that a doctrinal criteriology produces almost as many doctrines as there are currents or even authors (see Faivre 2000, p. xxviii).

A thematic criteriology, which defines esotericism on the basis of favoured themes—*androgyny*, *sophiology*, the *World Soul*, and so on—cannot account for the nature of esotericism because, Faivre argues, while esotericism as he understands it has indeed favoured these themes, none of them belongs to it exclusively. As elements of mythologies, it is to the mythic in general that they refer. Faivre concedes that the concept of the 'anthropological structures of the Imaginary' (as understood in [Durand 1960](#)) offers a criteriology of interest to scholars of esoteric currents but cautions that these structures refer to archetypes rather than to mental attitudes more directly connected with historical conditions (see Faivre 2000, p. xxviii).

Having disposed of essentialist, universalist, thematic and doctrinal criteriologies, Faivre advocates an empirical, historical criterion of esotericism as the most conducive to a scholarly approach to its study:

Methodologically, it appears far more fruitful to begin with the empirical observation that esotericism is a Western concept, and that this concept derives from an ensemble of varied and sometimes problematic materials which are sufficiently challenging when studied within that context. It is a matter of studying the genesis and the various transformations of these modern Western esoteric currents in a diachronic way which highlights the differences and disruptive factors within specific currents, as well as the affinity or antipathy evinced by these currents in their relationship to one another or in their relationship with other forms of thought. Thus, it is a matter of emphasising these things, rather than of demonstrating a 'continuity' of what would be an overarching esotericism *per se*, above all traditions. (Faivre and Voss 1995, pp. 63–4; see also Faivre 2000, p. xix)

Faivre then turns to the task of defending the empirical, historical approach to the study of esotericism against 'religionist' and 'reductionist' approaches. He proceeds by endorsing Wouter J. Hanegraaff's argument that empirical research must be based on methodological agnosticism with regard to religious and philosophical 'first principles', and must fully recognise the historicity of religious phenomena. This argument (see [Hanegraaff 1995](#), pp. 101–2) is a specific application to the study of esotericism of methodological proposals put forward for the study of religion in general by [Jan Platvoet \(1990\)](#). Platvoet distinguishes empirical research from 'religionist' and 'positivist-reductionist' pursuits. Believers view religion from the perspective of a 'multiple tier cosmology': an empirically perceptible realm and one or more meta-empirical, non-perceptible realms ([Platvoet 1990](#), p. 184). Scholars who study religion are dependent on believers expressing their awareness of a meta-empirical reality in empirically perceptible ways (words, images, behaviour, etc.). As scholars, they do not themselves have direct access to the meta-empirical: 'They can find "religion" only in the historical religions of humankind, and can analyse those religions only as events in its history, and as institutions of human societies by which definite personal and societal



needs, religious as well as non-religious, are met' (Platvoet 1990, p. 185). Because scholars can thus neither verify nor falsify the existence of a meta-empirical reality, or any claims made about it, methodological agnosticism is the only proper attitude. Empirical researchers, Platvoet continues, do not limit themselves to the empirical because they wish to claim that it is the only reality (privately they may believe the opposite) but because it is the only one accessible to them for investigation. They hold to their 'one tier cosmology' *non-axiomatically*, while positivist-reductionists hold to it *axiomatically*, that is, as an ideology, and religionists hold *axiomatically* to a multiple tier cosmology. Empirical research cannot accept *any* axiomatic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality (see Platvoet 1990, pp. 186–7).

Faivre affirms that scholars can approach the meta-empirical realm of the believer only through its historically available expressions, and with the help of methodological tools and conceptual models. The empirical method therefore rejects metaphysical premises of religionists and draws on methods of interpretation that are not intrinsically those of the esotericists themselves but which are historical, sociological and psychological. The empirical method, Faivre adds, corresponds to the attitude of laicity (*laïcité*) in the technical French institutional sense, which characterises the spirit in which one studies religious sciences in the public institutions created for this purpose (see Faivre 2000, p. xxvii). Faivre here distances himself from Riffard's methodology, just as he had previously rejected Riffard's universalist criteriology. (Religionism and a universalist or essentialist criteriology are often found together.) Riffard identifies two methods for gaining knowledge of esotericism: the external method of the scholars, which considers esotericism as a fact to be studied by means of critical-historical, comparative, phenomenological, structuralist and anthropological approaches, and the internal method of the esotericists themselves, which reveals itself as the adept's reflection on esotericism itself, a form of self-analysis (see Riffard 1998, p. 63). Riffard concludes that, while the external method is indispensable for authorial identification, dating, establishment of texts and restoration of works, and understanding of the cultural milieu, the internal method remains indispensable for all that is related to meaning rather than to facts. In short, the external method deals with what is circumstantial; the esoteric method expresses what is fundamental (see Riffard 1998, pp. 73–4).

While the 'methodological agnosticism' of the empirical method rules out religionist approaches, it also illegimates reductionist approaches. Faivre cautions that scholars do not limit themselves to the empirically perceptible because it is the only reality but because it is sole realm to which scholarship has access. Reductionist approaches, no less than religionist ones, 'have shown a characteristic tendency to impose "immutable" laws and principles on their material, and this often at the expense of historical contingency (feared by both because of the relativist implications of this contingency)' (2000, p. xxvii). Faivre does not cite examples of reductionist approaches to esotericism (but see Hanegraaff's analysis [1998, pp. 28–42] of the 'anti-esotericisms' of Vogelin 1952, Truzzi 1974 and Raschke 1980).

We may summarise Faivre's approach to the study of esotericism as: an empirical method brought to bear on an object of study defined by family resemblance based on an underlying form of thought. Critiques may address the definition; form of thought; or empirical, historical approach.

### **Critique**

Faivre's six characteristics are conceptualised as an inductive generalisation from detailed historical research into specific movements and persons rather than as a deduction from

a pre-conceived idea of an essential esotericism. Such a procedure, while it may be regarded as making explicit a certain measure of coherence that had already been implicitly assumed by the researcher (see Hanegraaff 1998, p. 44), yields an 'operational definition' of esotericism: 'An operational definition is developed for the purpose of delineating the object of study in its historical particularity. No universal validity and applicability is claimed for it. . . . It is also a heuristic definition. It is proposed because it is believed it will be an instrument for fruitful research' (Platvoet 1990, p. 182). Such a definition is always subject to testing and criticism from other scholars. One possible outcome of further research might be to add one or more additional characteristics. Actually, it seems to me that Faivre himself comes very close to enshrining a seventh characteristic. He often alludes, albeit always in relation to the theosophical current, to the centrality in esotericism of the myths of creation, fall, redemption (for example, see Faivre 2000, p. 141). Further, Faivre uses this myth as a criterion for adjudicating marginal cases. He argues that one essential trait distinguishes Swedenborg from theosophy proper: 'with him the mythical is almost entirely devoid of dramatic elements: the fall, the reintegration, the idea of transmutation, new birth, or the fixation of the spirit in a body of light is almost absent from his visionary conception'. And again, 'While reading Swedenborg, one has the impression that one is meandering through a garden rather than participating in a tragedy' (Faivre 2000, p. 23). Faivre similarly notes, in relation to Henry Corbin's 'comparative theosophy', based on Corbin's theory of the *mundus imaginalis*, that Islamic theosophy is permeated by dramatic scenarios to a lesser extent than Western theosophy (see Faivre 2000, p. 30). One would like this emphasis on the drama of fall and redemption to receive explicit methodological recognition. Another possible outcome is that scholars who more or less accept Faivre's six characteristics may use them to enlarge the domain of esotericism beyond the limits (modern, Western) he has established. The six characteristics in this case become a heuristic tool used in order to discover 'esotericism' in contexts outside the original scope of specific historical developments in Western culture. Hanegraaff, for example, notes that, in light of the syncretisation of elements from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions during the Renaissance period, a more general definition of 'esotericism' applicable to the three great Western scriptural traditions is called for. Despite Faivre's explicit refutation of the attempt to establish a universal esotericism, a heuristic use of his characteristics may reduce Faivre's original delimitation of the field to a specific, historically and culturally demarcated sub-domain within a wider field (see Hanegraaff 1998, pp. 46–7).

Faivre's characteristics serve to demarcate a distinctive 'form of thought'. The result is a study of esotericism that focuses on the historical emergence and subsequent development of a historically specific mode of thinking. On the one hand the heuristic expansion that identifies 'esoteric' traditions within the Jewish-Christian-Islamic domain as a whole is compatible with conceiving of esotericism as a form of thought. One would then explain the coherence of the domain by genetic diffusion based on inter-religious contact over a long period of time. On the other hand one might explore the option of relatively independent invention, based on the logic(s) of monotheism and scripturalism. It is possible that the normative absoluteness of monotheism and scripturalism sooner or later lead—in certain individuals or groups, under specific conditions—to the emergence of structurally similar speculations (see Hanegraaff 1995, p. 124). Esotericism in this approach is less a 'form of thought' than a 'good move' in the 'design space' (Dennett 1995, p. 306) of the scriptural religions. In this context, moreover, it is not clear that the term 'esotericism' should have preference over such

rival candidates as ‘gnosis’ and ‘mysticism’; it may be that esotericism, gnosticism and mysticism refer to manifestations of one great and complex domain (see Hanegraaff 1995, p. 122; 1998, p. 52; see also the ‘Defining Gnosis’ chapter in Merkur 1993, pp. 111–6). Faivre has briefly responded to this challenge: ‘Actually, it is not evident that all such “gnostic” currents in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam . . . belong to the form of thought’ (Faivre 1998, p. 3). This defence appears circular: since esotericism is defined as a form of thought, nothing outside that form of thought can be esotericism.

An example of an approach to esotericism that attempts to construe a general theory of esotericism in the three great scriptural traditions is offered by Joseph Dan, Gershom Scholem Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Dan’s ‘contingental’ methodology (discussed in Hanegraaff 1998, pp. 53–4) is empirical. There is no such thing as esotericism ‘in itself, but only esotericists, who must be studied in their specific contexts with historical and philological approaches (see Dan 1993, pp. 58, 89). Rather than a form of thought, Dan defines ‘esotericism’ with reference to the status accorded language:

The language of the esoterics differs from that of theologians—and that of many mystics—in its delegating of the semantic level of language to a secondary place, and emphasising the non-semantic aspects of language. . . . The esoteric expert is a ‘reader’: he can read series of signs that other people cannot, be it in an exotic alphabet, a system of astrological or alchemical signs, or any other physical system which acquires semiotic signification. (Dan 1998, p. 129)

Accordingly, the study of esotericism, in Dan’s construal, focuses on all those groups and individuals, forming a coherent tradition of commentary, who interpret both scripture and one another’s interpretations in symbolic fashion because they assume that ultimate truth transcends discursive, literal language.

How well do Faivre’s own works meet the criterion of the empirical, historical method? There are two aspects to this question. The first concerns a point raised by Hanegraaff in relation to Occultism: ‘A diachronic study of esotericism would have to consider *any* of its historical manifestations not in terms of continuation but in terms of *reinterpretation*. As any interpretation necessarily presupposes a context, a detailed analysis of that context—in all its dimensions: intellectual, religious, social, political, etc.—is essential’ (Hanegraaff 1995, p. 121). Faivre’s studies rarely provide detailed investigation of the contextual factors contributing to the emergence and development of his form of thought. The relative neglect is in part attributable to Faivre’s concern to emphasise the study of esotericism as a history of ideas in order to defend the independence of the field from the ‘appropriative claims’ (Faivre 2000, p. xx) of anthropology and sociology. Nevertheless, the history of ideas must be anchored in broader history. One must ask under what social and economic conditions Europeans have opted for esotericism.

A second aspect of the question concerns the presence of religionist language in Faivre’s own work. One of the blurbs (unattributed) on the back cover of *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* announces that ‘This book will be welcomed by modern practitioners of alchemy and the occult as well as by scholars of esotericism’. The blurbs accompanying *The Eternal Hermes* similarly position the book as appealing to both spiritual seekers and scholars. An author ought not be held responsible for promotional materials, yet inasmuch as *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* and *The Eternal Hermes* are clearly being marketed to insiders and religionists as much as to scholars, we may legitimately inquire into the extent that the works themselves align Faivre with the religionism of the marketers. *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* traces the presence of the

elements of the myth of the Golden Fleece in the alchemical tradition from the Byzantines to the Rosicrucians and from the Age of Enlightenment to contemporary hermeneutics. *The Eternal Hermes* is an anthology of historical studies on the distinct but complementary figures of the god Hermes-Mercurius and Hermes Trismegistus. Both books are historical studies. Faivre throughout encourages esoteric approaches to the Golden Fleece and Hermes as good things but does not practice them himself.

Religionist language, however, is to be found in many of Faivre's articles republished in the *Access* volumes, including 'The Inner Church and The Heavenly Jerusalem—Foundations of a Cosmic Anthropology According to Franz von Baader and Christian Theosophy' (Faivre 1994, pp. 135–46), 'The Temple of Solomon in Eighteenth-Century Masonic Theosophy' (Faivre 1994, pp. 147–62), and 'Thoughts of God, Images of Man (Figures, Mirrors, and Engendering in J. Boehme, F. C. Oetinger, and F. von Baader)' (Faivre 2000, pp. 137–52). These three articles, all based on lectures delivered to gatherings of the Université de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, are examples of Faivre speaking to esotericists and appearing to share their project: 'For the second time we are assembled under the emblem of the University of Saint John of Jerusalem, a symbol that evokes the traditional Temple to which each of us devotes himself to become the co-architect and laborer' (Faivre 1994, p. 135). The Université de St Jean de Jérusalem, also known as the Centre International de Recherche Spirituelle Comparée, was established in 1974 by Henry Corbin. Faivre was one of thirty university professors who collaborated on the founding of this 'hermetic university' openly dedicated to the reconstitution of Martinist Templarism (see Wasserstrom 1999, p. 8). Membership in the Université de St Jean de Jérusalem overlapped considerably with that of the Eranos group; and both fraternities practiced what Steven Wasserstrom calls 'an "illuminist" sense of scholarship as theosophy' characterised by 'a lasting suspicion of mere academicism' (Wasserstrom 1999, pp. 24–5).

The following lengthy example of religionist language is taken from yet another *Access* article, 'From the Divine Figure to the Concrete Figure, Or Transposition Through Mirrors' (Faivre 2000, pp. 153–67), written for a religionist audience in this case, the *Cahiers du Groupe d'études spirituelle comparées*. The following statements are offered as Faivre's final comments on the texts discussed in the article:

The first comment has to do with an interpretation of certain miracles of the Virgin. Bernadette and the other little girls having described their visions by means of images corresponding to those that these children could have seen in their churches, there was no lack of 'clever' minds to draw the conclusion that everything, from that point on, was easily explainable and that any 'miraculous' hypothesis could be put aside. Now, considering with even a little attention and an open mind the stories of the theophanic visions spoken of earlier, one realises the poverty of this kind of approach. In what form could the Virgin in fact be seen, assuming that she can be seen, if not through the images that each one of us already has of her? And who indeed would recognise her if she chose to show herself in the physical form that was 'historically' hers? Already Ludwig Feuerbach considered religions as simple 'projections' of human concerns. Certainly, no one today casts any doubt on the need to 'situate' every religious tradition, and every theosophic image, in its social and historical context. . . . Thus one can always understand them better by studying the economic circumstances (Marx), emotional frustrations (Freud), and collective resentments (Nietzsche) associated with their manifestation, and it is not a question of denying the validity of such research. But, as the sociologist Peter Berger says: 'The point is, quite simply, that this is not the whole study'. One can always define an analytical parameter to 'explain' a traveler's tale, it nonetheless remains true that the country visited really exists. Similarly, the fact that gods are symbols of human realities does not necessarily imply that they are no

more than that, and the fact that a theophany individualises each witness does not imply by the same token that it lets itself be dissolved in the analysis of these singularities. (Faivre 2000, pp. 161–2)

The final paragraph of the essay is even more engagé:

We do not accede to the world, natural and spiritual, and to beings, except through the molds that structure our physical eye and our inner eye. But if our inner eye remains passive, routine, lazy, then it runs the risk of ‘degenerating into a doctrinaire blindness’, for example, in ideologies and reductive visions, totalitarian, or simply into a blurred mirror reflecting no more than lifeless forms. It is perhaps not given to everyone to partake of a theophanic vision. But between the Book of Nature, or an authentic work of art, and the imaginal world, there is perhaps not so much a gap as discrete degrees linking levels of reality. And while to most of us the imaginal world can appear too remote or inaccessible, the few stories, thoughts, and testimonies here brought together can at least serve as a horizon line that many orient us, spiritually or culturally, toward a spirit of openness to these levels of reality that are, perhaps, awaiting our seeing. (Faivre 2000, p. 163)

Faivre has said of Corbin that he ‘knew how to join scientific rigor to personal engagement. . . . This combination allowed him to apprehend the specificity of his subjects both from inside and the outside’ (Faivre 1994, p. 98). Earlier in the same essay, he had cast a wider net:

The exegeses of Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and Seyyed H. Nasr always start with the notion of *philosophia–theosophia–perennis*, and it is to this that their hermeneutics always return. But not one of them neglects erudition, critical apparatus, or the historical and philosophical tools that constitute a specific aspect of modernity. With them, university scholarship comes to the aid, today indispensably, of Tradition, which they approach both as savants and philosophers. (Faivre 1994, p. 44; see also Faivre 1995a, pp. 67–8)

Faivre here appears to be celebrating what Wasserstrom has called, in reference to Eliade, Corbin and Gershom Scholem, the ‘uncanny doubleness in their scholarship’: at once study of religions and a quest for a post-institutionalised spirituality (Wasserstrom 1999, p. ix). Moreover, Faivre explicitly links this duality to Eliade’s desideratum of a ‘new humanism’: ‘The risk that our age must take, if it wishes to see the birth of a new humanism, consists of relearning the place of myth and mystery in our lives and in our field of knowledge’ (Faivre 1995a, p. 65). This sentence echoes a paragraph from Faivre’s entry on ‘Esotericism’ in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*:

Esoteric traditions can be especially valuable in suggesting ways of thinking beyond the closed systems, abstract terms, and dehumanising ideologies that characterise so much of modern life. They offer the immense depth of a traditional wisdom and hermeneutics, which are becoming progressively more accessible thanks to the process of historical research and publication. Esotericism presents us with a form of nonreductive thought that reveals the richness of the correspondences uniting God, man, and the universe in the play of its reflecting mirrors. Its potential value for a renewal of the human sciences has yet to be realised. (Faivre 1986, p. 159)

Here we have an analogue of the History of Religions process that Wasserstrom identifies as the ‘use of myth to make meaning for universal history’ (Wasserstrom 1999, p. 242). But there is a contradiction at the heart of this project:

That contradiction emanates from ‘theogonic process’, the fabulous *imaginal* dialectic by which human history is seen theosophically as unfolding inside cosmic process. This

theosophy allowed the three Historians of Religion to write academic history while retaining religious significance, which proved to be inspiring for many readers. But it also—and here's the rub—tended to eradicate social difference. To take up the theogonic process, history as the unfolding of a great myth, to take this grandiosity on its own terms, as they insisted, must also be to diminish the little differences seeming so little when seen from such a height. But close analysis of context tells the historian that differences are never humanly little. Myth, in short, belittles difference; it builds on the drive, in fact, to close the gap of contradictions, to tell one story and not two. (Wasserstrom 1999, pp. 242–3)

Does this same contradiction between academic history and religious signification lurk at the heart of Faivre's scholarship, with the dangerous scholarly and ethical consequences to which Wasserstrom alerts us? Preliminary to offering an answer, we should note that while Faivre was a friend of Corbin and Eliade, he was always historical (no 'terror of history' [Eliade 1954, p. 160]) and democratic (no elitism or flirtation with fascism). Nevertheless, it may appear that Faivre, in shifting between religionist, or esotericist, and empirical-historical approaches, resembles his own description of Hermes as 'plastic, mobile, and ambiguous' (Faivre 1995a, p. 13). And yet, to leave Hermetic ambiguity as the final word on Faivre's scholarship would be to ignore a crucial historical divide. The year 1993 marks a watershed in Faivre's critical-mindedness (Hanegraaff, private conversation, Amsterdam, March 2000). Before that date, he did at times write as a religionist rather than a critical scholar and did not always give sufficient weight to theoretical issues. After 1993 (the chronology is tricky in the English editions because, though published after 1993, they include older material), and under the influence of Hanegraaff's critical approach, he embraced the empirical-historical method and is more careful about definitional and theoretical issues.<sup>4</sup> The combination of rigorous historical, empirical research and a critical-mindedness that recognises the conceptual status of 'esotericism' as a scholarly construct is the prerequisite for the acceptance of its study as a legitimate field of academic research, the goal towards which Faivre has worked over the course of his distinguished and highly readable studies.

### Notes

- 1 While the word 'occultism' is sometimes used synonymously with 'esotericism', the term is increasingly reserved for the specific historical movement that began with Eliphas Lévi in the mid-nineteenth-century (see Faivre 1994, pp. 34–5).
- 2 A second chair, dedicated to the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents and occupied by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, was established in 1999 at the University of Amsterdam.
- 3 Hanegraaff notes that "esotericism" in a perennialist sense is not intended to be, and should not be misunderstood as, a proposal for construing an "esoteric tradition" in any accepted historical sense of that word. Instead, it is a proposal for *interpreting*, not *esotericism*, but the phenomenon of religion as such' (Hanegraaff 1998, p. 27).
- 4 An institutional expression of Faivre's transformation is provided by *ARIES: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*. Formerly published by La Table d'Emeraude and Archè-Edidit, a New Series of *ARIES* has from January 2001 been published by Brill with a new editorial mandate (critical historical scholarship and interdisciplinary approaches, including the use of social-science methodologies within a historical framework) and team (Faivre, Hanegraaff and Roland Edighoffer).

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