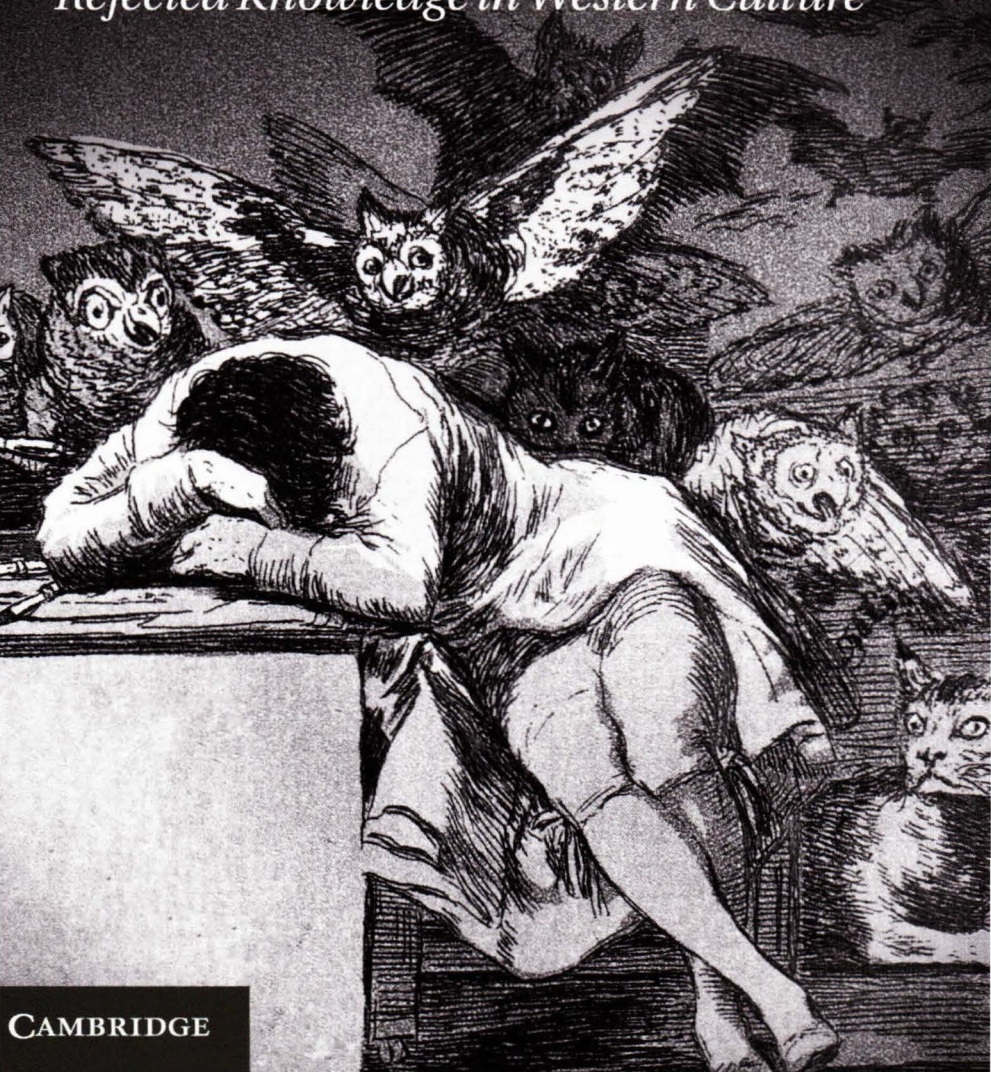


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Esotericism and the Academy

Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture



CAMBRIDGE

the widespread popular phenomenon of “psychological astrology,”¹³¹ Jung’s theory of “synchronicity” has proved attractive as a theoretical framework even for modern historians of ancient astrology, as will be seen.

Summing up: from the perspective of the academic study of “Western esotericism,” Jung’s essential contribution is that he took the basic idea (invented by German Romantic mesmerism, with Ennemoser as the paradigmatic example) of a history of the magical “nightside of nature” and its experiential manifestations, but repackaged it in modern psychological terms as the history of Western culture’s suppressed unconscious. The result was an extremely attractive narrative with an internal logic all of its own, which has been widely adopted in popular culture since World War II and – in spite of its evidently non-historical foundations – has deeply influenced scholars as well. Its basic concept is that of an esoteric “counter-tradition,”¹³² that has always been present as the hidden – occult – “shadow” of the mainstream: from gnosticism and the ancient mystery cults, through alchemy and the other “occult sciences” (natural magic and astrology), to early modern thinkers like Paracelsus and his followers, to Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, mesmerism and, finally, modern psychology. In this narrative, the official representatives of the mainstream (Christian theologians, rational philosophers, modern scientists) have always tried to suppress it, but never with any lasting success, because, like the unconscious, it is the hidden secret of their own existence, the vital source without which they could not exist. The positive religions, particularly the monotheistic ones, are “external” products of time and historical circumstance – they have had a beginning, and will have an end – but underneath them, there has always been this permanent and universal substratum: a kind of objective paganism expressing itself by symbols and myths, and grounded in the universal human search for self-knowledge, or gnosis.

ERANOS AND RELIGIONISM: SCHOLEM, CORBIN, ELIADE

The importance of Eranos for the study of “Western esotericism” lies in a specific approach to religion that came to dominate its proceedings and publications, and was adopted as a matter of course by many of the scholars who became interested in “hermetic” or “occult” traditions as an object of

¹³¹ Von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 337, 339–340, 345. Jung was interested in astrology already before the break with Freud: see, for example, his letter to Freud of June 12, 1911 (Freud and Jung, *Briefwechsel*, 470–471).

¹³² Cf. Pietikäinen’s concept of “counter-myth” (*C. G. Jung and the Psychology of Symbolic Forms*, 130–144).

study from the 1960s onwards. In line with my earlier discussions, I will refer to this approach as “religionism.” Rooted in the impossible dream of a “history of truth,” it may be defined as the project of exploring historical sources in search of what is eternal and universal. The paradoxical nature of any such attempt is obvious; and at least in its more sophisticated representatives, this sometimes lends religionism a quality of intellectual daring bordering on the heroic. Each in their own way, and with particular vehemence after World War II, the religionists of Eranos were rebelling against the finality of history and time, change and impermanence – in short, they refused the nihilist verdict that all things that appear to be meaningful and true in human existence are just finite and transitory, ending in dissolution and death.

The relative emphasis placed on either temporality or eternity was, however, different with each of these scholars. On the farthest “historical” side of the spectrum we find a thinker like Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the pioneering scholar of Jewish kabbalah, who stood for critical philology and historiography and only very rarely allowed his readers to catch a glimpse of his deepest motivations. His clearest statement is in a famous letter to his publisher, Zalman Schocken:

For the Mountain, the body of things, needs no key; it is only the nebulous wall of history, which hangs around it, that must be traversed. To traverse it – that is what I have tried. Will I remain stuck in the nebula, so to speak, falling victim to “death by professorship?” But even where it requires sacrifice, there is just no alternative to the necessity of historical criticism and critical historiography.

True, history may at bottom be an illusion, but an illusion without which no perception of the essence is possible in time. The wondrous concave mirror of philological criticism makes it possible for the people of today first and most purely to receive a glimpse, in the legitimate orders of commentary, of that mystical totality of the system, whose existence, however, vanishes in the very act of being projected onto historical time.

From the first day to the present, my work has lived in this paradox, out of such a hope for a true message from the Mountain – for that most trivial, tiniest shift of history that makes truth erupt from the illusion of “development.”¹³³

¹³³ Scholem, “Birthday Letter,” in: Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 216, and Scholem, *Briefe* 1, 472; and cf. Scholem, “Zehn unhistorische Sätze.” On the connection of these texts and their role in Scholem’s development, see the excellent analysis by Peter Schäfer, “Philologie der Kabbala’.” See also the important passage from a highly perceptive article on Scholem by his pupil Joseph Weiss, published in *Yedioth hayom* (December 5, 1947; reproduced in Schäfer, “Philologie der Kabbala’,” 22 n. 69), and Scholem’s affirmative reaction in a Hebrew letter to Weiss (March 31, 1960; not included in the printed correspondence), reproduced in German translation by Schäfer (“Philologie der Kabbala’,” 22–23). See also the quotation at the heading of this chapter.

Like all other central Eranos figures, Scholem had absorbed the basic message that metaphysical Truth cannot be found in history and will never be discovered by the historian *qua* historian. But whereas colleagues with Christian backgrounds like Corbin or Eliade saw historical existence as a prison or nightmare and “historicism” as the enemy, for a Zionist Jew like Scholem such an attitude was impossible. He was deeply convinced that the very identity of contemporary Judaism was determined “by historical consciousness, by the feeling of a continuity with the past and a common hope for the future,”¹³⁴ and his understanding of history was therefore inseparable from a dimension of messianic expectation. From a Jewish perspective, history is the very condition that makes messianic fulfillment possible, even if it provides no guarantee about when, or how, or perhaps even whether the hope for a “message from the mountain” will be fulfilled. But at the same time, the fact that eternity cannot appear in time means that the hope that sustains Jewish identity through history can only be called an “aspiration to the impossible.”¹³⁵ Under these conditions, the historian must have the courage to “descend into the abyss” of history, knowing that he might encounter nothing but himself, and guided by nothing but a desperate hope for the impossible: that against all human logic, the transcendent might inexplicably “break through into history” one day, like “a light that shines into it from altogether elsewhere.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Hamacher, *Gershom Scholem*, 66. Hamacher points out that for Scholem, historical consciousness in this sense was all the more important because, for him, it replaced *Halakhab* as the basis of modern Jewish identity.

¹³⁵ Mosès, *L'ange de l'histoire*, 189.

¹³⁶ Scholem, “Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee,” 25 (and cf. 7–8 for how Scholem contrasted Jewish ideas of salvation with Christian ones, which he deeply disliked because of what he called the “horrible smell” and “swindle” of pure interiority [letter to Georg Lichtheim about Simone Weil, 1950, in: *Briefe II*, 16]). My understanding of Scholem’s perspective is informed by a manuscript from 1921 that contains an earlier version of the ideas expressed in the letter to Schocken (Scholem Archive of the Jewish National and University Library, Arc. 4^o 1599/282, as reproduced in Schäfer, “Philologie der Kabbala,” 4–7). Here, the passage “without which no perception of the essence is possible in time” ends as “in an unmessianic time”; and about the mountain without a key, one reads that “What we are missing is not a key, but only one thing: courage. Courage to descend into an abyss that, against expectation, might end with ourselves. Courage to go through a plane, a wall – history . . .” (Schäfer, “Philologie der Kabbala,” 5; and cf. Scholem’s letter to Hugo and Escha Berman of December 15, 1947, responding to Hugo’s criticism of Scholem’s sharp distinction between “prophets” and “professors” in the final sentences of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: “I live in despair [*Verzweiflung*], and only from the position of despair can I be active” [*Briefe I*, 331]). About correct and incorrect interpretations of the letter to Schocken, see the excellent analysis in Hamacher, *Gershom Scholem*, 62–72. On “the spiritual quest of the philologist,” see also Mendes-Flohr, “Introductory Essay.” Finally, see Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte,” 34; in his *g¹² Mystics*, Herbert Weiner writes that for Scholem, “a reference in a kabbalistic document to an ‘Elijah appearance’ may be hallucination, or simply a technical term . . . but it cannot mean what most kabbalists took it to mean, that Elijah actually did appear

In the meantime, Jews are condemned to the exilic situation of strictly historical existence, guided only by myths and symbols that, by their very nature, provide a glimpse of the transcendent only by concealing it at the same time. In his understanding of symbolism and myth in relation to kabbalah, Scholem owed much to the perspectives of German Romanticism, notably Molitor (a major influence on Ennemoser, as we saw earlier) and Novalis, but also Schelling and von Baader; and the exact nature of his debt to A. E. Waite deserves further study.¹³⁷ These backgrounds make it easier to understand why Scholem's strict insistence on philology and historical criticism as the only legitimate approach to the study of Jewish mysticism did not prevent him from feeling at home in *Eranos*,¹³⁸ with its emphasis on myth and symbolism as reflections of meta-historical truth, and did not prevent him from expressing feelings of deep spiritual kinship even with a declared enemy of historicism like Henry Corbin.¹³⁹ It remains, nevertheless, that in his published writings he appears as the very model of a "historian's historian,"¹⁴⁰ and in this regard it would have made little difference if he had chosen never to reveal his personal hopes and motivations. Scholem is therefore best interpreted as a scholar who felt the temptation of religionism but resisted it, explicitly and largely successfully,

with a message" (*g*^{1/2} *Mystics*, 81). However, in the margin of his personal copy, Scholem wrote "I NEVER SAID SO!"

¹³⁷ Kilcher, *Sprachtheorie der Kabbala*, 331–345; Schulte, "Die Buchstaben." Mostly during the 1920s, Scholem took the trouble to read everything that occultists (Eliphas Lévi, Blavatsky, de Guaita, Papus, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Waite, Westcott, Crowley, Regardie, Pullen-Burry, MacGregor Mathers, Steiner) had to say about "kabbala." Usually the verdict was negative, as shown by his many marginal notes ("Lying and deceitful," "Nonsense," "No!" and so on); but Scholem's attitude towards Waite is more complex than one might perhaps expect (Burmistrov, "Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte").

¹³⁸ *Contra Dan*, "Gershom Scholem," 53–56, and "Foreword." Dan is very convincing when he describes the sharp contrast between Jungian/Eliadian approaches and Scholem's historical approach ("Foreword," 8–9); but he too easily reduces *Eranos* to just a "Jungian/Eliadean" project, and contrasts it with Scholem's historicism in terms of simple opposition rather than dialectical tension. Whereas Dan considers Scholem's participation in *Eranos* as "belonging probably to the most difficult questions of his biography" ("Gershom Scholem," 53; cf. Wasserstrom's initial "perplexity" about the same point: "Response," 460), I would see *Eranos* as an indispensable key. Idel emphasizes that most of Scholem's writings on the phenomenological aspects of kabbalah were written rather late in his career, and do reflect the influence of *Eranos* and its audience (*Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 11). For Scholem's ironic dialectics, see his own reflections on *Eranos*, significantly titled "Identifizierung und Distanz."

¹³⁹ See Scholem's letter to Corbin on April 5, 1973 (*Briefe III*, 69) and to his widow Stella Corbin on October 26, 1978 (*ibid.*, 193), where he writes that, for him, Corbin's death meant "the loss of a spiritual brother." These passages refute Wasserstrom's contention that Scholem was "spiritually unrelated" to the "esoteric blood brothers" Eliade and Corbin (*Religion after Religion*, 13, but cf. 53). As far as their published scholarship is concerned, however, Corbin's influence on Scholem appears to have been quite minor (Fenton, "Henry Corbin et la mystique juive," 161–162).

¹⁴⁰ Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 64.

Privately he may well have believed, or hoped, that events in time could be symbolic reflections of the eternal and universal; but he also knew that, if so, the very act of "projection" concealed their source from the historian's gaze.

If Scholem was situated on the farthest "historical" side of the Eranos spectrum, Henry Corbin (1903–1978) certainly exemplified the opposite, radically "anti-historical" alternative. This does not mean that he disregarded the study of primary sources: on the contrary, he spent his life studying the works of Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabi and a range of other important Iranian theosophers in their original language, and his enormous contribution to the study of medieval Islamic mysticism is undisputed. What it does mean is that he adopted the metaphysical perspective of his favorite authors as his own, and opposed it in the strongest possible wordings against the "disease," "profanation," "corruption," even "satanic inversion" represented by historical reductionism.¹⁴¹ In so doing, he explicitly took the perspective not of a historian, but of a philosopher in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger:¹⁴² "visible, apparent, outward states, in short, phenomena, can never be the causes of other phenomena. The agent is the invisible, the immaterial."¹⁴³ In other words, whatever appears in empirical reality has its origin in a transcendent realm: "any *history* that happens in this visible world is the *imitation* of events that happened first in the soul, 'in Heaven,' and hence the *place* of microhistory . . . cannot be perceived by the senses, for their signification refers to another world."¹⁴⁴ When Corbin spoke of "esotericism," as he frequently did, he meant a spiritual perspective – the only true one, in his

¹⁴¹ For example, Corbin, "L'*imago Templi*," 368 (all references are to the complete edition of 1980, not the abridged version published in the Eranos Yearbook). "Historical reductionism" captures most exactly what Corbin rejected under the term "historicism": a kind of "historical consciousness that cannot conceive of a reality otherwise than from the perspective of its material genesis" (Corbin, "Science traditionnelle," 30). See Faivre, "La question," 91 n. 11, and for the problematics of "historicism," cf. his reference to Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 413–417. There is also a theological dimension to Corbin's anti-historicism: for him, an eschatological and docetist theology associated with the early "Johannite community" represented the very antithesis of the historical and incarnational theology of the "Great Church" ("L'*imago templi*," 354–358).

¹⁴² As pointed out *contra* Wasserstrom (who did, however, acknowledge the fact: *Religion after Religion*, 145) by Lory, "Note sur l'ouvrage," 109; and Subtelny, "History and Religion," 93. On Corbin's use of phenomenology and his refusal of history, see Cheetham, *World Turned Inside Out*, 1–15; and see, for example, Corbin's application of Heideggerian categories in "De Heidegger à Sohrawardī," 28, where he speaks of "the refusal to let ourselves be inserted into the historicity of History" and the demand "to tear ourselves loose from the historicity of History. For if there is a 'meaning of History,' in any case it does not reside in the historicity of historical events; it resides in this *historiality*, in these existential, secret, esoteric roots of History and the historical."

¹⁴³ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 119.

¹⁴⁴ Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol. 1, 163. Cf. Jambet, "Henry Corbin et l'histoire," 145.

opinion – grounded in this distinction between external reality and a more fundamental “inner” dimension hidden from the senses. As explained by his close friend and colleague Seyyed Hossein Nasr,

For Corbin, the essential distinction in Islamic esotericism, and notably in Sufism, between the exterior (*zâhir*) and the interior (*bâtin*), as well as the process that relates the exterior to the interior – the *ta’wil*, translated by him as hermeneutics, in reference to the original meaning of the term – together constitute *the only method* for accessing the truth, a method which is also the real meaning of phenomenology.¹⁴⁵

All this makes it pointless to judge Corbin’s work by the criteria of academic historiography: as Maria E. Subtelny bluntly puts it, he was simply “not interested in historical truth.”¹⁴⁶ Overwhelming evidence for this fact can be found in Corbin’s fundamental text “The *imago templi* in Confrontation with Profane Norms,” presented in abridged form at Éranos shortly before his death. Discussing a “filiation” from the original Judaeo-Christian community and the Essenes, through the Templars and the Graal legend to the illuminism of eighteenth-century Masonic Templarism and Swedenborg’s “New Jerusalem,”¹⁴⁷ Corbin kept emphasizing that in order to understand it properly, one must take a position “beyond becoming and historical causality, beyond the norms of chronology, of filiations that require archives and notarial documents to justify themselves.”¹⁴⁸ The *imago* of the Temple is claimed to exist at a level of reality – the *mundus imaginalis* – that is ontologically prior to its earthly manifestation, and hence it is this transcendent image that conditions and determines its historical manifestations, never the reverse.¹⁴⁹ Historical causality is therefore irrelevant by definition. This is why Corbin’s elaborate claims about “hidden connections” between early Christianity, the Essenes, Islamic mysticism, the medieval Templars, the legend of the Graal, and Masonic neo-Templar traditions are declared by him, *ex cathedra*, to be immune against any historical falsification. By the same token, although Corbin’s own dependence on modern and contemporary esotericism is obvious to the historian,¹⁵⁰ any critical objection on

¹⁴⁵ Nasr, “Henry Corbin, ‘L’exil occidental,’” 13–14. ¹⁴⁶ Subtelny, “History and Religion,” 93.

¹⁴⁷ Corbin, “L’*imago templi*,” 190–191. Interestingly, the specialist of Jewish mysticism Elliot Wolfson appears to accept Corbin’s perspective as a valid textual hermeneutics in the study of religion and uses it to include Zoharic kabbalah as well (Wolfson, “*Imago Templi*”).

¹⁴⁸ Corbin, “L’*imago templi*,” 188. Cf. *ibid.*, 190: “although there are historical traces, always hidden under the veil of what is known as ‘legends,’ it is not by these uncertain traces that we find the knights of the Temple,” for the true connections “are not of the kind that leave traces in archival documents.”

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁵⁰ See notably his relation to Traditionalism (below, nn. 155–156) and his involvement in the Martinist *Rite Ecossaise Rectifié* (below, page 341 with n. 305).

that basis would automatically be declared inadmissible and misguided. Corbin was not speaking about what, on the basis of his studies, he had come to see as the truth: Truth itself was being spoken through Corbin, and any objection therefore had to be false by definition.¹⁵¹

Corbin had understood the depth of the conflict between "history" and "truth" perhaps more profoundly than any of his colleagues, with the exception of Scholem. This conflict goes to the very heart of the modern study of religion, and hence of "Western esotericism" as well,¹⁵² and has accompanied us like a red thread throughout this book. It is therefore important to understand it correctly. We are dealing with two types of reasoning that are internally consistent but mutually exclusive. Both are capable of rejecting the alternative on their own terms, but they share no common measure that would make it possible to decide which one is ultimately true or false.¹⁵³ When all is said and done, they are a matter of choice. Scholem chose the path of historiography, more congenial to modern thinking, and accepted that the transcendent was thereby reduced to only a glimmer of hope at the very limit of the human horizon. Corbin chose the narrow path of metaphysics, and accepted that this made him into an "occidental exile,"¹⁵⁴ speaking on behalf of a spiritual world that had become alien and incomprehensible to practically all his contemporaries. One understands the attraction of his work among modern students of "Western esotericism," for his vision of reality has an undeniable beauty, and his oeuvre commands respect for the depth of its intellectual vision. But admirers should not be fooled about its unflinching dogmatism: no less radically than the Traditionalist school of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, Corbin rejected "the modern world" along with all its basic assumptions,¹⁵⁵ claiming exclusive

¹⁵¹ More precisely, Corbin saw the historian's objections as based upon the blind assumptions of a world that is not only in exile, but refuses, or is unable, to recognize that fact (*ibid.*, 198–204). Living in this world, the "gnostic" is a "stranger" to it, because he has at least discovered the true nature of his condition, and knows that his true home is elsewhere.

¹⁵² See Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method."

¹⁵³ Cf. Hanegraaff, "Under the Mantle of Love," 176–177, about the strictly comparable case of Marsilio Ficino's platonic theory of love as compared to modern psychoanalysis.

¹⁵⁴ Nasr, "Henry Corbin, 'L'exil occidental'" (and cf. above, n. 151).

¹⁵⁵ For the core argument against modernity, see Corbin, "L'*imago templi*," 196–200, and cf. 251. Wasserstrom associates Corbin's antimodernism with fascism and antisemitism but, by his own admission, fails to find any evidence (*Religion after Religion*, 155, 179). Regarding the type of discourse and rhetoric basic to Wasserstrom's argument, see below, n. 160; for a critical assessment of his moral agenda, see Benavides, "Afterreligion after Religion." On the complex relation between Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism, see the excellent analysis by Accart, "Identité et théophanie"; and Guénon, 203–204, 1012–1019. Corbin's very first published article (under the pseudonym 'Iyāg-Ni') already contained a long discussion of Guénon, who was praised for presenting an India free of Romantic and occultist distortions, and showing "what true esotericism consists of." But Corbin did not share Guénon's rejection of "all Western philosophy . . . and

truth for only his own worldview and presenting his hermeneutics as the only correct method. Critical discussion about these foundations was out of the question.¹⁵⁶

Representing two extreme options in the polar dynamics of religionism, Scholem ultimately sacrificed “truth” in the interest of history, while Corbin sacrificed history in the interest of “truth” (the former with regret, the latter with relish). The third central figure of Eranos in the postwar period, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), rather seems to represent the unresolved paradox of religionism as such: as has often been noted, the discipline that he referred to as “history of religions” was in fact notable for its attempt to transcend history.¹⁵⁷ Unlike Scholem and Corbin, Eliade was not a deep specialist in any particular religious tradition, and did not spend his life reading primary sources in their original languages. He relied essentially on secondary sources to provide him with information on a wide variety of religious traditions, and his sympathizing ex-student Robert Ellwood describes him quite correctly as “not at heart a scholar, much less a politician or social scientist, but a litterateur, a writer and literary critic.”¹⁵⁸ It belongs to this profile that Eliade had little concern for questions of methodology, as noted by another of his ex-students, Douglas Allen: “He simply looks at the religious phenomena, and he just ‘sees’ these essential structures and meanings.”¹⁵⁹ It is therefore somewhat ironic – understandable though it may be, given the dominance of his “Chicago school” in the American study of religion, not to mention the posthumous scandal of his political past – that precisely Eliade’s oeuvre has become the focus of intense methodological debate in the study of religion.¹⁶⁰

European scientific methods,” and highlighted the importance of German philosophers who would always remain alien to Guénon (Trang-Ni [Henry Corbin], “Regard vers l’Orient”; see Accart, “Identité et théophanie,” 179–180). For Corbin’s criticism of Guénon, see his response in 1963 to a review of his work by the Guénonian Mohammad Hassan Askari (Corbin, “Correspondance”; Accart, “Identité et théophanie,” 189–195).

¹⁵⁶ Corbin, “*L’image templi*,” 213: “between ‘those who see’ and ‘those who do not see,’ debate is pointless.” Corbin’s reasoning exhibits the same “no-win logic” as Traditionalism: “if you understand, you would agree; if you disagree, obviously you don’t understand” (Bowman, “Status of Conceptual Schemata,” 12). See also Hakl’s remarks about Corbin’s problems with accepting disagreement (*Verborgene Geist*, 347).

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, McCalla, “When is History not History?,” 435 (“History is not history when it is the history of religions”) and 437–438; Rudolph, “Mircea Eliade and the ‘History’ of Religions”; Alles, “Ist Eliade Antihistorisch?.”

¹⁵⁸ Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*, 124.

¹⁵⁹ Allen, “Encounters,” 14; and cf. Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 429–430.

¹⁶⁰ The number of publications on this debate is overwhelming. As *partes pro toto*, I just mention here Dudley, *Religion on Trial*, and McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*. The methodological debate is inseparable from the question of Eliade’s politics. Against the background of the “Eliade scandal” that erupted in the 1990s, when Eliade’s enthusiastic pre-war engagement with Romanian

Rather than looking for an implicit method in Eliade's writings, I believe it is more fruitful to emphasize the *absence* of method in his work. At the very core of his oeuvre we do not find some theoretical conviction about the correct way to study religion, but, very simply, a deep emotional need to find meaning in human existence. Eliade's obsessive activity as a writer, beginning in his teenage years and continuing until his death, reflects a profound awareness of transitoriness and death: "Everything passes. That is my immense pain . . . an intimate and never admitted obsession."¹⁶¹ Temporary relief from this oppressive awareness was granted only by special moments of "grace": evident models of what Eliade would later refer to as "hierophanies." Perhaps the most impressive example occurred one afternoon, when, as a small child, he discovered a room in the house that was normally closed:

The emotion that I felt then nailed me to the ground. I found myself transported into a palace of legend. The blinds had been lowered and through the heavy curtains of green velvet filtered a pale light of emerald colour, rainbow-like and almost supernatural. I felt as if I were inside a gigantic green grape. I stayed like that for a long moment, motionless in the middle of the room, holding my breath . . . Like great surfaces of clear water . . . the venetian mirrors reflected my image, but larger, and more beautiful, more noble above all, surrounded by that light that seemed to me to come from another world.¹⁶²

fascism and antisemitism became impossible to deny (see Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 251–301 and *passim*; for perhaps the most shocking piece of evidence, see the journal of Eliade's Jewish friend Mihail Sebastian for March 2, 1937: *Journal 1935–1944*, 113–114), scholars like Russell McCutcheon and Daniel Dubuisson have claimed that fascism and antisemitism are structurally *encoded* in Eliade's scholarship. For a convincing deconstruction of the underlying procedures of discourse and rhetoric (which are typical also of Wasserstrom's analysis of Eranos in his *Religion after Religion*, and the earlier analysis by Holz, "ERANOS") see Fisher, "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship." As pointed out by Fisher, the taken-for-granted associations between fascism and concepts such as "gnostic," "esoteric," "platonic," or "neopagan" (along with, for example, "totalizing," "antinomian," "aesthetic," "elitist," "syncretist," "Nietzschean," "Faustian," "amoral," "lawless," "organic," and "antimodernist": *ibid.*, 264) are ultimately derived from the "Critical Theory" of the Frankfurt School, which came to enjoy great moral and intellectual prestige after World War II (Fisher, "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship," 271–281; and see below, pp. 312–313).

¹⁶¹ Eliade, *Journal des Indes*, 24 (Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 96, 128). On the young Eliade's obsession with writing and reading, see Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 23–24, 27–30, 71, 78. For some time, he even tried to win more time by reducing his hours of sleep to four each night (*ibid.*, 29).

¹⁶² Eliade, *Promesses de l'équinoxe*, 14. This experience served as a model for Stefan's "secret room" in Eliade's novel *Noaptea de Sânzienze*, later translated as *The Forbidden Forest* (von Stuckrad, "Utopian Landscapes," 96–97). Eliade writes that for years, he trained himself in prolonging and artificially evoking such states of mind, always with success, but it finally brought unbearable sadness because he now knew that the world of the secret room was gone forever (*Promesses de l'équinoxe*, 11, 14–15). Particularly illuminating in this regard is a passage attributed to Eliade by his friend Corbin: "To be like a child means being a newborn, being re-born to another spiritual life; in short, being an initiate. Contrary to all other modes of being, the spiritual life knows of no law of becoming, for it does not develop in time. The 'newborn' is not a baby who will grow up in

Referring to the great importance that such “magical moments” had for Eliade, Ellwood speaks of him as having lived “a life governed by nostalgia: for childhood, for historical times past, for cosmic religion, for paradise,”¹⁶³ and his biographer Florin Turcanu concurs that “the famous *illud tempus* that Eliade talks about, the primordial time evoked by myths, is identified on another level with the time of childhood and its particular relation to the world.”¹⁶⁴ Whereas Corbin was inspired by very similar emotions and personal experiences¹⁶⁵ but went on to embrace a consistent metaphysical worldview, I see no indication that Eliade ever did so. At bottom, his famous notion of the “terror of history” does not refer to any specific form of “historicism” either, but quite simply to the painful experience that in the prosaic reality of adult human existence, it appears that “things just happen,” without any apparent reason or deeper meaning. The experience of war during his childhood, including the bombing of Bucharest in 1916,¹⁶⁶ seems to have affected him deeply, and his frantic workpace can be explained at least partly as reflecting a continuous struggle against his depressive tendencies.¹⁶⁷ In his pivotal *Myth of Eternal Recurrence*, written under the impact of the traumatic events of World War II and Eliade’s own exile from Romania, we find him reacting with deep emotion to the terrors and atrocities of history, and stressing that human beings somehow need to “defend” themselves against the nihilistic view that “everything that happens is ‘good,’ simply *because* it has happened.”¹⁶⁸

Eliade never says that historical events *do* have a meaning, either in themselves or as a reflection of some “deeper” or “inner” dynamics, and contrary to Corbin and even Scholem, he never developed any concept of a “meta-historical” reality: his many references to “the Sacred” remain

order to die one day. He is a *puer aeternus*. He remains a child *in aeternum*: he participates in the atemporal beatitude of the Spirit, and not in the becoming of history” (Corbin, “L’université de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem,” 11 [without source reference]).

¹⁶³ Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*, 99. For strong confirmation, see Olson, “Theology of Nostalgia”; and cf. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, on what he calls the “politics of nostalgia.”

¹⁶⁴ Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 13.

¹⁶⁵ For a very similar “hierophanic” experience reported about Corbin, see Shayegan, “L’homme à la lampe magique,” 31.

¹⁶⁶ Eliade, *Promesses de l’équinoxe*, chapter 2 (“War at Age Nine”). ¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶⁸ Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 152 n. 11, and cf. 149–150: the various “historical philosophies” all claim that “every historical event finds its full and only meaning in its realization alone.” Nevertheless, Eliade also writes that even Hegelianism and Marxism still preserve some dimension of “transhistorical significance” or meaning in history, and can therefore serve as a means of “defense” against it (*ibid.*, 148–149). I find little theoretical depth and consistency in this famous chapter on “The Terror of History,” which ends even more strangely with a simple appeal to Christian faith in God as modern man’s only defense against “despair” (*ibid.*, 159–162). Like his novel *The Forbidden Forest*, Eliade’s *Myth of the Eternal Return* must evidently be seen as a response to the recent historical horrors: see Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 340–342, 376–383.

extremely vague,¹⁶⁹ and imply little else than that some kind of “absolute” reality *must* exist because the alternative is nihilism and despair. Essentially, then, his oeuvre appears to be based upon a life-long search for psychological “defenses” against such despair: they are not so much “solutions,” “explanations,” or “justifications” of suffering as ways to make it bearable. Myths and rituals of periodic cyclical renewal and rebirth as an antidote against the finality of events in irreversible chronological sequence, the concept of an irreducible religious reality *sui generis* as an antidote against historical reductionism (that is, against religions as mere contingent products of historical circumstance), ecstatic techniques for entering an “other reality” and the imaginal return to “archaic” and primordial worlds as antidotes against the sense of being imprisoned in time: all have the same function of providing a measure of existential relief and emotional comfort, by suggesting that the dream of escaping historical reality is not altogether hopeless. In short, for Eliade, the revival of myth as a counterbalance to history became a kind of “therapeutic” necessity for modern man:

Until recently, all personal dramas or collective catastrophes found their justification in some kind of cosmology or soteriology . . . Today history terrorizes purely and simply, for the tragedies that it produces no longer find a justification or absolution . . . The cosmic alteration, the day that invariably, *in spite of everything*, follows the night, the spring that follows the winter: the eternal return. This myth must be re-invigorated if life still has some meaning, if it still deserves to be lived.¹⁷⁰

Elsewhere in his private journal, Eliade was even more implicit about his work as a means of “escaping History, of saving myself through symbol, myth, rites, archetypes.”¹⁷¹

In his search for “escapes” from historical reality, Eliade explored a wide variety of ancient and contemporary “esoteric” currents as well. German Romantic culture always remained somewhat alien to him, but occultist authors played a role in awakening the youthful Eliade’s interest in comparative religion and the Orient, and convincing him of the reality of paranormal phenomena.¹⁷² Alchemy was another early fascination, likewise

¹⁶⁹ Faivre, “L’ambiguità della nozione del sacro,” 368: the ontological status of the Sacred “remains ambiguous by lack of precision. What, then, is this Being that manifests itself by means of hierophanies and is situated beyond any religious phenomenon properly speaking?” On the ambivalence of Eliade’s sacred/profane distinction (as compared with Rudolf Otto, Emile Durkheim, and Roger Caillois), cf. Hanegraaff, “Defining Religion,” 356.

¹⁷⁰ Eliade, unpublished diary fragments (Eliade Papers, Box 3, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago) for April 6, 1944, and March 15, 1945, as quoted in Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 340–341. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷¹ Eliade, *Caete de Dor* 8 (1954), 27, as quoted in Ierunca, “Literary Work of Mircea Eliade,” 351.

¹⁷² Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 37–41 (focusing on Eliade’s youthful reception of Edouard Schuré, H. P. Blavatsky, and Rudolf Steiner); cf. Faivre, “Modern Western Esoteric Currents in the Work

linked in his mind with “the Orient”; it was sparked by Marcelin Berthelot’s *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, but Eliade became a firm believer in “spiritual alchemy” under the influence of Guénon and Evola, as we will see shortly.¹⁷³ While studying in Italy from 1927 to 1928, he developed an interest in Renaissance philosophy, resulting in an unfinished thesis that discusses, *inter alia*, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola; but this remained no more than an episode.¹⁷⁴ References to contemporary esoteric currents are scattered through Eliade’s literary and scholarly works,¹⁷⁵ and during his Parisian period after World War II he frequented French esoteric milieus, including the alchemist Eugène Canseliet, the Gurdjieffian Louis Pauwels, and (somewhat later) the “neo-gnostic” writer Raymond Abellio.¹⁷⁶ But by far the most important “esoteric” factor in Eliade’s intellectual development was the Traditionalism of René Guénon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and Julius Evola. While he tried to conceal his debt to these thinkers,¹⁷⁷ Paola Pisi has demonstrated beyond any doubt that they were decisive influences on a range of central concepts in Eliade’s mature oeuvre, notably the symbolism of the “center,” his notion of “reintegration,” and his understanding of “archetypes.”¹⁷⁸ The two most important theoretical chapters of his

of Mircea Eliade,” 150. In an early article in a school journal, titled “Știință și ocultism” (“Science and Occultism”; 1925), he reacted to a skeptic schoolmate by expressing his firm belief in paranormal phenomena while trying (characteristically) “to crush his adversary under the weight of a bibliography” dominated by occultists and parapsychologists (Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 40).

¹⁷³ For the general development of Eliade’s interest in alchemy, see Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 42–43, 85–86, 232–234, 251. Eliade’s brochure *Alchimia asiatică* (1935) was “based upon one master-idea: alchemy is not a ‘proto-chemistry,’ it is not a ‘proto-science,’ but an autonomous spiritual discipline whose reasonings and goals have nothing to do with the intellectual instruments and the results of modern chemical experiments” (Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 233). This belief developed prior to and independently of Jung (whose views were more ambivalent in any case, as seen above, pp. 289–291). Already Eliade’s teacher Nae Ionescu appears to have presented alchemy as mysticism, probably under the influence of Evelyn Underhill (Pisi, “I ‘traditionalist,’” 92 n. 36), but Eliade’s “panvitalist” and soteriological interpretation was dependent on Guénon and Evola (*ibid.*, 49–51).

¹⁷⁴ Eliade, *Contribuții la filosofia Renașterii* (1928), available in French translation as *Contributions à la philosophie de la Renaissance*; see discussion in Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 112–115. Looking back at this dissertation at the end of his life, Eliade clearly projected post-Yatesian understandings of “Renaissance hermeticism” back onto his own early work.

¹⁷⁵ See overview in Faivre, “Modern Western Esoteric Currents in the Work of Mircea Eliade,” 150–154.

¹⁷⁶ Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 360–361.

¹⁷⁷ For example, Eliade, *Viața Nouă*, 212 (as quoted/translated in Spineto, “Mircea Eliade and Traditionalism,” 68 n. 48): “Tului [the hero of his novel] will say things which . . . I have never had the courage to express in public. I have only, at times, confessed to a few friends my ‘traditionalist’ views (to use René Guénon’s terms).”

¹⁷⁸ Pisi, “I ‘trazionalisti,’” 51–60, 64–72. Pisi shows that, again, Eliade’s understanding of archetypes is not derived from Jung but from Coomaraswamy (*ibid.*, 66–69). On Evola’s political ideas, his failed attempts to become the philosopher of Italian fascism and German National Socialism, and his antisemitism, see the exhaustive analysis by Hansen [Hakl], “Julius Evolas Politisches Wirken.”

Myth of Reintegration even turn out to be summaries of, and partly literal quotations from, an article by Coomaraswamy!¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Eliade never became a convinced Traditionalist. He did not accept the notions of a “primordial tradition,” an initiatic transmission of traditional knowledge, and cyclical decline, and, most importantly, he interpreted Traditionalist beliefs not as metaphysical truths, but as expressions of the fundamental needs of *homo religiosus*: man’s (and Eliade’s) desire for unity and reintegration in the life of the cosmos, as an emotional response to the existential anguish of temporal being.¹⁸⁰

As suggested by his enormous popularity, Eliade’s books do seem to have been experienced as “therapeutic” by a wide postwar readership, including many academics.¹⁸¹ They clearly answered a widely felt need for alternatives to the dominant trends of thought – notably, in Eliade’s own words, existentialist pessimism and “the chaos and meaninglessness of modern life”¹⁸² – and became essential parts of the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s.¹⁸³ Achieving world fame in this period, the Romanian exile with his unfamiliar approach ended up dominating the academic study of religion in the United States. As all his previous books now began to be translated, at least one new title by Eliade appeared in English every year between 1958 and 1965, and almost all of them became bestsellers.¹⁸⁴ This boom coincided with the no less spectacular popularity of Carl Gustav Jung, along with a range of further authors associated with Eranos, all made widely available in English by the financial support of the Bollingen Foundation.¹⁸⁵ The result was a remarkable transference of Eranos scholarship concerned with religion, myth and symbolism from Europe to the United States. Remarkably, at the same time when anything related to this domain was being declared

¹⁷⁹ Detailed analysis in Pisi, “I ‘tradizionalisti,’” 54–57, with reference to Eliade’s *Mitul Reintegrării* (1942) and Coomaraswamy’s essay “Angel and Titan” (1935). Furthermore, Pisi argues that Eliade’s chapters are not just a summary of Coomaraswamy’s work, but a “banalization” of it (“I ‘tradizionalisti,’” 57 and n. 80).

¹⁸⁰ Pisi, “I ‘tradizionalisti,’” 52, 57, 59, 60.

¹⁸¹ For testimonies about the impact that Eliade’s work made on members of this generation, see, for example, the cases of Jonathan Z. Smith, Robert Ellwood, Norman Girardot, and Bruce Lincoln (Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 449–452; Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*, 5; Ellwood, *Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 94), and a range of further memories by former students collected in Gligor and Ricketts, *Intalniri cu / Encounters with Mircea Eliade*.

¹⁸² Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, 8–II, 63–65, here, 64. Eliade discussed the French magazine *Planète*, Teilhard de Chardin, and structuralism as contemporary “cultural fashions,” and he could easily have gone on to analyze the wave of fascination with his own work along similar lines.

¹⁸³ Ellwood, *Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 90–100 (on Eliade as one typical representative of the religious *Zeitgeist* next to, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Nikos Kazantzakis, Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph Campbell, Thomas Merton, Paul Tillich, or John A. T. Robinson).

¹⁸⁴ Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 439. ¹⁸⁵ McGuire, *Bollingen*.

taboo in German-speaking countries,¹⁸⁶ the “spirit of Eranos” flourished like never before on the other side of the Atlantic, further strengthened by a series of American intellectuals strongly connected with Eranos and its agendas, such as, notably, the mythologist Joseph Campbell and the archetypal psychologist James Hillman.¹⁸⁷ This is how a range of basic assumptions originating in European interbellum scholarship on “myth” came to be accepted as a matter of course, not just by a wide international audience, but also by many of the scholars who, from the 1960s onwards, began to become interested in “hermetic” or “occult” traditions as an object of study.

In spite of this fact, however, the range of currents and ideas that we have been discussing as relevant to “Western esotericism” in the previous chapters of this book did *not* play any central role in the Eranos agenda up to the 1970s, at least not explicitly, and they were not conceptualized as manifestations of one continuous tradition or as belonging to a more or less coherent field of research. It is only in 1974 that Eliade briefly sketched the general outlines of such a historiographical project, under the influence of Frances Yates’ concept of the Hermetic Tradition and probably of Antoine Faivre’s work: in his essay “The Occult and the Modern World” (1974) he referred to a “secret ‘occult’ tradition” represented by gnosticism and hermeticism in antiquity, reviving in the Italian Renaissance and its “longing for a universalistic, transhistorical, ‘mythical’ religion,” continued by the “vogue of occultism” in nineteenth-century France, and culminating in the “occult explosion” of the 1970s.¹⁸⁸ Prior to this, Scholem had been devoting his life to recovering the “esoteric” dimensions of Judaism, and from a very different perspective, Corbin had done the same for Islam;¹⁸⁹ but perhaps surprisingly, a similar project focused on the third of the great scriptural religions, Christianity, had not taken shape, and began to emerge only during the 1970s in the work of Antoine Faivre.

If Judaism and Islam were believed to have their own “esoteric” traditions, what exactly did that mean in the context of Eranos prior to Faivre?

¹⁸⁶ In this regard, the essential factor was the “Critical Theory” of the Frankfurt School: discussion below, pp. 312–313, and cf. above, n. 160.

¹⁸⁷ On the role of these two authors at Eranos, see Hakl, *Verborgene Geist*, 232–240 and 329–337.

¹⁸⁸ Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions*, quotations on 49, 55–56, 58. Yates and Faivre are mentioned on 55–56.

¹⁸⁹ It must be noted that Hebrew has no term for “mysticism,” and Scholem spoke of *ba’uley sod*, “esoterics” (Dan, “In Quest,” 122), so that his famous historical overview of 1946 should perhaps have been titled more appropriately *Major Trends in Jewish Esotericism*. As seen above, Corbin adopted the emic terminology *batin* (“hidden,” or “inward”; cf. Lory, “Sexual Intercourse,” 49–50).

As pointed out by Moshe Idel, Scholem's understanding was based upon the idea of a sharp antagonism between "a Kabbalistic mode of thought motivated by a mythical universe, and the 'history-saturated' consciousness of the rabbinic mind";¹⁹⁰ and, moreover, Scholem maintained that this mythical universe, deeply informed by the paganism of the ancient Near East, had entered Judaism "from outside," so to speak, by way of gnosticism.¹⁹¹ In short, Scholem saw Jewish "esotericism" as an eruption of mythical consciousness into the historical consciousness of rabbinic Judaism, triggered by contact with non-Jewish sources. But at the same time, it is precisely in these products of pagan-monotheistic syncretism that he perceived the true, "living heart" that had kept Judaism alive, as opposed to the dry and stifling legalism of the rabbinic counterpart:¹⁹² somehow, then, its essence was not exclusively Jewish, for the mythical dimension lent a more universal quality to it. In the case of Corbin, the situation is easier to summarize: he saw "esotericism" quite simply as the true, hidden or inward dimension of exoteric Islam, known only to the mystics and visionaries and imperceptible to the historian. What we find, then, is that both thinkers claimed, for their respective fields, that the true "vital essence" of monotheistic religions was *not* to be found in their external, historical, doctrinal, and legalistic¹⁹³ manifestations, but only in a more universal, experiential dimension dominated by myth, symbolism, and the religious imagination, and ultimately focused on a superior knowledge of divine mysteries, or "gnosis." This "inner" ("esoteric") dimension was seen as the true secret – the "well of turbulent vitality" in Scholem's words – of "outward" ("exoteric") religion.¹⁹⁴ We will see that until the early 1990s, very much the same perspective dominated Antoine Faivre's understanding of "esotericism" in Christian culture.

¹⁹⁰ Idel, "Rabbinism versus Kabbalism," 289. ¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 283, 291.

¹⁹² On the centrality, in Scholem's oeuvre, of the idea "that Judaism was kept alive by the revival, in mysticism, of the mythical-magical worldview," in the context of his organic understanding of Judaism as "living religion" and its roots in Romanticism and contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*, see Hamacher, *Gershom Scholem, 195–227* (here 195); on the "regenerating" virtue of myth and mysticism, see also Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 113–147.

¹⁹³ On the anti-legalistic dimension in both Scholem and Corbin, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 57–59.

¹⁹⁴ See the opening quotation. If we go back to the last paragraph of the previous section, and compare this perspective with the narrative that emerged from Carl Gustav Jung's approach, one can see how easily the two can merge. Nevertheless, Scholem did not accept Jung's theory of archetypes, and was irritated about David Biale's suggestions concerning Jungian leanings in his work (Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 145–146; Scholem, *Briefe III*, 199), but see the perceptive remarks by Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 56–57 n. 21. As for Corbin, see, for example, "L' *imago templi*," 288, 290, 322: Corbin was respectful towards Jung and quotes him from time to time in his writings, but saw archetypes as metaphysical (celestial), not psychological realities.

The ambitions of Scholem and Corbin were therefore *not* limited to the straightforward agenda of “filling in the gaps” of traditional historiography, by calling attention to a series of historical currents that had been neglected by previous scholars (merkabah mysticism, medieval kabbalah, Lurianic theosophy, Suhrawardī’s *ishrāqī* school, Ibn ‘Arabi’s mysticism, Ismaelism, Sufism, and so on). They were after something bigger as well: nothing less than an answer to the question of what is true and of lasting value in Judaism and Islam, and ultimately in the scriptural religions as such. In other words, underneath the historiographical project there was a normative one, which valued “myth and mysticism” much higher than mere “legalism and doctrine.” Now, the problem is that such normative judgments may be appropriate for philosophers or theologians, but cannot be supported on the basis of historical evidence. In the sources available to the historian, one simply does not discover anything about the truths or values of Judaism or Islam: all one will ever find is a wide variety of conflicting *claims* and *opinions* about such truths and values. One may perhaps regret this fact, but it cannot be avoided: the moment a scholar leaves the position of impartiality or “methodological agnosticism” and starts favoring some of these claims and opinions as more true or valuable than others, he starts practicing what I have been referring to as “eclectic historiography” on the basis of some philosophical or theological *a priori*.

Even Scholem, the “historian’s historian,” did not entirely succeed in avoiding this temptation. As pointed out by Steven Wasserstrom, in Scholem’s writings and, much more extremely, those of Corbin, the “esoteric” dimensions were promoted from a position of marginality to one of centrality with Judaism and Islam, at the expense of the purely doctrinal, legalistic, and other “exoteric” dimensions that have in fact dominated much of the beliefs and practices of ordinary Jews and Muslims.¹⁹⁵ This emphasis is understandable as a reaction against the eclecticism of previous scholars, who had marginalized and suppressed “mysticism” as irrelevant to *their* ideas of “true” Judaism and Islam,¹⁹⁶ but this does not make it any more correct as a general statement about those religions. Presenting

¹⁹⁵ Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 52, cf. 98, 174, 180–182, 239–241 (one need not share the author’s polemical stance to appreciate the basic point); Wasserstrom, “Response,” 461–462; Algar, “Study of Islam”; cf. Masuzawa, “Reflections on the Charmed Circle,” 435–436. Provoked by Idel’s “Rabbinism versus Kabbalism,” Joseph Dan recognizes Scholem’s “strict, almost ascetic concentration on the field of Jewish mysticism” and his complete avoidance of such dimensions as Jewish philosophy, Halakhah, or Talmud, but claims that he was merely restricting himself to his own field of expertise (“Gershom Scholem,” 36 with n. 36 referring to Idel).

¹⁹⁶ For the paradigmatic case of Heinrich Graetz in the case of Judaism, see Schäfer, “Adversus cabbalam’.”

“esoteric” dimensions as the true “vital core” of a religion is possible only by adopting some kind of “essence versus manifestation” scheme, in which the great majority of believers have supposedly been oblivious to the true nature of their own religion, which is known only to a mystical elite – and some scholars studying them.¹⁹⁷ Such essentialism is a belief, not a fact of history. By adopting it nevertheless, one replaces the historian’s perspective with that of the metaphysician or theologian. The “study of esotericism” then becomes a crypto-philosophical or crypto-theological pursuit that feels free to move beyond history towards a “higher knowledge” about what, behind the surface of events or on a deeper and more “inward” level, is supposed to be “really” going on. One might be tempted to conclude that quite a lot of what has been presented as the “study of esotericism” since the 1960s has, to a greater or lesser extent, fallen prey to this religionist temptation. But it is perhaps more correct that many scholars embraced it with enthusiasm, because at some level of consciousness they shared the dream of escaping from history.

Originating in Jungian approaches and developing into new directions after World War II, Eranos may be considered the classic example of “religionism,” and a predominant model for how Western esotericism has come to be understood from the 1960s. In Chapter 2, discussing its emergence in the decades around 1700, I referred to religionism as an approach to religion that presents itself as “historical” but nevertheless denies, or strongly minimizes, the relevance of questions pertaining to historical “influences,” and hence of historical criticism, because of its central assumption that the true referent of religion does not lie in the domain of human culture and society but only in a direct, unmediated, personal experience of the divine;¹⁹⁸ and at the beginning of this section, I referred to it more briefly as “the project of exploring historical sources in search of what is eternal and universal.” But we have seen that in the same period that saw the emergence of religionism, there also emerged a counter-paradigm based upon Enlightenment assumptions, which saw Reason as the universal yardstick for evaluating the truth or seriousness of any worldview. Religious or philosophical currents that were perceived as not satisfying the criterion of rationality lost their right to be taken

¹⁹⁷ On history of religions as a disclosure of hidden meanings, see the pertinent remarks by Hugh Urban, who points out how closely Wasserstrom’s attempt to unveil the “secrets” of Eranos scholarship resembles the approach that he criticizes (“Syndrome of the Secret,” 439–440). Cf. the “gnostic study of religion” (practiced by scholars who claim to understand “secrets” about religion that escape the common practitioner) advocated by Jeffrey J. Kripal, and my critical objections in Hanegraaff, “Leaving the Garden.”

¹⁹⁸ Above, Chapter 2, pp. 126–127, 149.

seriously in intellectual discourse, and were relegated to the waste-basket category of "prejudice," "superstition," "foolishness," or "stupidity." In that process, they were tacitly divested of their traditional status as players in the field of history, and transformed into non-historical universals of human thinking and behavior: they no longer needed to be discussed as traditions ("platonism," "hermeticism," even "paganism"), but could be dismissed as synonymous with irrationality as such.

If Eranos was the main twentieth-century manifestation of religionism, the alternative Enlightenment paradigm was continued in the decades before and after World War II by a philosophical school associated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt, and known as Critical Theory or the Frankfurt School.¹⁹⁹ Grounded in Marxist assumptions and dominated by Jewish intellectuals, its moral prestige after 1945 was above any suspicion; and its understanding of totalitarianism would remain remarkably authoritative in Germany and the United States in spite of the Cold War, even after the full extent of the Stalinist terror was revealed to the Western public by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in 1973. The history of how Critical Theory has impacted the perception of "Western esotericism" among intellectuals after World War II, particularly in Germany, deserves a major study; but for our present concerns, it suffices to point out that the background assumptions of critical theorists about concepts such as "magic" or "the occult"²⁰⁰ display no theoretical originality but are derived straight from the "waste-basket" approach of the Enlightenment as analyzed in the previous chapter. The element of innovation in Critical Theory was that it posited a straight connection between such "irrationalism" and fascism, thereby suggesting that the entire field of myth, symbolism, mysticism, gnosis, or esotericism was, by definition, tainted with dangerous political and immoral implications. Georg Lukács developed the basic argument about "irrationalism" and fascism in his classic study *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, based upon the Marxist adaptation of Hegelian belief in an inseparable connection between Reason and historical progress.²⁰¹ From this perspective there could be no such thing as a "history of esotericism" in any strict sense, for irrationalism has no autonomous existence by definition: as Lukács put it, it can never be more

¹⁹⁹ Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*; Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*; Bottomore, *Frankfurt School and its Critics*.

²⁰⁰ For example, Adorno, "Theses Against Occultism"; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

²⁰¹ Lukács, *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, 111. For the definition of "irrationalism" as the attempt to bridge the distance between thinking and reality by appealing to "higher knowledge," see *ibid.*, 88–89, 93.

than a “form of reaction (reaction here in the double meaning of secondary and regressive) to the dialectical development of human thought.”²⁰² In other words, it lacks independent validity and is inextricably linked to “reactionary” politics. In the wake of Lukács, Horkheimer, and Adorno, these basic assumptions became a dominant factor in the thinking of left-leaning intellectuals and academics after World War II; and particularly in Germany, the result was a virtual taboo on the study of anything related to esotericism or the occult, except of course from a perspective of *Ideologiekritik*. Any wish to do research in such domains from a strictly historical perspective became suspicious by definition, as it seemed to reflect an unhealthy fascination with the perennial enemy of reason and progress, and could always be interpreted as a front for covert apologeticism on behalf of dangerous anti-democratic ideas. Most of the critical attacks on Eranos by academics have been inspired, directly or indirectly, by these assumptions typical of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School;²⁰³ and many scholars of Western esotericism have, at some point in their career, been forced to defend themselves against the suspicion of holding far-right sympathies.²⁰⁴

Although the religionist and Enlightenment paradigms are one another’s counterpart, we have seen that they have more in common than one might think. Already in their original manifestations around 1700, they were based upon ideological axioms rather than empirical research, and as a result they were seriously deficient as methodological frameworks for the study of history. The anti-apologetic alternative to both, which combined a methodology of historical criticism with a theoretical focus on the “Hellenization of Christianity,” could have developed into a proper academic study of Western esotericism; but its potential never came to fruition because the entire domain was dropped from the history of philosophy after Brucker, no other discipline took it up, and the Enlightenment paradigm came to dominate how it was perceived by intellectuals and academics. The result was a sharp decline of serious scholarship in the field, as we have seen,

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 92–93. Cf. James Webb’s notion of occultism as a “flight from reason” (*Occult Establishment*, 8 and *passim*).

²⁰³ Evident examples are Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*; Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies*; McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*. In my opinion, the academic debate about these influential studies will remain unsatisfactory unless their underlying theoretical and methodological assumptions are made into an object of critical analysis. For a first step in that direction, see Fisher, “Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship.”

²⁰⁴ See, for example, Laurant, “*Politica Hermetica*.” Obviously I do not mean to suggest that such suggestions are never correct, although they often are. My point is that they tend to be based on an ideology that makes study of Western esotericism “tainted” by default, so that scholars can be attacked for fascist tendencies even in the absence of any demonstrable evidence.

finally resulting in the Waste Land of the nineteenth century. Eranos was the first major reaction to this state of affairs, but turned into the vanguard of a new form of religionism that studied history in the hope of finding ways to transcend it. Critical Theory, for its part, perpetuated the unhistorical ideology of the alternative Enlightenment paradigm, thereby nipping historical research in the bud and declaring it politically suspect by definition. Caught in the middle between religionist and rationalist ideologies, the historiographical tradition in this field was therefore abandoned for two centuries, resulting in alarming levels of ignorance among intellectuals and academics. But fortunately, it had not vanished for good. In the 1960s the core approach of the anti-apologetic tradition began to return to the academy at last, under the flag of "the Hermetic Tradition."

THE RETURN OF THE HISTORIANS:
FROM PEUCKERT AND THORNDIKE TO FRANCES YATES

The preceding discussions might almost make one forget that specialized historians working in specific fields were continuing quietly to go about their core business of exploring the sources of the past, usually without much concern for such things as the "crisis of the modern world," existential anxieties about being imprisoned in time, or crypto-metaphysical projects of transcending history in view of some kind of salvational gnosis. Since the final decades of the nineteenth century, classicists and philologists began the work of recovering the manuscript sources of ancient hermetism, magic, astrology, and alchemy;²⁰⁵ and on those foundations, serious historical research in these domains began to flourish around the turn of the century, with scholars such as Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, Franz Boll, Richard Reitzenstein, Wilhelm Bousset, Wilhelm and Josef Kroll, Walter Scott, and many others: a tradition that culminated finally in classics such as, notably, André-Jean Festugière's monumental four-volume study *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (1944–1954). However, research of a similar kind focused on the period *after* antiquity developed only piecemeal and gradually; and with the notable exception of historically corrupt overviews for the general market written by esoteric or occultist authors, mostly of French provenance,²⁰⁶ comprehensive or synthetic works remained rare.

²⁰⁵ For example, Berthelot and Ruelle, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* (1887–1888); the multi-volume "Codex Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum" (from 1898 on); Preisendanz, *Papyri graecae magicae* (1928); Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum* (1946, 1954).

²⁰⁶ See, for example, Bosc, *La doctrine ésotérique à travers les âges* (1899); Jollivet-Castelot, Ferniot, and Redonnel, *Les sciences maudites* (1900); Durville, *La science secrète* (1923); Hall, *Secret Teachings*