

## Historical Approaches to Contemporary Esotericism

That contemporary esotericism can be approached from a historical perspective might seem counter-intuitive at first sight. After all, historical research is concerned not with the present but with the past; and although the past theoretically includes even what happened just a few seconds ago, we usually think of history as concerned with human actions and events that are a bit more distant in time and have reached a certain degree of completion. An essential point about historiography is that we do not have immediate access to historical actors while they are still in the midst of doing whatever they are doing (as in the case of anthropological methods such as ethnography and participant research) but must rely on the *traces* that their activities have left for us to decipher. We usually refer to those traces as primary sources – for instance written documents (published or unpublished, online or offline, including journals or zines, personal letters, diaries, emails, discussion forums, rituals scripts, as well as minutes, bylaws, or membership lists in the case of esoteric organisations, and so on), but also images or other material artefacts that have survived the passing of time, including sound recordings or filmed footage. Moreover, as long as those human actors are still alive and available for being interviewed, historians may gain access to the traces left in their memories about what they did in the past or what happened to them – in such cases, the primary sources of historical information consist of the actors themselves.

### *Interpreting Sources*

It is therefore evident that much of what we know about contemporary esotericism does in fact rely on historical research of some kind. Historians of contemporary esotericism are concerned with studying their sources so as to decipher the traces that have been left by past events *insofar as* these are judged to be relevant or illuminating with respect to these historians' central concern with "esotericism". This means that all historians in this domain necessarily approach their sources in terms of certain already-existing questions and broader theoretical perspectives or assumptions about what

they think "esotericism" is all about. To give an example, Genesis P-Orridge (born as Neil Andrew Megson, 1950-2020) was a central figure in the occultist fellowship *Thee Temple ov Psychic Youth* and the author of a contemporary esoteric classic, *Thee Psychick Bible* (P-Orridge n.d.). Historians of contemporary esotericism will naturally focus most of their attention on these dimensions of P-Orridge's work, whereas historians of the musical underground might want to call attention rather to the artist's involvement in the experimental bands Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV, historians of the transgender movement are bound to highlight the "pandrogy" project in which Genesis P-Orridge and Jacqueline Breyer sought to merge their identities as "Genesis Breyer P-Orridge", and so on. In terms of basic textual hermeneutics, the point of this example is that any particular historian's personal and professional *research horizon* (Gadamer 1986) determines what will stand out as important and what will be allowed to recede into the background or remain on the margins of attention.

However, what defines historical research is the attempt to *reconstruct* past events as completely and as adequately as possible, in order to do justice to the full complexity of "what actually happened". Unavoidably, this results in a certain degree of tension between any particular historian's focus of interest (technically known as the patterns of "prejudice" or "prior opinion" that determine her mental horizon) and the enormous, potentially unlimited amounts of information that are there to be interpreted in the primary sources. If we stick to our example, it will actually not do for a historian of contemporary esotericism to select from P-Orridge's oeuvre just those elements that seem to fit some theoretical concept of what "esotericism" is all about while disregarding the rest – as if those musical or gender dimension are irrelevant. Rather, the historian's ideal is to include as many dimensions as possible, so that whatever is considered "esoteric" will not be treated as an isolated phenomenon but will be deeply *contextualised* in terms of all the artist's activities – which are themselves necessarily part of a potentially limitless number of even more general historical contexts, for which further primary sources are available (for instance, the contexts of punk and industrial music, psychedelics, the sexual revolution, developing theories of gender, performance art, anarchist politics, and so on and so forth).

The dialectical tension between these two dimensions of historiography (the historian's necessarily limited horizon and the potentially limitless amounts of source information) is negotiated in terms of the famous "hermeneutical circle" and best

understood along the model of a dialogue in which – contrary to outdated concepts of positivist historiography – both discussion partners have agency (Gadamer 1986). Thus any historian of contemporary esotericism who decides to study *The Temple of Psychick Youth* will necessarily do so in terms of a horizon defined by certain prior theoretical models or assumptions, for instance about what is meant and implied by post/modern “occulture” (a term that was actually coined by P-Orridge); but during the process of reading and analysing *The Psychick Bible* in depth, the historian is bound to encounter *new* information that may actively challenge her initial ideas of what “occulture” was supposed to be all about. The result is that her research horizon will begin to expand and change, either radically or more subtly, under the impact of deeper patterns of nuance and complexity that are now being discovered in the text. But because that horizon determines the very range of her possible perceptions and interpretations in the first place, the effect is that once again, new and previously unnoticed patterns of meaning and significance will start to come into focus. Those, too, are bound to change and expand the historian’s horizon once again, allowing her to see and pay attention to yet further dimensions and avenues for exploration that had initially escaped her, and so on *ad infinitum*. Historical research can therefore be understood as an ongoing and open-ended dialogue between the historian and her sources, resulting in progressively deeper levels of understanding but never in any final, entirely stable and definitive conclusion. Human knowledge understood as *process* (Josephson Storms 2021, 85-104) rather than as a static acquisition is what historicity is all about.

That hermeneutic circularity is basic to the practice of historical research has serious implications for the study of contemporary esotericism. Most importantly, it means that theoretical concepts such as “esotericism” can never be more than provisory instruments for detecting patterns of meaning and significance in the boundless and infinitely complicated flux of historical events, and therefore need to remain flexible and open-ended. “Esotericism” is neither just there to be discovered in the historical sources, nor does a commitment to historical method allow us to impose it arbitrarily on the sources by some kind of scholarly *fiat*. Rather, theoretical concepts such as “esotericism” are themselves deeply ambiguous, fluid, negotiable, continuously changing, and therefore inherently unstable *historical* phenomena. They serve the important, indeed necessary function of mediating between the imaginal worlds created

by historical writing and the source materials that historians are writing about (Hanegraaff 2022). The implications of this point are particularly crucial in the study of *contemporary* esotericism, where theoretical concepts based on classic "model examples" or historical prototypes are going through processes of change and transformation in the very present and keep moving into new directions that are as yet unknown. What makes contemporary esotericism unique is precisely its historical location at the moving interface between what is known or knowable at least to some extent (the past), and what is unknown (the future).

The result is a conceptual paradox. Since historicity means ongoing change and transformation, sooner or later the "esotericisms" of the future will become so different from the "esotericisms" of the past that the very category will need to be either abandoned or re-defined in more or less radical new ways. Inevitably, such conceptual transformations will affect not only the study of contemporary esotericism but also future ways of conceptualising the esotericism(s) of the past to which it is being compared. For instance, when Antoine Faivre presented his famous definition of esotericism in 1992, this reflected the influence of certain contemporary types of Christian esotericism in which he himself was involved, and this led him to privilege its historical ancestors as model examples or prototypes of what "esotericism" was all about (Hanegraaff 2012, 334-355). Some later scholars felt that they encountered "esotericism" primarily in British or American popular culture, resulting in entirely different historicisations: for instance, Christopher Partridge privileges the history of occulture as a perfectly ordinary phenomenon traditionally neglected by religious or academic elites (Partridge 2013), while Jeffrey J. Kripal focuses his attention on historical evidence for paranormal "superpowers" and anomalous phenomena as particularly good examples of what "esotericism" is all about (Kripal 2011). As society keeps changing and new scholars appear on the scene, with new preoccupations proper to their own time and culture, they too will be making choices about what they find relevant and important in relation to past events. As a result, the historiography of "esotericism" *in general*, or any future equivalent of that term, will always keep evolving along with its historians' contemporary horizons.

### *Dimensions of Historical Consciousness*

Every type of scholarly or scientific endeavour, without exception, results in a specific research horizon that determines both the *limits* of what is perceived to be relevant and the *potential* for attaining new knowledge. Historical approaches have a specificity all of their own, with peculiar implications when they are applied to phenomena that (provisory at least, based on historical models or prototypes) are perceived or categorised as "esoteric" or as pertaining to "esotericism". Without claiming to be exhaustive, we might distinguish between at least seven different dimensions that define a typical historian's perspective in studying esotericism: temporality, historicity, contingency, empiricism, hermeneutics, relativism, and (methodological) agnosticism.

*Temporality* means that historical approaches insist on the primacy of time. In studying and interpreting their materials, historians are not searching for "eternal truths" that remain valid no matter what happens. For instance, that a triangle's angles always add up to 180 degrees is necessarily true, regardless of the historical moment. Interestingly, many historical traditions that we categorise as relevant to "esotericism" are ultimately grounded in speculative systems that seek to transcend temporality and prioritise precisely such eternal truths conveyed by mathematics – think for example of Pythagorean "numbers" or Plato's eternal "forms" or "ideas". It is typical of historical approaches that such esoteric systems and theories are studied not as eternal verities but as changing human opinions *about* such verities. Historians are interested in how Pythagoras, Plato, and their many followers (up to and including contemporary "esoteric" neo-pythagoreans or neo-platonists) disagree with one another – for the truth is that, in spite of their focus on atemporal verities, they have kept developing new theories and systems over time and will undoubtedly keep doing so in the future. Historians are interested precisely in these dynamic processes of change and creative (re)invention.

*Historicity* is closely aligned with temporality but by no means identical with it. The distinction between eternal truths and temporality – "Being and Becoming" – pertains to the whole of reality, whether or not it includes human beings (before *homo sapiens* appeared on the scene, triangles already added up to 180 degrees and the universe was going through transformations in time). Historicity has to do specifically with the active agency of human beings in time – it is concerned not just with temporal succession as such, but with the impact of human beings on the world and on each other. Only humans "make history". In the context of esotericism, the most radical

counterpart of historicity is known as "perennialism", the belief in perennial spiritual truths. Historicity as a basic principle of historical research implies that esoteric traditions, including all forms of perennialism, are approached strictly as human creations. Advocates of perennialism, by sharp contrast, are bound to attribute the very existence of ("true") esoteric tradition *not* to humans but to superior spiritual realities, forces, or agents that are believed to be present behind the scenes as the real active powers at work in history. It is therefore clear that whereas historians cannot work on perennialist foundations, what defines perennialists is that they reject the very principle of historicity.

*Contingency* means that many things happen in history that could not possibly have been predicted or foreseen. In a radical interpretation, this may lead to the suggestion that history as a whole consists of nothing but "one damned thing after another" (according to a famous formulation by Arnold J. Toynbee) – anything may happen anytime or anywhere, for better or worse, because there is no providential plan, deeper structure, or inherent dynamics that pushes or pulls history into any particular direction. Hence there is no deeper meaning or inherent wisdom to be found in the historical process. The idea that history is moving nowhere in particular has profoundly nihilistic implications and may result in existential despair about "the terror of history" (Mircea Eliade). While traditional forms of esotericism often implied some form of divine providence, many modern and contemporary esoteric traditions respond to the spectre of radical contingency in terms of grand narratives of spiritual evolution. Some classic examples are the influence on esotericism of Hegel's theory of world history as a dialectical process moving slowly but inexorably forward and upward, Blavatsky's theory of seven universal cycles of evolution that move in an ultimately positive upward spiral, New Age beliefs about astrological "great years" leading up to the Aquarian Age, or Ken Wilber's neo-hegelian theory of transpersonal psychology and "integral" spirituality. Again, historians cannot accept such esoteric theories as normative or axiomatic; they are bound to approach them as the contingent inventions of particular thinkers in a particular historical context.

*Empiricism* is a fundamental principle of historical method, in the sense that study of primary sources is foundational in both a practical and a theoretical sense. In terms of practice, all historical research begins with meticulous study of primary sources as empirical evidence – in simple terms, the historian must enter the archives

(whether physical or virtual) and start reading. Of course, this does not mean that she approaches her sources without a prior horizon of her own – historians always have their reasons for wishing to explore this or that particular archive, they harbour expectations of what might be found, and have questions that they wish to answer. Still, once the historian has entered the archives, the actual work of research begins with listening as closely as possible to whatever may be there to be discovered. In a theoretical sense, historical research is empirical insofar as it is supposed to proceed not top-down but bottom-up, by “following the sources” rather than making them follow the historian. The primal sin of historiography (frequent as it may be in practice) consists of “bending” or otherwise manipulating the evidence so as to make it say what the historian would like it to say while ignoring information that does not fit her theoretical agendas. In the study of esotericism specifically, empiricism seems to have a double face. On the one hand, esotericists often suspect or accuse historians of projecting their own “etic” scholarly perspectives on the data instead of taking the “emic” evidence seriously. But on the other hand, when historians *do* actually consider all the data as objectively as possible, this often results in rather complicated accounts that disturb the ideal story that esotericists would like the historian to tell about themselves and their traditions. Either way, empiricism seldom sits easily with esoteric insider agendas.

*Hermeneutics* may refer to the art of interpreting sources and to the theory of how we manage to do it. Most relevant here is that in terms of a classical distinction, it is centrally concerned with *understanding* historical sources and materials in all their complexity rather than with *explaining* them in terms of underlying mechanisms (whether the humanities and the social sciences as a whole could or should be defined in terms of such a distinction is a separate issue that does not need to concern us here). Again, this emphasis is closely connected with the typical historian’s focus on contingency – hence on uniqueness, creativity, and novelty – more than on universal laws, structures, patterns, or dynamics that operate regardless of specific historical context. In the study of esotericism as in other fields, it is important to distinguish between two different types of hermeneutics. A hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1965) seeks to *unmask* surface appearances so as to reveal “what is really going on,” for instance power dynamics related to gender, class, or race (Felski, 14-51). By contrast, a more charitable hermeneutics of trust or generosity seeks to *unveil* deeper meanings

and levels of significance in textual and other sources (Hanegraaff 2022, ch. 10). These approaches should not be seen as competing with one another, but as complementary, since both are essential to the practice of history. It is worth noting that the results of profound hermeneutic analysis sometimes come as a surprise even for the authors themselves: hermeneutics do not necessarily explicate conscious authorial intention, but are concerned rather with exploring the full range of meanings that sources may have *as* sources – including dimensions of which the authors themselves were unaware. Finally, it should be noted that hermeneutics is not just important in studying esotericism historically, for its generous and suspicious varieties are both of key importance also to how much of esotericism actually works. For instance, kabbalah is known for its concern with exploring the potentially infinite levels of meaning that are believed to be present in sacred scripture, whereas esoteric conspiracism seeks to expose “what is really going on” behind the scenes of history.

*Relativism* is an inevitable corollary of contingency and empiricism. A historian’s concern is not with what should have happened according to some predictive theory or normative perspective, but with what actually happened. Relativism in historiography tends to result in merely *descriptivist* approaches that have no other ambition than just “presenting the facts”. In the study of esotericism, such descriptivism can often be a healthy antidote against dogmatic assertions about esoteric truths. At the same time, it is notable that esoterically-inflected scholars often resort to it as an effective strategy for avoiding direct confrontation with secular perspectives: in such cases, relativist historiography leaves it up to readers to interpret “the data” according to their own preferred perspectives, be they esoteric or non-esoteric.

*Methodological agnosticism* means that historians *qua* historians cannot make statements either way about the ultimate truth or falsity of various spiritual or metaphysical claims that are put forward by esoteric practitioners or believers. They can *describe* such claims as precisely as possible, while seeking to *interpret* or understand them as complex historical phenomena; but any attempt to move beyond hermeneutics towards *explanatory* perspectives requires a metaphysics of some kind that defines the principles of “legitimate” explanation in terms of axiomatic assumptions about the true nature of reality. In this regard, it does not matter whether the metaphysics is of a naturalist type congenial to modern science or of a super-naturalist or spiritual type congenial to religious or esoteric beliefs. A radical stance of



methodological agnosticism must consider all metaphysical assumptions – even those that are at the basis of historicity and temporality – strictly as provisory human *opinions* about the ultimate nature of reality, and cannot act as arbiter in deciding which one is correct. It could be argued, and indeed has been argued, that this principle places the practice of history beyond the scope of “science” in a strict sense while remaining compatible with wider definitions of *Wissenschaft* or “scholarly research.”

### *The Historical Imagination*

As famously explained by Hayden White, “the differences between a history and a fictional account of reality are matters of degree rather than of kind” (White 2014, xiii). This does not mean that historiography is just fiction, but that any historical account is necessarily situated somewhere in between the ideal poles of factuality and non-factuality. What defines historical writing here is the attempt, ambition, or requirement to move towards an ideal of absolute referentiality or accuracy, unattainable as it may be in practice. But historical writing is also an attempt at communication, which means that the historian must tell a *story* about those facts, which her readers will understand and which will appeal to them. This requirement draws the historian away from factuality, not towards non-factuality but towards *poeticity*, defined as any patterns or procedures that are needed for telling a “good story” about the past – such as a sense of purpose and direction, a plot structure, or something with which the reader can personally identify (Hanegraaff 2017). Because such patterns of poeticity make a story memorable, they result in forms of *mnemohistory*: stories that are remembered as true even if they happen to be factually incorrect. The historian’s story must be experienced as relevant to wider concerns, by making a contribution of some kind to the accumulated store of cultural narratives on which scholars and their audiences rely for making sense of the human life-world. In the study of contemporary esotericism, too, historical accounts must somehow find a balance in the dialectical tension between optimal factuality and optimal poeticity, while being socially or intellectually relevant as well.

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