

ALCHEMY OF THE WORD

To understand the origins of Western esotericism in all its various guises, we must begin in antiquity, specifically at the beginning of Christianity. Although many aspects of what actually happened during this time may always be shrouded or lost, still we can trace through this era the origin of the primary elements or currents in Western esotericism. Here, we are not so concerned with surveying the entirety of this period—a monumental task best left to others—but with the defining themes that will emerge again and again in later times. And to find these themes, we will look at representative or synecdochic writings, beginning with the ambience for and emergence of the Christian Bible and affiliated works.

When we look at the emergence of Christianity from the welter of religious traditions at the time, one characteristic appears prevalent above all others: the emphasis upon the written word. From relatively early on, Christianity was centered around written accounts that took two primary forms. One is of course what we find in the canonical versions of the Bible, central to which are the gospel accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This, bolstered to some extent by apocrypha, remains central to what may be called conventional or exoteric Christianity—that is, Christianity based on faith or belief in a historical Christ, of whose life we know through the historical documentation of the gospels. The other kind of writing, however, is profoundly different, and of this there are only two examples in the canonical Bible: some elements of the Book of John, and, needless to say, the Book of Revelation.

Here we have the fundamental division that has lasted throughout the subsequent history of Western esotericism: on the one hand, what we may call a

historicist emphasis, and on the other, an ahistorical, revelatory emphasis. When we consider the emergence of historicist Christianity in light of world religious traditions, we can see how anomalous it is, for on a worldwide scale ahistorical religious traditions predominate. Consider, for instance, the development of Buddhism, which resembles Gnosticism far more than historicist Christianity: here, as throughout world religious traditions, individual spiritual revelation is incalculably more important than simple belief in a historical series of events. The Johannine elements in Christianity owe a great deal to the various movements collectively known as Gnosticism in antiquity, and represent a central reference point for the subsequent reemergence of esotericism time and again.

This division between exoteric and esoteric can, of course, be characterized according to people's approach to language. Historicist Christianity has always taken a literal interpretation of the Bible, and insisted on an objectified historical Christ in whom one must have faith in order to be saved. Such an approach to language is particularly common in modern times, where the idea that language might convey multiple layers of meaning has been almost completely jettisoned in favor of objectified technical language, be it scientific, legal, or technological. The gnostics, on the other hand, by and large eschewed literalist views of language in favor of more complicated, multilayered approaches. Whereas the historicist Christians established a fixed canon of Biblical books that ended with the Revelation to John, gnostic Christians continued to generate revelatory scriptural works because in their view, the Word was not literal but spiritual, and hence revelation could take place today just as in antiquity. What mattered to them was inward or esoteric understanding, not only outward fidelity to fixed written words from the past.

Perhaps most interesting about this dichotomy is how it centers around approaches to written language, in this respect being peculiar to Christianity. By contrast, the mystery religions of the time forbade writing about the mysteries: indeed, the very word *mystery* has the root meaning "silence." And written accounts of the mystery traditions are very rare, so rare—in fact, that one can easily list them, the most moving and extensive undoubtedly being that in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Plato alluded to this question in *Phaedrus*, expressing a view characteristic of the mysteries more generally when he had Socrates say that writing is problematic at best because the written word cannot explain itself and is easily subject to misinterpretation. In Christianity, both esoteric and exoteric tendencies center on how to interpret written language: should it be multilayered or monotonous; should it be ahistorical, symbolic, and mythic, or historical, literal, and anti-mythic? This was the battle, and indeed, many modern people unwittingly inherit these tendencies still.

Of course, to make this dichotomy so clear-cut is to distort what was and remains a spectrum. Some of the Church Fathers were in fact clearly esotericists and gnostics—the most prominent being Origen and Clement of Alexandria,

who insisted that there was an orthodox gnosis and that it is the “crown of faith.” There have been many gnostics since who have also insisted that they remain orthodox, however much their literalist opponents think differently. Likewise, there were some gnostics who were not far from historicist Christianity, and whose primary emphasis was on morality, asceticism, and spiritual illumination. Who was rejected as heretical, and who else was accepted as orthodox, often seems more like an accident of history than an inevitability.

But there remains a spectrum in antiquity nonetheless, and it is the esoteric side of it that interests us here, for in it we find the predecessors of all the later Western esoteric traditions. It is particularly useful to consider Gnostic spiritual traditions in light of what we have said regarding language. For instance, some Gnostic groups laid great emphasis on the inner meanings of language, and were reputed to use certain letters as intonations similar to *mantras* in Hinduism and Buddhism. Their repetition and intonation of certain letter combinations were ridiculed by literally minded Christians, but make a great deal more sense when one considers that language in this context is not merely a matter of transferring data, but of communication, and communion, that is, of communing with the power that the letters correspond to. And we in fact find such strings of apparently nonsensical letters, chiefly vowels, in some of the Gnostic treatises of the Nag Hammadi library.

This use of language is fundamentally different from what we ordinarily expect: whereas usual communication is horizontal, here it is vertical, a means not for one equal to convey information to another, but for a person to experience an organizing principle of creation itself. We may recall the first line of the Book of John: “In the beginning was the Word,” or “In the beginning was the Logos.” “Logos” here refers to that which precedes and transcends manifestation, the seeds of all things, corresponding in some respects to the Platonic archetypes. These vibratory seeds human beings may contact or activate through spiritual practice and in this way be in touch with the powers that inform creation itself; but such an approach is not for everyone. In general, it is reserved for those who are capable of it, who are worthy of it, and who will not use its power for selfish purposes.

We find a similar approach to language visible in Jewish esotericism in the doctrine of the *Shemhamphorash*, or sacred Names of God: by vibrating the names of God in the permutations of the sacred letters and by knowing their proper, true pronunciation, one is in touch with inconceivable power. Such doctrines of the hidden names of God, in turn allied with similar numerical-alphabetical mysticism involving the angels, are prevalent in Jewish esotericism during precisely the same time that Christian Gnosticism was flourishing, and in fact close scrutiny of this time suggests that Jewish and Christian esotericisms are so intermingled as to be virtually inseparable. Scholem remarks that Merkabah mysticism of the third and fourth centuries drew upon Greek language, just

as Greek Christian mysticism drew upon Hebrew or Aramaic terms.¹ And indeed there is an ancient tradition that the Torah contains so much power in its letters that it could destroy the world, so the letters were altered; but if the letters were properly restored, inconceivable power would be set loose.

All of this is to suggest that there was in antiquity in Jewish and Christian esoteric circles a very widespread gnosis of language which was grounded in writing, and to which we may refer as a gnosis of the word, which undoubtedly drew upon and incorporated elements of the Greek mystery traditions even as they differed from the Greeks in their emphasis upon writing down the mysteries and then writing down commentaries upon the previous writings. This gnosis of the word represents a 'fixing' of the mysteries, as does the creation of images, and its aim is twofold at least: microcosmically, its purpose is to restore the individual to a paradisaal or transcendent state; and macrocosmically, it is to restore the cosmos itself to its paradisaal condition. The letters, as principles of creation itself, are a means to creation's redemption; and in this regard man may be said to complete the work of God by being co-creator or co-redemptor.

Letters and numbers, then, are means in this process of individual and cosmic redemption—and so too are images. Both Jewish and Christian gnostic esoteric groups tended to think and express themselves mythologically, through images, and so we find numerous images from antiquity like lion-headed serpents, basilisks, and so forth. Such images are often found on amulets or talismans and are generally regarded as being 'magical' elements in Gnosticism. But given the gnosis of the word that we have been discussing, we can see how these images fit rather well into the tradition: they represent again a means of invoking and 'fixing' the underlying powers or principles of creation itself; such images represent divine aspects, and in fact are by no means absent from the larger Christian tradition. We may remember the four animals that symbolize the four Gospels, and so forth, all of which is entirely accepted within the orthodox tradition; and we may recall that Dionysius the Areopagite devoted some effort to discussing how the divine may best be symbolized by unexpected and even grotesque images that keep us from mistaking a beautiful image for the thing itself.²

Both the gnosis of the word and the gnosis of the image are extensions of the monotheism of the book, and contain within them the seeds of the perennial struggle in all three forms of monotheism between those who take the word literally and those who advocate gnosis. Both word and image reveal and 'fix' the divine, thereby making this conflict inevitable. But monotheism is a rubric under which all manner of possibilities exist; and even if monotheism often turns toward a fundamentalist literalism, one finds that from the very beginning of our era the very same elements conduce also to a wide spectrum of gnosés and hence to angelic polytheism and to nontheistic gnosis in which the very concept of God is transcended, paradoxically conveyed often through

the permutations of word, letter, number, and image—the very means by which concepts are fixed to begin with!

There are two more primary currents that fed into the Western esoteric traditions: Platonism and Hermetism. We have already alluded to Plato's expressed distrust of writing, particularly in the conveying of spiritual truth, and to his indebtedness to the mystery traditions. In at least some respects, Plato's writing represents a setting down or fixing, in symbols and myths, of the mysteries tradition, and this is especially evident in *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, but also in the *Republic* in his Myth of Er the Pamphylian, who died and came back to life in order to tell people what happens after death. The relation of such a tale to the mysteries, which were also about death and resurrection, is self-evident; but it also represents Plato's own version of the mysteries. One has the complex body of multiple traditions known as the mysteries, and one has an individual author drawing upon this in creative ways.

We find a very similar approach to spiritual tradition in the body of writings known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which date to roughly the same time that Gnosticism was flourishing, in the first centuries of this era. The *Hermetica* themselves refer to Egyptian tradition, and probably bear a relation to it similar to that between Plato and the mysteries. There is no one author of the *Hermetica*; they represent a collection of treatises that bear in common a set of themes and teachings sharing many similarities with gnosticism. But the *Hermetica* are not Christian or Jewish, nor for that matter are they exclusively Platonic, but share elements in common with all three, while belonging to none (though they remain closest to Platonism). And they represent the writing down of an oral tradition, presented in the form of dialogues.

The most famous of the Hermetic dialogues is the *Poimandres*, which begins with the narrator falling into "a sleep," but not like an ordinary sleep, for the bodily senses fall away and he encounters a vast and magnificent being that proceeds to unveil to him the mysteries of existence. "I know what you wish," the being, *Poimandres*, tells him, "for I am with you everywhere." From the very beginning, Hermetism is about direct individual spiritual revelations. These revelations at points have much in common with Christianity, as when the narrator sees a boundless and joyous light, out of which emerges a "holy Word," the "voice of the Light." And the revelations have much in common with Gnosticism, as when the path of one who died is traced through the spheres of the planets until the "eighth," when he reaches rest and joy (I.25). This corresponds closely with some Gnostic and Mandaean texts which emphasize reaching the "eighth sphere," or *ogdoad*—going beyond the cosmos into transcendence.

What marks the *Hermetica* most clearly despite the treatises' diversity is their intimacy: the revelations are always one to one. As Hermes himself says in one of the dialogues, "there is communion between soul and soul." (X.22b)

There is an initiator or revealer, and there is a witness to the revelation. Such a relationship goes beyond simply that of participants in a dialogue like Plato's; here the dialogues often take place in an interworld of revelation, and are between one who embodies knowledge and one who seeks to embody it. It is true that the language is sometimes Platonic, but this revelatory quality differs markedly from what we see in Plato and bears far more in common with what we find in some Gnostic treatises of revelation.

It is, then, no accident that so many of the Western esoteric traditions link themselves to the *Hermetica*. For from what we have said, it is clear that the Hermetic treatises occupy a peculiar place, not quite belonging to the sphere of religion, yet not strictly philosophical either. Occupying an intermediate space between religion and philosophy, and depicting direct spiritual illumination of the initiate, Hermetism reveals the ground occupied by Western esoteric traditions throughout the past several thousand years, precariously balanced on the periphery of religious traditions, willing to draw upon one or sometimes any of them, but insisting above all on one's own direct spiritual understanding or gnosis. Like Hermes himself, Hermetism refuses to be pinned down or definitively discussed; always there is a fluid, mercurial quality to it, as there was to many of the movements of antiquity.

Indeed, the more one studies the emergence of esotericism in the early centuries of this era, the more one recognizes the fluidity of the various traditions' boundaries. There are five primary currents in antiquity that feed into what we may call the Western esoteric traditions: Jewish esotericism, Christian esotericism, the mystery traditions, Platonism, and Hermetism. But these currents themselves are not discrete from one another; they certainly intermingled, and together provided a common ambience out of which emerged a panoply of sects, traditions, and writings that reveal a great many similarities. The most important of these is the insistence upon gnosis, or direct knowledge of the divine, and it is this that represents the red thread that will guide us through the labyrinths of the centuries.

THE FIELD OF THE IMAGINATION

It is commonplace today to think of the imagination as a means of escapism—the word is roughly equivalent to *daydreaming* or to *fantasy*, and is generally associated with the more or less random play of images. However, when we survey the Western esoteric traditions, what we find is something quite different, which Henry Corbin called the “active imagination.” “Active imagination” refers to the meeting of an individual and transcendent beings on an intermediate field that belongs completely neither to the transcendent nor to the mundane world. But such a term suggests that imagination is otherwise passive, and

I do not believe this to be true. Rather, I believe that literature, mythology, and visionary experience all emerge on a spectrum in the field of imagination.

But in order to understand the nature of this field of imagination, we will begin by looking at visionary experiences during the first few centuries of the present era, beginning with the Revelation to John. It is true that the Book of Revelation recounts a visionary experience of John while he was exiled on the island of Patmos, off the Greek coast. However, the Revelation definitely has a literary form as well. It begins with some introductory remarks and salutations to the seven churches, and introduces the experience with virtually no biography whatever, only John's remark that he heard a great voice, turned, and the auditory part of the vision began. Thereafter came a series of specific messages to the individual churches, and only then, in the fourth chapter, came the following: "After this I looked, and behold, a door was opened in heaven; and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me . . . And immediately I was in the spirit, and behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne." These remarks begin the actual visionary sequence.

The visionary sequence in the Book of Revelation is, of course, quite well known, and there is relatively little point here in elaborating its intricate numerical and visual symbolism, but it is worthwhile to remark on several aspects of it in relation to Western esotericism more generally. Above all, there is the fact that it is a direct individual revelation: John sees and hears Christ himself; he sees the twenty-four elders, and numerous striking images including the beasts with eyes before and behind them; *and he interacts with them*. His is not a passive vision in which events only happen before him: in the fifth chapter, when he weeps, an elder tells him to weep not; and in the tenth chapter, he is told to eat, and does eat, a little book sweet as honey. Then, when he eats the book, an angel gives him a rod by which he is to measure the temple of God and those that worship therein, after which come the most prophetic and well known parts of the revelation.

The revelation of John takes place in an interworld, a mesocosm, or field of the imagination, where John meets, questions, and is questioned by the angels or divine powers, and where the earthly past, present, and future are visible, but take place in their own time. At one point, John remarks that there was silence in heaven for about half an hour (8:1), apparently visionary time. There are, in other words, different kinds of time simultaneously here: there is the duration of the vision, and there is historical time spread out and glimpsed in symbols. Yet interestingly, there is no conclusion to the visionary sequence: we are never told that John returned to ordinary consciousness. Although the vision has a beginning, in this respect it does not appear to have an end: it is as though, once introduced to this sequence, John does not entirely return from it except to say "I, John, saw and heard these things;" the book concludes with the admonitions of Christ himself.

In addition to its being a direct spiritual experience, several other elements of the Book of Revelation have remained particularly important in subsequent

Western esotericism. One, of course, is the prophetic element: more than one group has identified itself with the “woman in the wilderness” in the twelfth chapter; and more than one group has seen itself as living during the end times. Another such element is the number and letter symbolism, which has inspired countless commentaries or explanations. Christ’s repeated assertion that “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” as well as the repetition of geometric and numerical symbolism such as the sevens, twelves, and one hundred forty-fours, all remind us of the prior traditions, found in Judaism, Christian Gnosticism, and Hermetism, of letters and numbers revealing the secret powers of the divine. Taken together, these elements lend themselves very much to an esoteric interpretation: the symbols and numbers represent a secret knowledge known by the few symbolically designated as the “woman in the wilderness,” during these the end times.

But for our purposes, the most symbolically resonant image of all is that of the book. In the tenth chapter, we will recall, John is given a little book to eat, which he does, and finds it bitter in his belly, but sweet as honey on his lips. John eats the little book: it becomes part of him, symbolizing his union with the esoteric center of spiritual life. The entire revelation is an unveiling of gnosis, a gnostic encounter with elders, angels, and Christ whose symbolic heart is the written word, and by eating the book, John is united with its knowledge. This image is amplified by the presence of book imagery throughout the entire work, especially in the Book of Life wherein is written the names of those who belong to the Lamb (13.9). Additionally, there are “other books,” which are opened during the Last Judgment in order to see the lives of those being judged (20.12). And then there is, of course, the very book that we are reading, the Book of Revelation of St. John himself—for he is told to write by a voice from heaven (14.13), and we are given warnings at his account’s end that no one should add to or subtract from what is written in his book (22:18).

By reading the Book of Revelation that John subsequently writes after eating the little book, we are eating *his* little book—we belong to a direct lineage or current, and are in a sense initiates. The Revelation of John has an oneiric quality; it is like a collective dream in which we participate simply by reading. And it has immense power for this reason: by entering into its world of references, the way we see the cosmos itself changes. Every aspect of life is altered, becoming symbolically charged. After the various accounts of Christ’s life and death in the Gospels, we suddenly are given in the Revelation this overwhelming and astonishing visionary sequence that brings us completely outside the sphere of mundane human life, revealing the hidden forces beyond history and what happens to all humanity.

The Revelation, in other words, possesses a special luminosity of symbolism that we may call “hieroeidetic,” symbolism charged with initiatory knowledge. The word *eidetikos* in Greek refers to a particular kind of knowledge associated with shape or form, and although the word *eidolon* early in the modern era

came to mean “phantom” or “apparition” without substance, in fact the word *eidetic* also often refers to a particularly luminous and vivid imagery found among young children and in dreams. The Book of Revelation is filled with hieretic, profoundly symbolic numbers, words, and images revealing the hidden nature and destiny of humanity, hidden knowledge that comes mediated in the field of the imagination through forms.

Hieroeidetic knowledge is not in itself gnosis—that is, it is not the spiritual revelation of union or unity. Rather, hieroeidetic knowledge is prior to and preparatory for gnosis; hieroeidetic knowledge exists in the field of knower and known, where an encounter may take place, and so it is charged with cosmological revelations, for it exists at the meeting point of the transcendent and the immanent. But such knowledge remains partly in the realm of division or objectification: there is a revelatory encounter between John and all the angelic figures of the vision, and they remain separate even while meeting in this charged field of imagery. This meeting of above and below is also symbolized in the heavenly city of Jerusalem, where we see the order of the transcendent manifesting itself in vivid, splendid earthly form: but again, it is an image, seen by a seer. Hieroeidetic knowledge is the visionary revelation of the unifying principles and powers informing the entire cosmic realm, and as such takes place in the field of imagination midway between the mundane and the transcendent: there is a seer, and what is seen, a hearer, and what is heard.

When we look at the various currents of the Western esoteric traditions, we find that they correspond in striking ways to what we have seen delineated here in the Book of Revelation. Whether one looks at the alchemical tradition and its symbolism; at the mystical tradition; at the Kabbalistic tradition, with its emphasis on writing and encoded language; or at the theosophic current that in turn manifests in Rosicrucianism; in all of these we find parallels to the Revelation. This is not to say that the Western esoteric traditions all find their origin in Revelation, but rather that the Book of Revelation is paradigmatic. The Revelation is unquestionably esoteric in its plethora of symbolism, but also esoteric in the fact that it takes place in this visionary field, and is so thoroughly literary or bibliocentric in its essential symbols.

Of course, the Revelation does not stand alone, but among numerous other revelations from the same era, including the two books of Enoch, the Apocalypses of Baruch and Ezra, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Apocalypses of Peter and of Paul, and of James and of Adam, all of which belong to the apocrypha, and some of which are found in the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic writings. Yet because it became canonical, and because of its mysterious and powerful imagery, the Book of Revelation has had a far greater impact than all of these other visionary works combined. At the same time, the fact that there were so many apocalyptic revelations during the beginning of the Christian era underscores the recognition that such revelations are inherent in

Christianity itself, for although the Revelation is the most well known, it is certainly not the only one.

And so we are drawn inexorably back to the nature of the book itself and the act of reading. There are numerous ways one can approach a work as extravagant in symbolism, as wild as the book of Revelation, ranging from external to internal, or from exoteric to esoteric. The most external or exoteric is to regard it as an object of study, without relevance to oneself; a more intermediate or mesoteric approach is to see it as prophetic and revealing truths about our own world and lives; and an esoteric approach is to see it as paradigmatic and inspiring of one's own revelation, to make it one's own. In other words, reading about another's vision may inspire one to experience a vision of one's own; the act of reading gives birth to the act of writing.

Esoteric bears the meaning of 'inward,' of participation, and reading is uniquely suited to create inward participation because in reading our habitual boundaries between self and other can disappear. We can identify with fictional or poetic characters; we can enter into a new world of symbols and meaning. Esoteric literature, or put better, the literature of the Western esoteric traditions, is a particularly intense form of this inner participation or identification and union. But all literature takes place in the charged field of the imagination: it is simply a matter of how charged, how hieroeidetic a work is. For just as one may consider a work as charged as the book of Revelation from outside, objectifying it, or one may enter into it—just as there is a range of approaches to such a work—so too there is a range of such works. Some literature is not so charged or hieroeidetic, and exists more for entertainment.

What is it that makes a work hieroeidetically charged? Proximity to the invisible, to the transcendent. There is an element of danger inherent in such proximity—those who come too close to the gods or angels may go mad or blind. The analogy of electricity, of being charged, has a certain value here: a symbol or image, a constellation of letters and numbers, possesses a psychic or symbolic charge that allures us; we are drawn toward it, fascinated by its mysterious beauty. And though we risk being burned, we return again and again over the centuries because we recognize in this mystery something more alive, more electric, more vital than the mundane world of consumerism and the humdrum tedium of life without the invisible. We return to the field of the imagination because this is where we come to know what it means to be alive.

THE RED THREAD OF GNOSIS

A myth conveys, often in a simple story, far more than may at first appear. So it is with the story of Theseus, who found himself in the Minotaur's labyrinth, and who was able to escape only through the help of King Minos's own daugh-

ter, Ariadne, and a thread that led him out. The symbolism here is profound, and certainly reflects the ancient Mithraic mystery symbolism of the bull, the labyrinth of the world, and escape-rebirth. But perhaps we may adapt this symbolism to our own purposes, for when we consider the subject of gnosis, we too find ourselves in a labyrinth, and require some thread to guide us out. This thread is the topic of gnosis itself, for by exploring it, we will be far better prepared to understand the often bewildering variety of Western esoteric traditions.

The word *gnosis*, because it is singular, implies that there is but one kind of gnosis, or spiritual knowledge. However, when we consider the range of religious literature, even that labeled “gnostic,” we seem to find a bewildering spectrum of gnosés. We might divide this spectrum into cosmological gnosis (insight into the hidden patterns in the cosmos), eschatological gnosis (insight into what transcends history and the cosmos), and metaphysical gnosis (insight into the divine), even though all of these may be seen as aspects of a single gnosis. And concerning metaphysical gnosis, or direct insight into the nature of the divine itself, we find two primary approaches that we may call visionary and unitive gnosis, corresponding to the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* discussed by Dionysius the Areopagite. The *via positiva*, or visionary approach, goes through images and the field of the imagination; the *via negativa*, or unitive approach, is the falling away of all images.

It has become more or less commonplace, following Dionysius himself, to see the *via negativa* as superior to the *via positiva*. Dionysius writes that sacred revelation often proceeds through sacred images in which like represents like, while also using forms that are dissimilar, and even entirely inadequate and ridiculous (Cel. Hier. 140c). But he goes on to remark that a second way, of going beyond images entirely in the *via negativa*, is “more appropriate, for as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things that have being, and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence” (Cel. Hier. 141a). What Dionysius observes here is extremely important, in particular his insistence on a secret and sacred tradition that the Divine completely transcends the realm of being.

Dionysius’s observation—that God in no way resembles the things that have being—combats a tendency that, as we have already noted, is common to the traditions of the Book: taking writing literally. Literalism corresponds to what in Judaism was called “idolatry”: it reduces the Divine to human concepts that can be manipulated. This tendency may also be called “objectification,” and is a common function of language more generally. For language by its nature can separate us from what we are discussing: we objectify the Divine just as we objectify all that surrounds us, including nature and other people. But this process of objectification inherently separates us from what we see in this way: the very word *God* becomes a barrier to experiencing what that word means.

In other words, gnostic knowledge is fundamentally different from ratiocinative knowledge, and the language to express gnosis must reflect this difference. Ratiocinative (from *ratio*, measure between things) knowledge belongs to the realm of division into subject and object: 'I' discuss 'that.' Such is the basis for modern science, and ratiocinative knowledge can be widely disseminated as information or data. By contrast, gnosis belongs to a secret or intimate tradition and cannot be widely disseminated as information because it does not belong to the realm of information and division at all, but instead to what transcends division. The scientific or ratiocinative path moves toward ever greater data about what is external; the gnostic path moves toward ever greater intimacy with what transcends both internal and external. Gnosis, then, is not at all a matter of 'I' discussing 'that,' but of going beyond the very division between 'I' and 'that.'

The question, of course, is *how* one moves toward gnostic knowledge, and the answers to this question in the West comprise the Western esoteric traditions. The essential division offered by Dionysius the Areopagite between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* helps us begin to discuss these answers in a schematic way, not because these two ways are at all opposed to each other, but because they illuminate each other. Indeed, they correspond rather closely to what we see in the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana tradition, where visualization and a plethora of imagery express their own transcendence. The *Prajna-paramita Sutra*, with its verses on sheer transcendence of all that is sensory, does not invalidate but expresses the ultimate meaning of the countless Buddhist images often in the very hall where it is chanted. Likewise, in the Western esoteric traditions, one finds a vast range of imagery and means, but these are generally seen within the traditions as an expression of what transcends them.

The problem here, and in language itself, is that it is all too easy to regard words or images as if they were the thing itself, to 'fix' or 'congeal' the inconceivable. This is a particularly likely problem when there is no widespread emphasis on the transcendent, as there is within Buddhism, or any continuous lineage of masters or teachers who could guide seekers or initiates. The Western esoteric traditions have largely remained catch-as-catch-can, defined perhaps best by the precarious relationship between an author and a reader through the medium of the book. And the Gnostic Basilides evidently recognized this, for in one of the only fragments attributed to him, he writes of the ineffable transcendent nothing, and notes that "what is called by a name is not absolutely ineffable, but it is not, for the truly ineffable is not ineffable, but 'above every name which is named' [Eph. 1.21] . . . Names are inadequate . . . Instead, by understanding without speech one must receive the properties of the things named" (Hipp. Ref. VII.viii). Actual direct experience of the transcendent is far more important than simply knowing the words.

Basilides held that he belonged to a secret lineage that ran from Jesus to Matthias to himself, and primary in their revelation was nothingness, or

absolute transcendence. According to his rather bitter opponent Hippolytus, Basilides wrote that before the cosmos, “nothing” existed, “not matter, nor substance, nor the insubstantial, nor an absolute, nor a composite, not conceivable, or inconceivable, not sensible, not devoid of sense, not man, angel, or a god, nothing that has a name or is cognized by intellect” (*Ref.* VII.ix). Basilides’s emphasis—throughout what little we still have, quoted by Hippolytus from Basilides’s treatises—was consistently on sheer transcendence beyond the medium of human language, and corresponds to the *via negativa* of Dionysius the Areopagite. Indeed, given the series of negations here that very much resemble those of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* in Buddhism, it is not surprising that Basilides is reputed to have been influenced by Buddhism.

However, Basilides is not alone in his emphasis on the inconceivability of gnosis, its sheer transcendence of all ratiocination. So too Epiphanes wrote of the Gnostics that “The earliest originating principle was inconceivable, ineffable, and unnameable” (*Ref.* VI.xxxiv); and Marcus, during a Gnostic Eucharist, reportedly offered a chalice to a woman during the consecration, then received it back from her and said, ‘Grant that the inconceivable and ineffable Grace which existed prior to the universe, may fill thine inner man, and make abound in thee the gnosis of this grace, as she disseminates the seed of the mustard-tree upon good soil’” (*Ref.* VI.xxxv). A similar emphasis is to be found in Dionysius the Areopagite, in his treatise on the Divine Names, for instance, when he remarks that God is beyond all names and creatures, “transcendently and supernaturally, far above creatures, above their being and above their nature” (956B). He continues that “no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness . . . of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being. There is no name for it and no expression” (981a).

Paradoxically, by maintaining an emphasis on the ineffability of the divine, the Gnostics also maintained a *via positiva* of esoteric words, letters, numbers, and images. But this linguistic mysticism existed within the context of the absolute transcendence that it in fact manifests. In other words, letters, numbers, and images emerge out of the unbegotten, and represent the hidden patterns and harmonies of the cosmos that, by ‘following back,’ inevitably in turn lead one to the ineffable. It is well known that there are Hebrew systems of transforming letters into their numerical meanings, but what is perhaps less remarked upon is that there was an esoteric Greek tradition of such transformations too, probably carried over from Pythagorean and Neoplatonic sources. Thus we find the Gnostic Marcus maintained that the number of Jesus is 888, that the number of the dove is 801, and that the body of truth is composed of letters, the head by Alpha and Omega, the neck by Beta and Psi, and so forth.

Sacred numbers, letters, and images reveal the esoteric forming powers of the cosmos. Each letter, according to this tradition, is produced by a particular

sound that in turn manifests others, so that ultimately the “enormous sea” produced by a single letter is in fact infinite. This linguistic mysticism was represented in Gnostic practice by a secret initiation that consisted in the whispering of holy words of power into the ear of one who had been tested, or who was faithful and near death (*Ref.* VI.xxxvi). This name was composed of four syllables, the first of which had four letters, and the entire name had thirty letters. One who pronounced the name was in fact pronouncing the powers that had brought the cosmos itself into being, for each letter was also an angel and a forming power.

All of this suggests that there was in Christian Gnosticism, just as there was in Jewish Merkabah mysticism and in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, a developed metalanguage that both reflects and leads toward its own transcendence. Such a metalanguage is implicit both in the human being and in the cosmos as a whole, so to penetrate into the deepest mysteries of human language is to penetrate into the metalanguage that gives birth to the cosmos itself. From these observations we can begin to see something of the hidden significances of the mysticism of the word and the book. For to read the metalanguage of the cosmos is truly to read the Book of Life—a figure for the hidden energies or powers that inform life both in the cosmos and in ourselves. Indeed, to become privy to these mysteries is to penetrate beyond ordinary humanity and to become divinized oneself.

Here we begin to see how the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* represent, not opposite or even complementary ways, but different aspects of the same way, the path from ordinary rational consciousness divided into subject and object, toward transcendent degrees of consciousness of ever greater communion between subject and object. The gnostic visionary path is not separate from the way of negation—rather, sacred images, words, and numbers emerge in, embody, and reveal transcendence. As we ‘read’ these images, we participate in what they represent; we become intimate with them; apparent boundaries between subject and object dissolve; and we enter into a realm where negation and affirmation are both recognized to be at once valid and invalid ways of expressing what transcends them both. This is the realm sometimes glimpsed in literature, in dreams, and in religious experiences; it is the realm of living ideas or energies.

Throughout early Christian gnostic writings, we find plays on naming and namelessness, always emerging out of this relationship between the expressed and the inexpressible, between this world and the invisible realm of energies. For instance, in the Gospel of Philip, we read that “whereas in this world the union is one of husband with wife,” “in the aeon the form of the union is different, although we refer to them by the same names.”³³ In other words, there is earthly marriage, and there is another kind of marriage that takes place in the invisible, or aeon, which is of a totally different order, and its light “never sets.” One must “receive the light” in the “bridal chamber” before death, or one will

not receive it after death—and one who receives that light is perfected and cannot be detained, but is free in life and in death. These figures or images of marriage and light are ways of expressing the inexpressible gnosis.

This inexpressible gnosis is the “marriage” or union of subject and object. The Gospel of Philip goes on: “And again when he leaves the world he has already received the truth in the images. The world has become the aeon, for the aeon is fullness for him. This is the way it is: it is revealed to him alone, not hidden in the darkness and the night, but hidden in a perfect day and a holy light.”⁴ In other words, when one dies, one has already experienced the mysteries for oneself by ‘reading’ and receiving the truth in the images—not only the images of sacred words or symbols, but also the actual energies that these images embody or represent. Thus “the world has become the aeon”—in other words, the invisible and the visible are no longer divided for the initiate. The cosmos is no longer opaque, a collection of objects from which one remains separate, but rather, one can ‘read’ the invisible in the visible, can see the energies ordinarily veiled from humanity by its fallen, divided consciousness; for such a one the world is transparent. The nameless and the named are not divided.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the Western esoteric traditions unquestionably have their origins in the early centuries of the present era, I do not mean to suggest that there is a direct current of influence running from relatively obscure works like the Gospel of Philip or the lost writings of Basilides into medieval and modern times. Rather, even though such writings somehow may have made their way into this or that monastic library, my argument here is not about lines of influence so much as about modalities, characteristic ways of understanding, gnostic paradigms, what I call the red thread of gnosis that leads us out of the labyrinth. What are the characteristics of this red thread as we trace it through history?

Naturally, the first of these is its inexpressibility: it remains always transcendent, elusive, the unnameable. This is as true for the canonically accepted authors such as Clement of Alexandria or Dionysius the Areopagite as it is for Valentinus or Basilides. But the inexpressible is so only by contrast with the expressible; unnameability emerges always out of the presence of names. The way of negation is not the opposite of affirmation, but its inseparable companion. And here we see emerging the second characteristic: the mystery of names. For whether the gnostics belong to the Jewish Merkabah or the Christian Gnostic, and perhaps to a lesser extent to the Hermetic or the Neoplatonic tradition, one finds a gnosis of the divine names. Here naming refers, not to arbitrary designations, but to inherent characteristics of what is named, to actual energies that the name itself embodies, evokes, indeed, is.

From the gnosis of naming emerges a range of related mysteries, including the gnoses of numbers and letters, a third characteristic. According to rational consciousness, numbers designate quantities that one can manipulate, on which conventional mathematics is founded. But this view of numbers corresponds to seeing reading as the accumulation of data: it remains objectified, separated from the subject who sees. By contrast, a gnostic view of numbers and letters sees them not as merely signifying something external, but as qualities pregnant with meaning. What is more, numbers and letters can open up into aspects of consciousness itself, so that to work with them is to enter into the existential quality that is their real nature or kernel, of which the quantitative designation is a husk.

Such a gnosis of numbers is visible during the medieval period, where we find definite traces of Latin number and letter transposition corresponding to what in Hebrew is termed *gematria*. These number-letter transpositions yield many hidden significances, and are visible in major European literary works, including *Piers Ploughman*, to which I have already devoted some study.⁵ A similarly gnostic view of numbers appears again in the work of Louis-Claude de Saint Martin (1743–1803), a theosopher in the line of Jacob Böhme, who wrote his friend Baron Kirchberger that “Numbers are no algebra, my dear brother, but men have sometimes lowered them to it. They are only the sensible expression, whether visible or intellectual, of the different properties of beings, which all proceed from the one only essence . . . Regeneration alone shows us the ground, and therein we obtain the pure key, without masters; everyone, however, in his own degree.”⁶ There is in Saint-Martin’s work a peculiar kind of mystical mathematics from which it is evident that here is indeed an order of knowledge entirely different from the merely quantitative.

A fourth characteristic is imagery. Gnostic works reveal a wide array of images and myths, albeit few more wild than those of the Book of Revelation. Such images may be seen in terms of degrees of union. On the lowest level, the images remain outside one and are taken literally as referring to history. More intimately, the images may be seen as reflecting inner aspects of the cosmos; here they no longer are taken as having entirely historical dimensions, but instead express aspects of the invisible origin of the cosmos and of ourselves. Even more intimately yet, the images may be seen as corresponding to something in our own inward nature, as a panoply on an inner stage where we see acted out the soul’s dramas, which emerge out of the inexpressible into the realms of conscious perception. Here, of course, imagination proceeds neither wholly from ourselves, nor wholly from without, but lives in an intermediate realm necessary for the birth of unitive consciousness.

Out of the gnoses of numbers, letters, and images emerges the fifth characteristic, which is the mystery of words and of the book. Here we have the combination of all the elements we have discussed so far, woven together into a

tapestry meant not only to point toward the gnostic experience, but also to convey it. To read such a work properly is to ingest it, to become it, as John ingests the little book in Revelation. Its mysteries of names, numbers, letters, words, and images, taken together, are meant to permeate and transmute one's consciousness so that the invisible is no longer divided from the visible, so that one no longer exists only in a rational separate consciousness in an objectified world, but instead participates in the energies and powers that give rise to and inform the cosmos, and indeed even begins to approach the highest mystery, that of the inexpressible from which all of these gnosés derive and to which they inevitably lead.

Thus we can see the outlines of the mysteries of the word and the book that in turn give rise to the Western esoteric traditions. We can see that despite the bewildering variety of traditions that existed in the first centuries of this era, these gnostic characteristics remain visible, in one form or another, in the complex admixtures of Jewish, Christian, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and other currents that mingled to create the works we have been considering. And when we look for these fundamental characteristics, we find that divisions between heretical and orthodox, Jewish and Christian and Greek, often do not hold at all. The esotericist or gnostic in antiquity, just as in the subsequent Western esoteric traditions, remains a heterodox figure drawing upon whatever myths, words, images, and traditions best express his understanding. By following the courses of Western esotericism, we will seek to trace the essential characteristics of each current and see whether or not at heart Western esotericism as a whole exists on the border between religious and literary experience, whether, from antiquity to the present, it remains a tradition of the mysteries of the book.