

Access to Western Esotericism by Antoine Faivre. State University of New York Press, State University Plaza, Albany, NY, 12246, 1994; 369 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Siobhán Houston

Antoine Faivre, the professor of History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne), is arguably the world's foremost authority on Western esotericism. His stellar reputation as a scholar and author is further validated by the publication of *Access to Western Esotericism*, which is a compilation of two books originally published in French (*Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* [1986] and *L'Esotérisme* [1992]).

The author has arranged this edition, which focuses on esoteric thought in the Latin West from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries, into three parts. Book One clearly lays out Faivre's methodology and approach to the subject at hand, defines key concepts such as theosophy, gnosis, and hermeticism, and includes five short chapters that chronicle esoteric history from the beginning of the common era through the twentieth century. This whirlwind narrative of two millennia is remarkably comprehensive, and serves well as a jumping-off point for the reader's further exploration of particular topics like Alexandrian Hermetism, Neoplatonism, Jewish and Christian Kabbalah, alchemy, initiatory societies, and Naturphilosophie, to name a few. Not a mere chronological rendering of history, Faivre inserts his incisive commentary at every turn, illuminating the complex relationships between the kaleidoscopic spectrum of personalities, philosophies, and organizations which make up Western esotericism. Especially welcome is his attention to the ways in which the arts, including music, opera, fine art, literature, and poetry, have been influenced by esoteric ideas.

Book Two of this work, entitled "Studies in Esotericism", is comprised of seven essays by Faivre, many of which were given originally as conference papers. The longest of these treatises is a study of "Love and Androgyny in Franz von Baader," the German theosophist of whom Faivre is especially fond. This section also includes two other essays on Baader as well as an exposition of the soul's journey as portrayed in Johann Valentin Andreae's seventeenth-century romance, *The "Chemical Wedding"* of Christian Rosencreutz.

Another excellent piece in this collection of essays elucidates contemporary neognostic cosmologies as propounded by the "gnostics of Princeton," those scientists who draw on esoteric traditions to frame their discoveries in the physical and natural sciences. In this regard, Faivre notes that numerous members of the scientific community are disdaining positivism in their research in favor of an intuitive approach. Even though philosopher René Guénon criticized modern science for being purely quantitative, it is clear that this definition does not hold true across the board. On the contrary, Faivre maintains that the "reaction against scientism . . . represents one of the significant trends of the twentieth century." This essay, like the other six, shines with the author's original reflections and remarkable insights.

Book Three consists of an extensive bibliography. Faivre did not have space to include primary works on esotericism, so he has concentrated, in his words, on "recent, solid studies devoted to certain authors and currents of thought." What emerges is an indispensable listing of monographs, journals, and serials in English, German, French, and Italian, along with a

brief section enumerating the important library holdings on esotericism in the United States and Western Europe.

Perusing this work, the reader can hardly fail to be awestruck by Faivre's scintillating intellectual brilliance, his encyclopedic knowledge, and his affinity and passion for his subject. A caveat for the general reader may be in order, however. Although this book's title may lead one to believe it is an introductory work, the prose is dense, erudite, and academic in the extreme, and will best be appreciated by those who have some familiarity with philosophy in general and esotericism in particular. For those seeking an initial ingress into this complex territory, a better text might be *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, edited by Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995).

Perhaps Faivre's most valuable contribution in this book is his precise methodology. While some consider the word "esoteric" to refer to secret knowledge or a transcendent wisdom that informs all spiritual traditions, the author inveighs against such overly-restrictive definitions, even though they may be legitimate to an extent. Instead, he advocates approaching the study of esotericism "phenomenologically as a form of thought, an ensemble of tendencies to be described"; in doing so, according to Faivre, "we can avoid doing violence to historical data". His typology delineates three paths of esotericism (purist, historical and humanist) and four essential elements of every esoteric philosophy: a system of correspondences; the importance of the "living book of nature"; imagination and mediation; and an experience of transformation. He also points out the need to differentiate between esotericism and other forms of alternative philosophies and religions, including neo-paganism, New Age currents, and other new religious movements. Unfortunately, many scholars tend to lump non-traditional spiritualities together under an homogenous rubric, and then dismiss the entire group as eccentric and flaky. Employing Faivre's meticulous typology will enable scholars and others to distinguish between the arcane figures, ideas, and movements that dwell in the interstices of mainstream Western culture.

It is apparent from this book that Faivre is a scholar on a mission. In the preface, he bemoans the fact that academicians generally devalue, ignore, or ridicule esotericism, and his agenda includes the legitimization of esotericism as an essential component of Western history and a valid and significant subject for academic research. He comments, "Vast areas of our Western cultural history, obscured a priori by theological or epistemological positions, were deliberately omitted, abandoned to the curiosity of eccentrics or even cranks and to capricious handling, which only increased the distrust of serious, albeit somewhat prejudiced investigator and established thinkers vis-à-vis this peripheral domain." He acknowledges that certain factions of the Academy have begun to take esotericism seriously, but notes that his university chair in esoteric currents is still the only one of its kind in the world. Clearly, there is much to be accomplished as far as the scholarly study of this subject is concerned, and the issuance of this work will go far in gaining a greater regard and appreciation of esotericism within the academic community.

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