TWO BOOKS ON WESTERN ESOTERICISM


It is gratifying to see the ARIES association addressing a wider public, with the appearance last year of two surveys of esotericism: a short one by Antoine Faivre in the popular “Que sais-je?” series, which covers every imaginable subject, and a longer one by Jean-Paul Corsetti in the series “Références Larousse”, division “Sciences de l’homme”. It is no derogation of Mr. Corsetti to say that his work is strongly “Faivrian”, since he acknowledges the indispensable help of Professor Faivre and follows the rubrics established in the latter’s work. Comparing the two books, it becomes clear that they are telling the same history, but that what Faivre condenses in about fifty pages, Corsetti expounds in three hundred.

The problem facing Corsetti in creating this pocket encyclopedia was to cover everything from ancient Egypt to about 1840, mentioning all the important sources and their modern commentators. His introductory pages deal with the difference between the two subjects of his title – esotericism and occult sciences – and the impossibility of disentangling them. Calling on the categories for understanding esotericism established by Faivre, Corsetti claims its droit de cité in the realm of humanistic learning. He then sets out on his voyage of exploration with all the enthusiasm and energy of a young scholar discovering a new world. Everything he presents is in a gracious and positive light. He is evidently in love with his subject, but able to keep own engagement off the stage.

There will be very few readers of Corsetti’s book who do not discover in it things they have never heard of. A particular strength is his treatment of the period between the Neoplatonists and the Renaissance. With great skill he draws out the triple thread of Jewish Kabbalah, Islamic Sufism, and the Christian esotericism of the mystics, the chivalric orders, and the cathedral builders. He says of the latter:

_Romanesque aesthetics and symbolism, the speculations of the School of Chartres, and nature-mysticism had a strong influence on the esotericism of the Renaissance. But there was already an esotericism in the earlier period, in the fullest sense of the term. Thanks to this rebirth of the West in the_
In the twelfth century, it was able speedily to reassemble the scattered stones of a temple that was open to the cosmos, inhabited by God. The proof of this is in its recourse to symbolic exegesis, analogies, correspondences, and mediations, its insistence on the salvific function of man in nature, and on the reality of the creative imagination. (p. 123)

Another of Corsetti's strengths is in his ability to keep the wider picture in view, while making his historical survey of minutiae. In his discussion of Isidore of Seville, for example, he mentions explorations of etymology through Court de Gébelin to the present, showing how what is philologically wrong may still be esoterically fruitful. His chapter on Robert Grossteste points out how this Oxford theologian shares his platonizing frame of mind with the Fludd, Boehme, and the Cambridge Platonists of three centuries later. The section on Paracelsus calls for exegesis on Alexandre Koyré, Henry Corbin, and C. G. Jung.

Corsetti has this to say on the vexed question of whether esotericism includes the Gnostics:

Compared to Hermetism and its esoteric ferment, Gnosticism differs in certain definite and remarkable ways. In general, and although some Gnostic currents cannot be included in this, it depreciates and rejects created nature and the manifested world, urging the soul to rise above them. This is certainly close to the doctrine of Poimandres. But Gnosis is more pessimistic, and its system leaves fewer exits in comparison to Hermetism, whose cosmological and theological architecture has many ways in and out, mainly thanks to the mediations which it places between the different planes of creation. Gnosis tends towards the excessive multiplication of intermediaries, an excess that ends up by weakening their power and reducing their function. The crucial point is its dualistic view of the universe: a strict dualism that inevitably leads to tragedy, because it gives undue advantage to the forces of evil, giving enormous weight to the primal fault and thus belittling the divine will. (p. 69)

While this is a fair historical summary of Gnostic doctrine, it obviously carries the additional function of an esoteric value-judgment: Gnosticism fails as an esoteric philosophy because it has no respect for Nature. Illuminating comments of this kind are scattered throughout Corsetti's work, coming thick and fast towards the end where he treats Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, and the first stirrings of the occult revival. His book is a synoptic masterpiece, flawed only by the failure of Larousse to include an index. This does him a great disservice by making his book almost useless for the ready reference it pretends to provide.

Faivre faced the opposite problem to Corsetti's, in the all but absurd task of condensing material on which he has already written thousands of pages into the tiny scope of a "Que sais-je?" manual. Since his book could not be
encyclopedic, it had to be definitive, i.e., it had to define esotericism for the common reader. Faivre therefore writes a proportionately long Introduction, structured around the fundamental elements of (1) Correspondences, (2) Living Nature, (3) Imagination and mediations, and (4) the experience of Transmutation; and two secondary ones of (5) the practice of Concordance and (6) Transmission. By enlarging on these categories in several books (in English as well as French) and in his lectures around the world, Faivre has already ensured that they will become the basis for the scholarly treatment of his subject. Now he offers them to a broader readership. The book is a study-manual and an aide-mémoire, written as a kind of narrative bibliography like his earlier L’ésotérisme du XVIIIe siècle en France et en Allemagne (Paris, Seghers, 1973). With this public in mind, in its later chapters it leans especially to the connections of esotericism with literature and the arts, and to the evaluation of nineteenth-century and contemporary movements.

Faivre tackles two sensitive questions here, which Gorsetti’s dateline of 1840 relieved him from having to touch. One is the question of Guénonism, which before Faivre’s enterprise was the only comprehensive attempt to define esotericism for the West. Of this “perennialism”, whose most salient characteristic is not what it includes but what it censures and rejects, Faivre writes:

Guénonism is truly a novel phenomenon in the history of Western esoteric traditions, on account of its lack of interest in Nature and in most of those very traditions. Nevertheless, it is a widespread movement today, affecting minds in all fields which are attracted by the clarity of its thought, or perhaps by its simplifications. It leads them, surely, to dismiss too readily the complexities of our reality – notably its cultural richness, whether esoteric or not – in favor of metaphysical certitudes presented as dogma. (p. 109)

The other question is more sensitive to the Perennialists than to those of Faivre’s broader and more positive persuasion: it is that of how “low” esotericism should go. Is the New Age esoteric? Is the AMORC? Is Blavatskian Theosophy, or Steiner’s Anthroposophy? The work of Gurdjieff, or of Jung? Obviously, as Faivre says, esotericism gets lost in the circuses of occultism and “celebrations of consciousness”; yet even there one can see the wish for self-transformation that is one of esotericism’s pillars. It is this kind of objective yet generous remark that distinguishes Faivre’s world-view from the censoriousness of Perennialism. In another book that is part of the same movement of information, Modern Esoteric Spirituality, edited by Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York, Crossroads, 1992), chapters are dedicated precisely to those bugbears of Perennialism: Blavatsky, Steiner, Gurdjieff, and Jung – complemented by a chapter on Guénon.

These books are the tip of an iceberg offered to the intellectually curious. If they kindle a desire to look below the surface, there will be found
the more specialized works of Antoine Faivre, the collective volumes of the "Cahiers de l'Hermétisme", the single-author books gathered as the "Bibliothèque de l'Hermétisme", and ARIES itself. It is an impressive body of work, which in future ages may be seen to constitute a chapter not merely in the history of philosophy, but in Western esotericism itself.

Joscelyn Godwin