Postmodernism and the Logic of Esoteric Thought

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1. Defining esotericism

In constituting itself as a discipline of the human sciences, esotericism has faced a not insubstantial problem of definition. What is the domain of study here? Can it be properly constituted as a delimited field of analysis? The problem is a pressing one, when even the leading figures of the discipline such as Antoine Faivre admit that 'esotericism' is 'devoid of any particular sense' and 'shows itself to be expandable, transparent, and semantically indeterminate'.[1] If the term itself resists definition, how can we base a discipline upon it?

Now the standard account of definition, which we have inherited virtually intact from Plato and Aristotle, gives us fairly rigorous criteria of definition. According to this account, there are two ways to define a term and they operate in unison. In the first definitional mode, a term is defined positively, by reference to what the thing being defined actually is. For both Plato and Aristotle, for example, such 'positive' definition would capture the essence of the thing defined; it would define its genus. In the second definitional mode, a term is defined by reference to what differentiates the thing being defined from what it is not. For Plato and Aristotle, such 'negative' definition would capture the essential difference of the thing from the other things in its genus; it would define its species. For Plato, as for Aristotle, the two forms of definition are necessary for an adequate or 'true' definition. The account is thus called definition 'by genus and species'.[2]

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1 A. Faivre and J. Needleman (eds), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, Crossroad, New York, 1995, p. xi.

2 For accounts of Classical definition, see Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 5th edition, Macmillan, New York, 1978, Chapter 4 and John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 2nd edition, Kegan Paul, London, 1967, Chapter 1. These standard textbooks of logic agree that the Classical account of definition remains the prevailing one.

On the received account, then, in order to define 'esotericism' with the determinacy required to identify it as a semantic - let alone a disciplinary - field, we must be able both to specify a quality (or qualities) that is (are) essentially its own, and to distinguish it from other fields by reference to such a quality (or qualities). A number of theorists seem to question whether this is possible in the case of esotericism. This is turn leads us to question whether it is 'esotericism' which is at fault here, or our received account of definition, which demands such rigorous criteria of definition.

Faivre's approach to this problem of definition seems to me to exemplify the general difficulties that esotericists face in this regard. In his several introductions to the field, he repeatedly baulks at the claim to be offering a definition of it at all. He claims that such definition as he offers will not be determinate in the way standard accounts of definition demand. He claims of his approach merely that it 'facilitates a sketch of a possible outline of the border around the field, a border that is, happily, blurred'.[1] Indeed, his approach to the delineation of his subject is thoroughly Wittgensteinean; he treats it as a 'cluster concept':

> The question is not what esotericism would be 'in itself'. No doubt esotericism is not even a domain, in the sense in which one speaks of the domains of painting, or philosophy, or chemistry. It is, rather, a form of thought, and the point is to identify its nature, on the basis of those currents or forms of spirituality which appear to illustrate it.[2]

Pursuing this method, Faivre adopts a descriptive, rather than prescriptive or stipulative, approach to the definition of his subject. And so, despite his concerns about definition, Faivre is able to identify a given set of qualities - four in all - that serve as determining criteria for the term. He is emphatic about the importance of the empirical method here: an 'abstract' definition of esotericism runs the risk of 'being held hostage to an *a priori* idea of what it "ought" to be, its "true" nature.'[3] Quite rightly, he wants to avoid philosophical or

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1 Faivre and Needleman, *op. cit.*, p. xx.

2 *Ibid*, p. xi.

3 *Ibid*, p. xii.

ideological presuppositions which would inhibit his empirical exploration of the field. He fears doing violence to the historical data.

The problems of determinate definition are not automatically overcome by this methodology, however. By opting for the descriptive rather than prescriptive approach, one merely forestalls the need to stipulate the grounds for one's definition. One pushes the problem a step further back, but arrives at the same point when one has to make concrete determinations as to which particular 'currents or forms of spirituality' one will assert as illustrative or exemplary. Why is *this* current exemplary of esotericism but not *that*? The grounds one gives for answering such a question will surely indicate what one takes to be its 'true' nature. That said, the approach does have the advantage of being relatively transparent. It is undoubtedly better than a definitional approach that covertly imports one's presuppositions about esotericism as if they were simple givens.

It seems to me that much of the difficulty of defining 'esotericism' can be overcome by recognising precisely how difficult it is to define any term by the Classical method. Even in the natural sciences, definition rarely occurs with the determinacy that the Classical approach prescribes.[1] Indeed, the Classical sources themselves point to the fact that definition occurs in many more ways than their prescriptive accounts allow. Ironically, determinate definition is achieved nowhere in the many dialogues of Plato devoted explicitly to the definition of their subject (justice, virtue, beauty and so on). Plato's definitions are invariably offered via an illustrative method.[2]

Approaching the issue from the other direction, there are advantages in specifying one's understanding of the term as definitional. Primary among these arises from the need to stipulate a positive content to the term, rather than defining it merely by relation. For example, the very act of asserting a positive definition of esotericism - that is, of defining esotericism by its own qualities rather than by virtue of its relation to the exoteric - can bring to light the

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1 Max Black argues that even a basic technical term such as 'science' itself does not admit of definition upon the Classical method. Max Black, *Problems of Analysis*, Ithaca Press, New York, 1954, Chapter 2.

2 On this point, see Raziel Abelson, 'Definition', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Macmillan, New York, 1967.

presuppositions that so concern Faivre. Primary among these is the tendency 'sometimes due to ignorance and sometimes to an inquisitorial spirit' to draw an essential link between esotericism and religious marginality.[1] For Faivre, esotericism cannot be defined merely by reference to its relation to dominant religious traditions, nor indeed as the arcane or secret currents within an otherwise overt religious domain. Esotericism has it own trajectory within the history of religions - albeit complex and often difficult to discern - which gives it its own independent status relative to the exoteric. Indeed, there needs be some degree of independence if esotericism is to be defined positively, as an autonomous discipline, as Faivre hopes. The truth of the Classical account of definition lies in this requirement for independence.

2. Esotericism and postmodernism as 'discourses of alterity'

While refusing to make it definitional, the theme of the marginality of the esoteric repeatedly appears in Faivre's descriptions of what gives the esoteric its singular character. For example, primary among the qualities he attributes to exotericism is the appeal to correspondences. The idea here is that, across the visible and invisible universe, there exists a harmony of resonance that is at once real and symbolic. From this arises the understanding of the world as a series of signs, to be decoded for the encrypted meaning that links them across creation - and so the element of mystery which is so characteristic of esotericism. From this also arises the reversals of logic which situate esotericism in such tension with prevailing Western intellectual traditions. For, instead of the principles of contradiction, excluded middle and linear causality, esotericism espouses principles of included middle and of synchronicity.[2] No other principles could so clearly distinguish esotericism from the logic that, since Classical thought, has defined the intellectual climate of the West. Platonic dualism, as Friedrich Nietzsche urged, provides the very foundation for Western thought. Esotericism may be seen as marginalised precisely because of its

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1 *Loc. cit.*

2 A. Faivre (ed.), *Access to Western Esotericism*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1994, p. 10.

rejection of this logic. The difficulties of definition can be traced to the same source.

This theme of correspondences captures the features of esotericism that most closely link it to the themes of postmodern philosophy, as also to the increasingly popular self-styled field of postmodern theology. A fascinating research project might be devoted to tracing the influence on contemporary theory of esoteric themes regarding the intelligibility of the transcendental, the necessity of its harmony with the immanent, and its accessibility via a worldly hermeneutics. For example, there seem to be clear resonances between the central esoteric theme of the universe as a book to be deciphered and the much-discussed claim of Jacques Derrida that 'there is nothing outside the text'.[1] There are lines of intellectual descent here which might surely be mapped. And no doubt, the genealogy would be traced through the writings of Nietzsche, whose importance for contemporary philosophy and theology can hardly be overestimated. No other modern Western philosopher has gone further in the attempt to reconcile transcendence and immanence.

The inverse relation also holds: the themes of postmodernism could be used to illuminate aspects of esotericism. To take one clear example, in trying to characterise the influence of esotericism on exoteric culture, it is often tempting to appeal to the notion of the cultural unconscious that has been employed so successfully across the textual studies. Sigmund Freud's term has been adapted by the French philosopher Jacques Lacan and by the poststructuralists influenced by him to describe the process whereby cultures, and not merely individuals, store concepts that they have not - or for whatever reason cannot - fully assimilate at an ordered, conscious level.[2] Taken as a whole, these concepts and ideas come to operate as a sort of unstated language that subtends the language of culture. Perhaps ironically, the cultural unconscious provides much of the material that sustains and

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1 J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1974, pp. 157-8.

2 The use of the notion of the unconscious to illuminate aspects of culture is widespread in contemporary social theory: see, for example, James Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds*, Macmillan, London, 1991 and Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991.

enlivens the language of culture - its metaphors, its figures of speech, symbols and images. And thus these can be seen to have an underlying or encrypted meaning. Given the means to bring this unconscious to the surface, to decipher its meaning, we find that the unconscious provides us with a deeper understanding of culture - and particularly such artefacts as its religious doctrines and practices - than does the conscious.[1]

For the remainder of this paper, I would like to trace one further 'postmodern theme' that I believe is evident in esotericism. This is because it provides postmodern thought with something it presently lacks - and this I shall call a 'logic of the other', hoping that my use of this expression will become clearer as I proceed. The expression has to do with the way in which esotericism situates itself as a discourse, as a text - and, by extension, how it situates the author or speaker of that discourse, the esotericist himself or herself. My claim is that esotericism is similar to postmodernism in that it situates itself as an 'other' to exoteric discourses. Esotericism is, like postmodernism, self-avowedly analogical; the form which governs its discourses is held to be in many ways distinct from the *logos* which governs the everyday use of language. It is the analogical character of these discourses which makes them so difficult to define. Faivre's claims as to the semantic paucity of 'esotericism' can be matched by a plethora of similar claims regarding 'postmodernism'. Theorists tend to fall back on notions of a postmodern stance, approach, method, mode or form, rather than claim any determinacy for the term. One might almost speak of a 'postmodern way'.

Like postmodernism, esotericism has situated itself as somehow marginal to received discourses, not merely in respect of what is said in this field by also in respect of the way that language is used to say it. Thus, as suggested above, the well-known esoteric themes of secrecy and mystery, the idea that the truths thereby revealed are not for everybody, that they are to be sought behind a veil of symbols 'and not in their sublime nudity' to use Dionysius' expression. The prevalence

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1 For the religious import of the cultural unconscious, see Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987.

of this theme in discussions of esotericism leads to its treatment as definitional.

It is in part the historical marginality of esoteric discourses that gives the study of esotericism a distinctly postmodern feel. Postmodernism is preoccupied with *marginalia*; the recovery of hitherto marginalised voices is among its most celebrated features. This has been evidenced elsewhere in the study of religion by a renewed fascination for mystic theology and for negative theology, the relationship of which to the so-called philosophies of alterity (such as those of Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas) is the subject of ongoing speculation.[1] Across the human sciences, a concentration upon the discourses, past and present, of those cultural elements formerly marginalised - whether by social, sexual, racial or other cultural determinants - remains a primary motivating theme of postmodernism.

This explains the centrality to postmodernism of the notion of the 'other'. Its use derives from the writings of G.W.F. Hegel on social history, from the attempt to explain how society develops the political structures that it does. Hegel argued famously that, as history progresses, there is a dialectical interplay of domination and subordination, both real and symbolic. In Hegel's mythical rendering of the moment of confrontation, the 'master' figure - representing both dominant philosophy and its author(s) - secure the acquiescence of the 'slave' figure - the subordinate philosophy and its author(s). In so doing, the slave renders itself - and its philosophy, such as it is - 'other' to the cultural trends by which progress is to be charted. Its place in the social framework is to be the underside of history, the fabric of history but not its maker.[2]

Postmodern discourses have in a sense attempted to 'liberate' the other from this subordination. Feminist, black and postcolonial theorists in particular have sought to recognise the place of the other, to assert its independent value and its contribution to history. To do so, they have had to identify the logic that governs the history of the 'one',

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1 There is a mountain of literature on this theme; see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1997, for a fairly recent appraisal of argument.

2 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, Part B, 1B, A.

the logic that allows the one to designate itself and its story as the universal and singular standard of progress. And concurrently, they have had to outline the philosophies that distinguish the other from the one, the patterns of difference of the other from the 'same'. They have sought to uncover the 'hidden' histories, the stories of those not cited as the bearers of progress, and show how these histories have contributed to social development. And they have questioned whether progress really can be conceived as such, where it cannot recognise the plurality of agents upon which it actually depends.

Esotericism might similarly be described as an exemplary discourse of the other. The focus on marginality, upon what is hidden within the religious traditions, the idea of an underside of religious history which is crucial to it but is largely unrecognised; all these place the study of esotericism within the theoretical milieu of which postmodernism is merely the popular form. In many ways esotericism is a more highly sophisticated form of such discourses, largely because of the extreme wealth of the tradition that it inherits. The self-conscious nature of esotericism's marginality, its celebration of its discourses as secret and hidden, means that its marginality has historically been seen as its very basis, rather than as a hindrance.

Exploiting its marginal status, esotericism has developed a logic which is distinctive. It is distinctive in that it positions its object of study - the esoteric - at the heart of the cultural artefact to which it is posited as marginal - the exoteric. Discourses of the marginal (such as postmodern discourses) standardly figure the objects of their analysis at the borders, the horizon, the extremity, the perceived limits of culture. This is so, even where the marginality of the discourse is recognised as a condition of its own possibility - that is, the discourse relies for its existence upon its marginality - and where it is recognised that existence of the marginal elements is a condition of possibility of the culture as a whole - that is, the culture relies for its existence upon its others. Esotericism, by contrast, places itself at the centre of the religious traditions more broadly conceived; it is the veiled truth of those religious discourses that circulate more widely. Esoteric study takes us to the core spiritual traditions from which they emerge. The value of esotericism is thus perceived to lie in its extreme interiority; it illuminates the heart of culture.

This question of where one situates the marginal discourse - and its authors - is not merely a nominal one. It has implications for the status that the marginal discourse holds within the symbolic systems of the culture as a whole, and most particularly, of course, for its relation to the exoteric discourses it supplements and supplements. For this reason, I suggest that the study of esotericism - specifically, of the attempts to define the esoteric in relation to the exoteric - might profitably contribute to those other fields of postmodernism seeking to construct a logic - or perhaps we might call it a geography - wherein marginalised voices may be located. Postmodern theorists such as Mark Taylor have named such discourses of marginality 'discourses of alterity'; the expression has widespread use in referring to such philosophies as those of Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard, as well as their contemporary followers.[1]

I am arguing, then, that esotericism gives us a logic for placing such discourses of alterity. It provides responses to the standard postmodern questions: Is it possible to speak - and be heard - from the position of other? How is the other to represent himself or herself? Is it in the language of culture or by some other means? Is there a knowledge that is proper to the other, by virtue of his or her position as other?

3. The Logic of Marginal Discourses

I wish in this section to take feminist philosophy as an exemplary discourse of postmodernism, and an exemplary discourse of alterity. For feminist analyses of language provide one of the clearest avenues of approach in contrasting different models of otherness. Feminist theorists working in logic and epistemology have developed some of the most sophisticated and targeted critiques of the received claims

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1 See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, and Mark C. Taylor, *Alterity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, on this. See also Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, who argues that the question of otherness remains the motivating theme behind contemporary French philosophy, and so the work of Derrida, Levinas, Foucault and Deleuze.

across the humanities to universality. Feminist theorists of many persuasions have been united by the claim that the alleged neutrality of traditional disciplines can be asserted only refusing to acknowledge any voice beyond that which is historically privileged - viz, that of white Western man. These theorists have been joined by many more contemporary voices in arguing for the singular nature of this standpoint - and the existence of many others united by class, race and many other historical contingencies.

Feminist concerns in this matter may be traced to Simone de Beauvoir's well-known lament that 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her ... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other'.[1] The category of man is hegemonic in that it reserves for itself the ability to define itself and its values in the singular, as the universal or neutral set of values operative across the entire symbolic field.

In response to de Beauvoir's concern, a number of alternative epistemologies have been proposed which attempt to situate plural epistemic positions in relation to each other. The task that these epistemologies set themselves is to model how plural discourses can coexist within the same symbolic space. The model must recognise the fact that some discourses will be subordinated to others on the scale of received cultural values. And it must attempt to capture each in its own, positive terms; it must resist the standard practice of defining them only by reference to the one privileged standpoint. In other words, it must avoid allowing the dominant discourse hegemony over the entire symbolic field.

Summarising feminist attempts at non-hegemonic epistemologies, Val Plumwood has argued that there are three primary models of otherness.[2] Interestingly, de Beauvoir's discussion of the otherness of woman appeals to all three of these models, assuming them to be

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1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 8.

2 Val Plumwood, 'Centrism and the Logic of Alterity', in Marjorie Haas and Rachel Joffe Falmagne (eds), *Feminist Approaches to Logic*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

largely interchangeable. The first focuses on the negative attributions implicit in the dichotomous structure of classical logics: woman, according to this logic, is devalued because she is defined as not-man, she lacks the qualities that are valorised as masculine. The second, by contrast, focuses upon the relativity of such logics: woman, according to this logic, is devalued because she is defined relative to man, her qualities are attributed solely by reference to those that are valorised as masculine. The last, which Plumwood herself favours, focuses upon the asymmetry of classical logics: woman, according to this logic, is defined by reference to man but not man by reference to woman.

It is, says Plumwood, the asymmetrical nature of classical logic that allows it to operate hegemonically. The difficulty with the first and second of these models in explaining such hegemony, Plumwood explains, is that they are both too encompassing and too restrictive. So for example, the first model would problematise the use of any negative attributions in characterising terms such as 'woman'. But what can be wrong with characterising Jane as 'someone who would not let others down' or, for that matter, as 'not the same as icecream', to use Plumwood's examples. And so, because they encompass too many perfectly good ways of characterising 'woman', they restrict what we can say about 'woman' unnecessarily. The problem with the negative attributions that traditionally attach to the category 'woman' is not directly attributable to the fact that 'woman' is defined negatively, but that it is defined asymmetrically with 'man'.

The second model is equally restrictive. It would problematise the use to any attributions that were relative to another term. This would help to explain what is wrong with attributions like 'Mrs John Doe', where a woman is given no identity whatsoever except one that relates her to her husband. The difficulty here, however, is that it is not so much the relativity of the attribution that is the problem here, but the fact that the relativity operates in one direction only. As de Beauvoir notes, she is defined by reference to him and not he to her. If some means of identifying both parties to a relationship could be constructed, the both with reference to the other, then there might, in principle, be nothing wrong with relative attributions. The problem, once again, is the asymmetrical manner in which such relative attributions are presently constructed: he attains an identity which attaches to him

independently of his relationship with others; her identity is attained only by reference to him.

Plumwood names the last of these three models the 'centrist' model, in that it identifies the problem of classical dichotomy as lying in its tendency to create a centre of value, a Archimidean point which is the source of the good, the true, the light and so on. Its hegemony arises from the fact that everything else, everything 'outside' this centre, then takes on the values of 'other'. The definition of 'other' commonly occurs in negative terms, certainly; so too, the 'other' is commonly defined in terms relative to that centre. But the issue here - the final cause of the disparity in power between one and other - lies in the positing of a centre per se. It is the existence of the centre as source of value that is the root cause of the asymmetrical valuation of one and other, centre and margin.

It is, I believe, fair to say that most so-called postmodern theories - feminist, black and postcolonial discourses most particularly - tend to identify something like centrism as the problem with traditional logics. This explains the very common tendency to revalorise marginality as a locus of speech; the claim to be speaking 'from the margins' or 'from the limit' is well-attested, marking one's discourse as countercultural in some sense.[1] The metaphor of marginality is the most common one used for mapping the relation of the one to its other. And indeed, this model is extremely useful in that it accords the marginalised speaker with a position of speech, ensuring that her speech will be heard and valued (especially by other others) precisely because it is marginalised. It is helpful in explaining why it is that the marginalised discourse is difficult to assimilate into tradition: it follows rules that may not be schematised according to the Classical logic of the tradition and may in fact operate in conscious antithesis to such logic.

However, the centrist model will only take us so far. It can help to represent the logic whereby the other is historically devalued, but it does not provide any solution to this hegemony. Granted this is all it

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1 For example, the claim to be writing from the margin or limit appears in the title of Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, Routledge, New York, 1992 and Fred R. Dallmayr, *Margins of Political Discourse*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1989. The trend was very much strengthened by J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1982.

claims to do. But it motivates the further question: what model should replace it? How are we to remodel the relation of one to other? A great deal of thought has recently been devoted to this question. Yet the popularity of the notion of marginal discourses attests to the fact that many theorists have found no other means of representing their speaking position except by reference to those models that they claim to refuse. Does one really wish to embrace marginality as a position of speech? Is woman's voice truly peripheral? Is this the status feminism wishes to claim for it? Are there no other alternatives in representing one's position as other to those that are hegemonic within our culture?

For de Beauvoir, as for Hegel and for Jean-Paul Sartre before her, there is ultimately no position of speech available to a speaker, beyond those of hegemony and subordination.[1] Within the existentialist framework, the only authentic choice is that which asserts one's independent authority, the choice to assert oneself as the one, the absolute. To do otherwise represents weakness, a failure to rise above the circumstances of one's given situation. It represents a refusal to adopt the terms of one's freedom to embrace the future and create one's life autonomously, defining it by reference to one's own terms. There are two choices: to adopt the voice of cultural authority (Sartre called this the voice of 'transcendence') or remain mired in the lowliness of ineffectualness (the voice of 'immanence'). Granted de Beauvoir's developed this account to include a voice of oppression, but such a voice remained submerged within the binary logic of hegemony/ subordination.

Contemporary discourses of alterity have tended, if not to overturn the status accorded to these two voices, at least to emphasise the truth of Hegel's admission in his discussion of the master/slave dialectic that there is a certain (perhaps ironic) status in consciously occupying the position of subordinate. For the subordinate retains a closeness to the material reality of day-to-day existence that the dominant culture denies itself by throwing its own interpretive overlay across the facts. This

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1 A number of de Beauvoir's commentators have noted that her position on this point coincides with the existentialist account: see, for example, Catriona MacKenzie, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and/or the Female Body', in Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Grosz (eds), *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986.

status would of course be maximally exploited in Karl Marx's revolutionary politic. As with Hegelian dialectics in general, the problem here lies in avoiding a simple inversion of the binary logic, thus leaving the master/slave or hegemony/subordinate structure intact.

The question that esotericism poses is whether the marginal discourse must always be figured as subordinate for reason of its marginality. Can a marginal discourse not figure itself at the centre of culture and empower itself by virtue of this position? Historically, esotericism has illustrated the fact that being marginal to tradition can provide a worldview that is distinctive, original and authoritative in its own terms. The study of esotericism may thus give contemporary studies of the other an alternative model for representing the relation of one to other within the Western symbolic.

4. The Logic of the Esoteric

One of the primary difficulties that theorists have faced in characterising esotericism concerns how to characterise esotericism so as to recognise the importance of its relation to tradition, but give it the authority required to recognise it as an independent cultural force? The tensions between these two ways of conceiving esotericism often appear in discussions of its status and reflect the two competing ways of defining it.

Take for example an influential article by Edward A. Tiryakian, which tries to capture the sociological conditions underlying the rise of interest in esotericism in the 1960s. Writing in a cultural milieu highly attuned to reactive cultural trends, Tiryakian suggests that the rise of interest in esotericism and occultism has a political motive: 'as a spiritual reaction against the rationalistic-industrial-bureaucratic ethos of modern society, it is part of the counterculture'.[1] Couching his description in the Kuhnian notion of the cultural paradigm so popular in the 1970s, Tiryakian defines culture as 'a collective paradigm which provides the basic interpretations and justification of ongoing social

1 Edward A. Tiryakian, 'Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 3, 1972, p. 496.

existence'.[1] Esoteric worldviews, then, coexist with the exoteric, providing alternative 'cognitive mappings of nature and the cosmos, the epistemological and ontological reflection of ultimate reality'.[2]

Tiryakian explains that the esotericists' knowledge is developed internally to the individual, that as such it liberates him from the strictures of everyday life: 'esoteric culture provides leverage against the existing order by grounding political reflection and action in a reality that transcends that of everyday life, but which is a reality that may become actualised in the historical future by reversing the present order of the world'.[3] Tiryakian offers us little to explain how it is precisely that the esoteric knowledge constitutes a countercultural force, why and how it should arise as such and from whence its power to provide 'leverage against the institutionalised paradigm' arises. But, more importantly, while recognising that esotericism can act as a vehicle for social change - it 'functions as a seat of inspiration to new systems of social action'[4] - Tiryakian nevertheless falls back upon the account of esotericism as 'a marginal or underground movement'.[5] Situating esotericism at the margins of culture rather undermines his characterisation of it as a latent force operating at its heart.

The idea that esotericism acts as a reactionary force, operating against the narrow-mindedness of the dominant cultural perspectives (however these may be characterised), is attractive insofar as it allows esotericism a certain cultural influence. Yet its deficiencies are those of any theory that situates the other as a discursive paradigm at the margins of culture. Wouter Hanegraaff has outlined the difficulties of such a model as it appears in those writings of Frances Yates devoted to tracing the existence of a covert hermetic tradition beneath the developments of early modern scientific rationalism. The primary difficulties that this model faces are two-fold: it gives the 'dominant paradigm' the monopoly on intellectual progress, and attributes to

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1 *Ibid*, p. 496.
2 *Ibid*, p. 499.
3 *Ibid*, p. 506.
4 *Ibid*, p. 502.
5 *Loc. cit.*

hermeticism an internal coherence and historical consistency in relation to this tradition which it simply has not displayed.[1]

The problem here seems to be that esotericism is being defined predominantly by reference to the exoteric, as counterculture. The exoteric is accordingly being given a cultural centrality - and indeed hegemony - which it does not have. The feminist analysis of models of otherness above suggests that, as soon as the exoteric is accorded the status of dominant paradigm within the cultural tradition, the marginality of esotericism will correspondingly be understood in terms of its subordination to that paradigm. And yet the example of esotericism can be introduced precisely so as to provide a counterexample to the apparent rule that all others must be figured upon this model of hegemony/subordination. Esotericism is one discourse that has apparently made its marginality work for it, providing it with a locus from which to develop independently from the tradition, and from that position of relative outsider to contribute to it and also on occasion to challenge and to confront it.

Thus the esoteric could be seen as having an ambiguous status within the history of religions: at once central to these traditions, in that it illuminates them to the core, it nevertheless supplements them, in that it is not merely a part of the tradition as one denomination among others.[2] So, for example, the various esoteric currents supervene upon the several religious traditions of the West, having in some ways more in common with each other than with the various religious traditions from which they emerge. Indeed, more than ambiguity, esotericism enjoys a certain paralogical status: the very conditions that make it marginal are what contribute to its centrality - and *vice versa.* For arguably, if esotericism had not kept itself at arm's length from the theology of the religious traditions, it would not have been provided the means to develop the depth of understanding of these traditions that it has consistently displayed. And so also, if esotericism had not sought

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1 A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff (eds), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, Peeters, Leuven, 1998, p. xiv.

2 The Derridean notion of the 'supplement' which is neither inside or outside that which it supplements, but inhabits both spaces, is an extremely apt one in describing this ambiguous status: see J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Athlone Press, London, 1981.

to reach so far beneath the surface of these traditions, then its extreme sophistication and so too its exclusivity - the very things that make it marginal - would not have been so pronounced.

The idea that there are discourses that have an ambiguous status with regard to the discourses of our tradition is, of course, not unprecedented. Esotericism is the one field within the intellectual history of the West that has a sustained history that builds upon this status. It is founded upon philosophies that themselves developed in conscious engagement with the Platonic themes of our tradition. It is perhaps the only marginal discourse in the West to have the breadth and depth of history to challenge the Platonic dualisms upon which our intellectual and religious traditions were founded. As such, it has important contributions to make to contemporary discourses of alterity.

5. Figuring the other

There is an interesting issue regarding otherness that deserves mention before closing, in part because it reinforces the alignments of esotericism and postmodernism that I have drawn in this paper. Beyond the question of how we are to situate the other in relation to the one, lies a deeper and, I suspect, more difficult question of how the other is to be figured in itself. What or who is the other? What or who is it that this notion of 'other' ought to represent? Many contemporary esotericists wish to leave aside the question of whether the voice that they are seek to capture in their study of esotericism is that of man or that of God - that is, whether this is an anthropology or a theology. Pursuing a 'studies in religion' approach allows us to approach esotericism as an anthropology, as a study of cultural representations of God.[1]

Interestingly, a logically similar question has been addressed within feminism - and the same answer embraced. In response to de Beauvoir's discussion of woman's status, an argument erupted as to whether feminism purported to represent women themselves - all women, regardless of situation - or whether feminism addressed itself

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1 Hanegraaff, among others, is clear on this point, describing the study of esotericism from an *etic* perspective: see Faivre and Hanegraaff, *op. cit.*, p 12.

to the cultural representations of 'woman'. Feminist scholars, like religion scholars, have pursued the latter approach, leaving open the question how far their discourses can truly claim to represent women themselves.[1]

The questions facing esotericism and feminism are structurally related: is it God itself that is the object of analysis or is it 'God', i.e., the way in which our culture represents God? Again, is it women themselves that are the object of analysis or is it 'woman', i.e., the way in which our culture represents women? Theorists have opted for the latter response, but the former always lingers in the background and asserts itself periodically as the issue of ultimate concern. For why bother with the cultural representations of God or woman if not to understand something about God or women themselves? Why challenge cultural representations of God or woman if not the better to represent God or women themselves? Are these not the ultimate object of their analysis? It seems to me that, like other discourses of alterity, esotericism and feminism are plagued by such questions, even as they try to position themselves as meta-discourses, as second-order analyses of culture, first and foremost.

There is, at this point, an equivalence between these two discourses of alterity which deserves further analysis on the part of feminist theologians. To date, I have suggested that the reason why esotericism stands as a clear exemplar of discourses of alterity is because of the way that it is situated relative to the exoteric traditions. It is this, I have suggested, that gives them the character of secrecy and mystery. But there is a further reason: there is a second-order 'otherness' at work here. This further level of otherness pertains to the ultimate object of analysis in the study of esotericism: God. Esotericism stands as an exemplar of the discourses of alterity because historically, esotericism shares with negative theology a positing of God as other. God is conceived as other to man, and hence other to man's discourses, to the symbolic systems which man creates to represent his universe. It is this that lends the discourses of esotericism their own marginal status; they speak of that which pertains to God, and not to man. There is food for

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1 See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, Routledge, New York, 1989 for a clear summary of arguments on this contentious issue.

thought here: does God stand on the same ground as woman in this respect - in respect of their otherness to the discourses of man?

I shall leave the discussion of alterity at this rather provocative question, noting merely that feminism and esotericism, while they may appear to be culturally diverse on the face of it, nevertheless have quite a good deal to contribute to each other. Indeed, it is highly worthwhile to treat esotericism, not as some arcane field within history, but as an exemplary contemporary field of study, and thus aligned not merely temporally but also thematically to other contemporary fields within the humanities. Of late, mysticism and negative theology have been receiving a good deal of attention from theorists of a roughly postmodern bent; esotericism will no doubt come under similar scrutiny before long. There is no doubt too that postmodernism can only benefit from such a study.