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Esotericism, Occultism, and Magic:
The Case of Gurdjieff and Crowley

Joseph Azize

joseph.azize@gmail.com

Abstract

Is it possible to satisfactorily define the words "esotericism," "occultism," and "magic"? Do these terms have any utility? Can "esotericism" be understood without reference to a complement such as "exotericism"? It is suggested that esotericism held a niche place in Western culture even before the rise of Western esotericism in the nineteenth century, although the word was rarely employed. After a study of the terms, and especially of the concepts they reference, the alleged similarity of G. I. Gurdjieff and Aleister Crowley is taken as a case study. I compare their methods and teachings, their meetings, and the applicability of these three terms to these figures, asking if Gurdjieff's and Crowley's systems were esoteric, occult, both, or neither. This discussion provides the occasion to consider the "argument from silence," and its validity in historical studies.

Keywords: G. I. Gurdjieff; Aleister Crowley; A. R. Orage; esotericism in the Gospels; Pythagoreanism; H. P. Blavatsky; argument from silence; argument *ad ignorantiam*

It is notorious that the substantives "esoteric" and "occult" are often used interchangeably, and that the derived nouns "esotericism" and "occultism" may carry unexpected nuances. To see how the accidents of history have a large role in the formation of our vocabulary, one need only compare the meanings of the adjective "social" with those of the derived noun "socialism," or "romantic" with "Romanticism." The difficulty in precisely defining "esotericism" and "occultism" perhaps also comports with their meanings: can we reasonably expect abundant certainty when speaking of secretive people and secret knowledge? However, there may be value in attempting to describe the parameters of these terms and their nuances, even if formal definition eludes us; and to compare them. I contrast G. I. Gurdjieff and Aleister Crowley, two

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influential personalities in Western Esotericism, almost exact contemporaries, who met each other on at least two occasions, and examine how our terms (and the complementary word "exoteric") may be applied to them and their systems. In doing so, we shall have the opportunity to consider the important methodological question of the "argument from silence."

1.1. The Terms and the Concepts

Egil Asprem has noted that often, historically, when articulating terms, "etymology, common understandings and lexical definitions all pointed in different directions."[1] This is exactly why these must all be analysed, and the results synthesized so far as this may be possible. I commence with some research from the modern linguistic disciplines. Contemporary definitions and etymologies of the word "esoteric" seem to me to be based on that offered by Walter Skeat, whose celebrated *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* appeared in various editions and volumes between 1879 and 1910:

> **esoteric**, inner, secret. (Gk.) 'Exoteric and *esoteric*:' Warburton, Divine Legation … Gk. *esōterikós* inner (Lucian); a term expanded from Gk. *esōteros*, inner, a comparative form from *ésō*, within, an adv. m *es* = *eis*, into. prep. A term used of those disciples of Pythagoras, &c. who were *scientifically taught*, as opposed to those who had more popular views, the *exoteric*. See **Exoteric.**[2]

The Liddell and Scott 1889 dictionary of Greek to English states that the superlative, *esōtatos*, is the equivalent of the Latin *intimus*, a significant point because we, being more familiar with the terms "intimate" and "more intimate" can thus better appreciate the overtones the word carried in ancient Greece, as appears when we come to the statement of Iamblichus about the *esōterikoi*.[3] Skeat does not date the appearance of "esoteric" in English, but William Warburton's

1. Asprem, "Beyond the West," 9.
2. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 200.
3. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *esōtatos*.

Divine Legation of Moses was published in two volumes in 1738 and 1741. For the word "exoteric," he supplies:

> **exoteric**, external. (Gk.) First in 1662. Opposed to *esoteric*.—Gk. *exōterikós*, external . . .[4]

The two substantives complement each other. I suspect they entered usage together, beginning to gain currency between the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As we shall come later to the "argument from silence," Henige's observation that most of the first attested appearances of a word in English will often not capture the earliest use is pertinent.[5]

The English-language use of the word "occult" is earlier than that of "esoteric":

> **occult**, hidden, secret (L.) . . . first in 1567 . . . L. *occultus*, hidden, pp. of *occulere*, to cover over . . . from √KEL, to cover, hide, whence also . . . E. *hell*. Der. *occult-ly, -ness*; *occult*, verb . . . from F. *occulter*, 'to hide' . . . which from L. *occultāre*, frequentative of *occulere* . . .[6]

The esoteric presupposes and thus implies the exoteric, while the occult presupposes and implies the existence of something manifest; as we shall see, the words also imply a hierarchy of truth and value. It is also significant that the first word is associated with the Pythagoreans, and specifically relates to the *disciples*; and that "occult" with the frequentative "t" and all its derived terms should be ancestrally related to the word "hell." One would not say something was made "occult" for safety, but one could say that it had been "hidden." The frequentative may have once given the word a sense of habitual concealment, which may have added to an unsavoury nuance.

The contemporary usage of these words is illustrated from the Australian national lexicon, the seventh edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, published in 2017. It includes the following entries:

> **esoteric** . . . *adj.* 1. understood by or meant for a select few; profound; recondite. 2. belonging to the select few. 3. private; secret; confidential. 4. (of philosophical doctrine, etc.) intended

4. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 204.
5. Henige, *Historical Evidence and Argument*, 181–82.
6. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 408.

> to be communicated only to the initiated . . . esoterically, adv.—esotericism, esotery
>
> **esoterica** . . . *pl. n.* arcane or abstruse information
>
> **exoteric** . . . *adj.* 1. suitable for or communicated to those outside a select circle. 2. of or relating to the outside; exterior, external
>
> **occult** . . . *adj.* 1. beyond the bounds of ordinary knowledge; mysterious. 2. not disclosed; secret; communicated only to the initiated. 3. (*in early science*) not apparent on mere inspection but discoverable by experimentation . . . 4. of the nature of, or relating to, certain reputed sciences, as magic, astrology, etc., involving the alleged knowledge or employment of secret or mysterious agencies. . . .
>
> **the occult**, a. occult studies or sciences. b. the supernatural
>
> **occultism** . . . *n.* the doctrine or study of the occult.

"Esoteric" and its derivatives then, referred initially to disciples, that is, to people. "Occult" and its derivatives referred first to discovering the real but hidden property of a thing or phenomenon. This seems to have left a trace on modern usage, at least in terms of what might not be said. Thus, in treating Joseph Rodes Buchanan's psychometry, Wouter Hanegraaff writes: "it did not matter that much to him whether the psychometric power should be explained in physical, occult, or mental terms."[7] The word "occult" fits here, but the word "esoteric" would not. This leads one to conclude that the word "occult" and its related terms can only sometimes be used as equivalents or subsets of "esoteric" and its related terms. Hanegraaff's conception of "occultism" as "secularized esotericism" also points in the same direction.[8] However, the "occult" is neither an equivalent nor a true subset of the esoteric, if only because the "occult" is historically associated with "certain reputed sciences, as magic, astrology, etc." as the dictionary has it. Henrik Bogdan describes magic, alchemy, and astrology as being the three "royal arts" of Western esotericism.[9]

7. Hanegraaff, "The Theosophical Imagination," 21.
8. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 409.
9. Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 11.

This raises the question of what is meant by "magic." Skeat derives the word via Latin from the Greek *magikós*, "magical," from *mágos*, "one of the Magi, an enchanter." He notes that the substantive "magic" was originally an abbreviation of the phrase "magic art," from the Latin *ars magica*.[10] I am not aware that this etymology has ever been challenged. Illustrating modern usage, the *Macquarie Dictionary* has:

> **magic** . . . *n.* 1. The art of producing effects claimed to be beyond the natural human power and arrived at by means of supernatural agencies or through command of occult forces in nature. 2. the exercise of this art.[11]

On the basis of these definitions, "magic" cannot be used as a synonym of either "esoteric" or "occult," and vice versa; but it is a subset of both terms, although it would more naturally and intimately be associated with the "occult" than it would with the "esoteric." This is, I suggest, related to the etymological roots of the words "esoteric" and "occult," and the fact that occult intrinsically has to do with being hidden, while esoteric is not so much hidden as inner: what is inner may not be secret, yet be demanding of attainment, like the peak of a mountain. "Magic" is often compared and sometimes contrasted with "religion" and "science," especially in anthropology and ethnography.[12] That is a global study. I am focussing here on its use in Western Esotericism.

Now we come to the question of the connotations of these words. I shall contend that the concept inherent in the word "esoteric" subsisted in European culture long before the rise of Western Esotericism, even if the word was not employed. Also, the nature of "esotericism" will be quite different depending upon the reason for maintaining some secrecy: whether to avoid sacrilege; or because to reveal the sacred is dangerous (for example, knowledge of a secret name can confer a power which could be abused);[13] or because of the likelihood of misunderstanding and distortion; or because one has to be personally

10. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 354–55.
11. *Macquarie Dictionary,* 8th ed., 922.
12. See, for an introduction, Otto and Strausberg, "Introduction," 1–13.
13. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 188 and 194.

worthy of it; or because the esoteric truth itself should be protected.[14] These considerations are not mutually exclusive.

First, consider the classic example, the Pythagoreans. The anonymous life in Photius states that the disciples of Pythagoras included *sebastikoi*, *politikoi*, *mathematikoi*, *Pythagorikoi*, and *Pythagoristai*, those engaged in contemplation, or business, or geometry and astronomy; and then those who associated with Pythagoras and those who only imitated the teachings.[15] Diverse categories are probably being placed side by side here. Porphyry, in his life of Pythagoras, has a different classification which cannot easily be reconciled with that preceding, for he draws a distinction between *mathematikoi* and *akousmatikoi*, stating that the *mathematikoi* "learned the fuller and more exactly elaborate reasons of science," but the *akousmatikoi* "heard only the summarized instructions of learning, without more detailed explanations."[16] Iamblichus, in *On the Pythagorean Life*, has those students who lived together being those who philosophized, contrasted with the *akousmatikoi* who lived family lives, but gathered together for instruction. This passage may be an interpolation.[17] Later, he describes how Pythagoras carefully vetted his pupils, placing them on a probation, and then selecting those who would be the *esōterikoi*:

> The candidates themselves, then, if they appeared worthy of sharing in his teachings, having been judged by their way of life and other virtuousness, after the five year silence, became "esoterics" and heard Pythagoras within the curtain, and also saw him. Before this, they shared his discourses through mere hearing.[18]

It is explicitly stated that the disciples had to be adjudged worthy of becoming *esōterikoi*. The esoterics were, then, the intimates of the master, and were allowed beyond the veil. The substance of this practice was known to the author of the

14. Dimant, "Concealing and Revealing," 56, concludes from the Dead Sea Scrolls that at Qumran their secret knowledge was kept so, both because those learning it had to be worthy and to protect it from the impure.

15. Uždavinys, *The Golden Chain*, 3.

16. Ibid., 11.

17. Dillon and Hershbell, *Iamblichus*, 52–53 and 55n6; *De Vita Pythagorica*, 6.29–30.

18. Ibid., *Iamblichus*, 96–98; *De Vita Pythagorica*, 17.72.

anonymous life of Pythagoras, if not to Porphyry as well, even though neither uses the word *esōterikoi*. Those who failed their probation were then treated as dead by the Pythagoreans, who even made tombs for them.[19] Conversely, those who were not among the Pythagoreans were referred to as "those outside." Describing a murderous attack, probably planned by those who had been declared "dead," Iamblichus stated:

> Then knowledge faded out together with those who knew, since it had been guarded closely until then in the hearts, never divulged, and only things hard to understand and unexplained were remembered by those outside (*tois exō*) the school; except for the very little which some Pythagoreans then in foreign lands preserved, some sparks very dim and hard to catch.[20]

It was already clear that the terms "exoteric" and "esoteric" necessarily complemented each other, but the Pythagorean terminology also shows that the institution of an esoteric inner circle can evoke not only one but more outer circles: hence, not all Pythagoreans were *esōterikoi*, but even these were privileged in comparison with those outside. We shall see a similar ramification of the idea in Gurdjieff, where there are three circles of the instructed: the esoteric, mesoteric, and exoteric, and then the rest of the world ("the outer circle").[21] Esotericism in circles such as Pythagoreanism has the effect of also structuring the group according to a hierarchy of access to the received truth.

This passage also reveals risks inherent in esotericism, that the secret can be so well kept it is eventually lost, and that by setting up a mentality of insiders and outsiders, ire and rivalry can be aroused. So, esotericism might be meant to preserve, but it can also render the transmission of the inner knowledge insecure. Stroumsa states: "esotericism is inherently prone to instability: if the secret is disclosed, it is no longer a secret; if it is not divulged, it loses its

19. Ibid., *Iamblichus*, 98–99; *De Vita Pythagorica* 17.72.

20. Ibid., *Iamblichus*, 244–45; *De Vita Pythagorica* 35.252.

21. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 310–11. Whenever I use italics in quoting from Ouspensky, they are always original.

power and impact, and eventually disappears."[22] He does not explain why what is restricted should necessarily lose any "power." But this "instability" is an issue for the esotericists; some may readily contemplate that the secrets will be forever lost rather than divulged to any outside the inner circle. Also, the esoteric/exoteric divide practically invites criticism and even ridicule from the excluded side of the fence. In fact, the word "esoteric" is apparently first attested, mockingly, in the work of the satirist Lucian.[23] Since Lucian's model student was a Peripatetic, Lucian must have presupposed that the division into esoteric and exoteric students was current as referring to students of philosophy, and not restricted to the Pythagoreans.[24] Ironically, the word pair must have entered popular knowledge from the philosophy schools, although its first attested instance is not from those schools, but from scornful outsiders.

1.2. Esotericism in the New Testament

The phenomenon of a secret reserved for the initiated has associations not only with the Pythagoreans, but also with the plan of the Jerusalem Temple with its courts of concentric holiness,[25] and veils, leading to the most important veil, which shielded the Holy of Holies. Meyers states that the veil was

> the fabric that served to divide the inner sanctum ("holy of holies") of the Tabernacle from the outer sanctum. It guarded the most holy object, the ark, from the profanity of contact with humans. Thus, no one could pass through this veil, not even Levitical priests. . . . Only the high priest could go past it, and only after special cleansing, for the annual atonement ceremonies.[26]

In the instance of the Temple veils, it was death to any unauthorised person to even approach, let alone pass them (Numbers 18:7). It is not remarkable that a veil should represent darkness shielding a dangerous secret and thus

22. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 6.
23. Hanegraaff, "Esoteric," 336.
24. Lucian, "Sale of Creeds."
25. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 33.
26. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Veil of the Temple."

exclusiveness and safeguarding. The curtaining off of the Holy of Holies also draws attention to the fact that what is marked off is *holy*. The sacred is exalted in the eyes of the faithful precisely by being removed from their gaze and is made accessible only to a trained hierarchic minority.

Stroumsa remarks that: "the existence of esoteric doctrines in early Christianity has often been played down."[27] This is perhaps especially true for the Gospels. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus is reported to have said: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you." This exemplifies four features of esotericism, namely: the sacred is inherently worthy of respect (sacrilege is an evil which discretion can prevent); the secret teaching cannot be understood without preparation; one must be worthy to receive what is holy; and it is dangerous to reveal the sacred to the profane.[28]

These principles are exemplified in the apostolic teaching.[29] Hence in Mark 4:10–11, Jesus says to the twelve apostles, when they are alone: "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside [*ekeinois de tois exō*] everything comes in parables" (see also Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10). Only Mark uses the adverb *exō*, from which the word "exoteric" is derived, but the others preserve the meaning of a favoured inner group admitted to the mysteries in contradistinction to those who are not. This is even clearer in Luke, which refers to *tois de loipois*, "those left behind, the remainder." Marcus points to the similarity of Daniel 2:27–30 (a dream is vouchsafed to Nebuchadnezzar, but the interpretation is reserved for Daniel); and to some Qumran scrolls where "God forgives the sins of the members of the elect community . . . while at the

27. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 3.

28. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 675–77.

29. They were at one time more prominent in Christianity, but this did change, so that Christianity lost the esoteric principle in its daily life: Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 6–7, 32 and 44–45. I will not pursue that; I am only contending here that the esoteric principle was preserved in the Gospels, and was thus a potential influence on Christian culture and cultures descended from it.

same time allowing, and even causing, outsiders to be led astray."[30] This dimension of the Gospels was understood and continued in early Christianity, where parts of the cult and also of the doctrine were reserved for baptised Christians.[31]

The preposition "inside" can function both as a necessary part of the narrative, indicating location, and as a symbol pointing to those "outside the community of disciples, the circle of the saved."[32] Marcus goes on to note that in the Pauline letters "those outside" has become "a term for non-Christians," as it does in the rabbinic text he references, and to Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras* 35.252 (see above).[33] This is shown in the Pauline epistles, notably in 1 Corinthians 5:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:12; and Colossians 4:5). Of these, the fullest expression of a dichotomy between insider and outsider is in 1 Corinthians 5:12: "For why should I be judging outsiders [*tous exō*, 'the ones outside']? Is it not your business to judge those within [*tous esō*, 'the ones inside']?" I would add that those who are consigned to the "outer darkness" in three verses of Matthew, are literally banished to *to skotos to exōteron*.[34]

While Mark 4:11 speaks of those outside, Luke 12:3 speaks of those inside: *en tois temeiois*, in the hidden or secret rooms.[35] Luke writes, "There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed on the housetops." This seems to mean that the esoteric and the exoteric are in a dynamic relationship for the enlightening of the exoteric. This explains why hiding is condemned; immediately after the pertinent parable in Mark, Jesus is reported as adding: "Is a lamp brought in to be placed under a bushel basket or under a bed, and not

30. Marcus (2000), 288.

31. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 3–4.

32. Marcus (2000), 299.

33. Ibid., 299.

34. The passages are Matthew 8:12; 22:13; and 25:30; see Danker et al., *Greek English Lexicon* (BDAG), s.v. *exōteros, a, ov*, 355.

35. BDAG s.v. *tameion*, 988.

to be placed on a lampstand? For there is nothing hidden except to be made visible; nothing is secret except to come to light. . . . To the one who has, more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."[36]

In Mark and Luke, the hiding and the manifestation are connected; however, in Mark alone it is unmistakable that the very purpose of hiding is *in order* that something may be revealed (hence the use of the preposition *hina*, twice in 4:22 to indicate purpose), but both Mark and Luke include the following mixed promise and warning: that those who know the secret will receive more, and those who do not be yet more deficient. The presence of the esoteric principle is clear in the Gospel of John (e.g. John 16:24–30 where Jesus says that he has spoken obliquely, but now he will not, and the disciples hail his clearer speech). The word used is *paroimia*, which has two meanings: a pithy saying, and "a brief communication containing truths designed for initiates," in illustration of which the *Bible Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (BDAG) cites, *inter alia*, John 16:25, and adds that tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia, *The Suda*, defined a *paroimia* as being a *logos apokruphos*, a "hidden word/saying."[37] Also instructive is the exchange in John 10:24–26 where the critics say that Jesus should speak plainly, and he replies that their lack of understanding is due to their lack of belief. Esoteric truth can stand in open sight yet remain invisible because the outer circle lacks the quality required to see it.

The Gospel teaching was meant to be widely and vigorously disseminated. Thus, Jesus is reported as saying: "What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops" (Matthew 10:27). Inherent in this principle is that the esoteric elite are obliged to share their learning, despite persecution (the context in both Matthew 10:27 and Luke 12:2–3). Esotericism, for all its privileges, also imports responsibilities. Furthermore, the direction of the revelation is necessarily from the esoteric

36. Mark 4:21–22 and 25; so too Luke 8:16–18; Matthew 5:15 shortens this considerably.
37. BDAG, 779–80.

to the exoteric: from inside to outside, never in the opposite direction. So, does the very promulgation of the Gospel supersede the principle? The dynamic relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric is shown in the fact that a reader or hearer knows of this esoteric principle through the Gospels. This principle, with the combined privilege and burden of esoteric students, was available to every culture which read the New Testament. Religious authority could appropriate the principle to itself, but if that authority was challenged, recourse could be had to the Gospels. The New Testament is innocent of the connection with astrology, magic, and alchemy which "occultism" readily connotes, but the passages we have reviewed were explicitly picked up by H.P. Blavatsky, and she was not too shy to claim that she possessed a higher and esoteric truth.

2.1. Esotericism and Occultism in the Twentieth Century

As the nuances of a word are determined by context, we will now consider some examples of how these key terms have been used in modern times. However, first it may help to bear in mind Bogdan's comment, summarising and finessing previous research:

> Western esotericism, as a form of thought, is an abstract construction that only exists as a methodology. There is no such thing as an esoteric tradition *per se*, in which the esoteric form of thought can be traced historically. What we can study . . . are the various currents through which the esoteric form of thought manifests itself.[38]

2.1.1. H. P. Blavatsky

It is not possible to fully explore the treatment of esotericism by H. P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), so extensive a use did she make of the exoteric/esoteric word pair, and so complex is the vexed and intertwined question of "the Masters."[39] The archaeology of her opinions would require a monograph, so complex was her procedure. For example, in this field she relied upon the work of S.F.

38. Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 21.
39. See for example, Johnson, *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*.

Dunlap (1825-1905), who specialised in stringing together quotations;[40] and she matched the principle that contemporary religions declined from a once universal esoteric "Wisdom-Religion" with a sort of Indian priority.[41] However, in *The Key to Theosophy*, published in 1889, we have a succinct summary of her teachings. There she uses the Marcan passage we have considered as one support for her view of the necessity of esotericism in any true wisdom teaching

> that every ancient religious, or rather philosophical, cult consisted of an esoteric or secret teaching, and an exoteric (outward public) worship. . . . Not one of the ancient nations ever imparted through its priests its real philosophical secrets to the masses, but allotted to the latter only the husks. . . . Finally, do we not find the same even in early Christianity, among the Gnostics, and even in the teachings of Christ? Did he not speak to the multitudes in parables which had a two-fold meaning, and explain his reasons only to his disciples? "To you," he says, "it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables." . . . Examples might be brought from every country to this effect.[42]

This identification of the esoteric with "the inner side of universal Truth" only means anything because it stands in relation to an exoteric "worldly face of a tradition consisting of various dogmas and rituals created by man."[43] Later, in *The Key to Theosophy*, she observed that the Theosophical section was divided into exoteric and esoteric sections:

> Every lay member is entitled to general instruction if he only wants it; but few are willing to become what is called "working members," and most prefer to remain the "drones" of Theosophy. Let it be understood that private research is encouraged in the T. S., provided it does not infringe the limit which separates the exoteric from the esoteric, the blind from the conscious magic.[44]

40. Hanegraaff, "The Theosophical Imagination," 10–11.

41. Rudbøg, "Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Esoteric Tradition," 166–67 and 173. This idea has a lengthy history, and Blavatsky assumes it rather than treats of it systematically, e.g. consider the discussion tucked away in a chapter on "Symbolism and Ideographs" in Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1.2.1, especially 306–7.

42. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 6–7.

43. Cited in Rudbøg, "Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Esoteric Tradition," 166.

44. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 17–18, see also 14.

In fact, she not only instituted an "Esoteric Section," but also an "Inner Group" of six men and six women for face-to-face instruction.[45] Blavatsky also linked the transmission of esoteric doctrine to the agency of initiates,[46] and distinguished Theosophy from "occultism," as overlapping sets. Thus, not all Theosophists are occultists, and those occultists with a penchant for black magic can never be Theosophists. However, she allowed that "true" occultists could be Theosophists.[47] This incorporates the features we have been discussing, namely the superiority of the esoteric to the exoteric and the need for the initiated to enlighten those in darkness. In Blavatsky we find an idea that the esoteric centre, so to speak, stands behind historically known religions, philosophies, and teachings. That is, there are layers of esotericism, within each teaching, and then beyond them. This does not seem to have been the case with the Greek schools, or in the New Testament, where the esoteric is understood by reference to a teacher and his selection of an inner group of disciples.

2.1.2. P. D. Ouspensky

The same passages from the Gospels were used by P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947) in his essay "Christianity and the New Testament," written between 1911 and 1929, and published as a chapter in *A New Model of the Universe* in 1933. In his interpretation these verses show that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs only to the few, the disciples, and this—as Ouspensky states—is the idea of the "inner circle of humanity or the idea of esotericism."[48] In Ouspensky's opinion, esotericism occupies an important position in Christianity, and the chief place in the Gospels.[49] In the preface to the second edition of 1934, Ouspensky acknowledged that an American reviewer had not been alone in

45. Boag, "The 'Lost Word' Key and Esoteric Eschatology," 490.
46. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 2, 3, 9, 169–70, and 222.
47. Ibid., 15–19.
48. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 163–64, citing 164.
49. Ibid., 148.

being unable to grasp the idea of esotericism.[50] It is no surprise that Ouspensky wrote that he had learned the idea of esotericism from the Theosophical Society, and it had provided him with a promising perspective for the study of religion and mysticism.[51] Ouspensky developed the idea of esotericism, by linking it to what G.I. Gurdjieff called "higher mind" and different ways of thinking.[52] Some interesting elements appear in his interpretation of occultism (a word that he rarely used):

> Magic or occult knowledge is knowledge based upon senses which surpass our five senses and upon a capacity for thinking which surpasses ordinary thinking, *but it is knowledge translated into ordinary logical language, if that is possible or in so far as it is possible*.[53]

This explains why, in the dynamic relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric, the direction of movement is from the inner to the outer: the esoteric receives the higher wisdom and undertakes the delicate task of interpreting it. Ouspensky followed Gurdjieff in considering that a new language was needed for esotericism, albeit a language using the same words, but filling them with more precise meaning, from an objective starting point.[54] Even then, said Ouspensky, certain esoteric insights could be learnt, yet could not be expressed or taught in words at all, requiring us to think with a higher mind and in different categories.[55]

Ouspensky may have been responsible for the formulation attributed to Orage that the "Hidden Learning" is not called the "Hidden Teaching" because the greatest efforts must be made by the pupil to learn the principles. Therefore, "they cannot be taught. But they can be learned."[56] Certainly, many of the ideas

50. Ibid., vii.

51. Ibid., 301.

52. The main outlines are to be found in Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, in the chapter "Esotericism and Modern Thought."

53. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 16.

54. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 22, 68–71, and 311.

55. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, vii–xiii, 324 and 541.

56. King, *The Oragean Version*, 14. Ibid., 20, states that all the ideas in the book were as taught by Orage unless specially indicated otherwise.

relating to the "public history" as the "history of crime" hail from Ouspensky.[57] This raises the possibility of a perspective on esotericism whereby the esoteric is hidden chiefly by the blindness of the outer circle.

2.2. Academic Studies of Western Esotericism

If Blavatsky and Ouspensky were theoreticians of the esoteric, then historian Frances Yates (1899–1981) was a sympathetic observer of the occult. Yates related magic to the occult and to theology of a certain kind; hence she spoke of Apuleius's turning to the "occult," especially to an Egyptian-themed occultism in his disillusion with the philosophical schools of the ancient Roman world, and stated that this earned him the ire of Augustine, who viewed his philosophy as demonic in the sense of devilish.[58] Moving forward, Yates distinguished two Renaissance types of magic: one was the old magic, evil, black, and forbidden by the Church. The other was respectable and learned, sanctified by its connection with the philosophical Greek-language Neoplatonic texts and "tinged with occultism."[59] She concludes that the sixteenth-century monk and hermeticist Giordano Bruno was responsible for the

> transformation of the art of memory from a fairly rational technique using images, theorists on which—amongst them Thomas Aquinas himself—had used the Aristotelian dictum (sc. on images from sense impressions), into a magical and religious technique for training the imagination as the instrument for reaching the divine and obtaining divine powers, linking through the imagination with angels, demons, the effigies of stars and inner "statues" of gods and goddesses in contact with celestial things.[60]

Yates does not, so far as I can ascertain, define these terms; but she does describe some important trajectories and, as we shall see, illumines the background to Aleister Crowley's "magick." Yates again touched on some of these themes, introducing some

57. Compare King, *Oragean Version*, 1, with Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 40 and 344–45.
58. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 10.
59. Ibid., 18.
60. Ibid., 370.

nuances which need not detain us, and offering the following as her understanding of the Renaissance "occult philosophy" with which she was dealing:

> This philosophy, or outlook, was compounded of Hermeticism as revived by Marsilio Ficino, to which Pico della Mirandola added a Christianised version of Jewish Cabala. These two trends, associated together, form what I call 'the occult philosophy'.[61]

Like Yates, historian James Webb (1946–1980) was an observer of the occult. In 1974, when he published *The Occult Underground* (first released as *The Flight from Reason* in 1971), he stated that: "The 'occult' has not formed part of the overt concerns of members of the academic fraternity."[62] He made the point that "it is the very nature of the occult that it cannot exist except in opposition to and interrelation with that critical Establishment."[63] Webb then made reference to the association of trends which Yates had averred to:

> Under this widely misunderstood heading (sc. the occult) are grouped an astonishing collection of subjects: hypnotism, magic, astrology, water-diving, 'secret' societies, and a multitude of similar topics of doubtful intellectual respectability.[64]

The Theosophical Society furnished Webb with an example of a "prototype occult society," illustrating his view of occultism as a "flight from Reason" (i.e., a reaction against the Enlightenment). For Webb, the Theosophical Society

> is the epitome of the pseudo-intellectual … the disseminator and distorter of countless non-rational theories of the universe—for as it combined Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and diverse manufactured notions into one eccentric whole, none of these doctrines was ever binding on a single member.[65]

By the time he wrote *The Occult Establishment*, published in 1976, Webb had realised that "no one had bothered to discover *what 'the occult' in fact is.*"[66] His

61. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, 1, see also 83–84.
62. Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 1.
63. Ibid., 2.
64. Ibid., 11.
65. Ibid., 104–5.
66. Ibid., 1.

own view had expanded, but was still fundamentally the same; seeing historical occultism in Europe and the USA as an "underground of rejected knowledge, comprising heretical religious positions, defeated social schemes, abandoned sciences, and neglected modes of speculation …"[67] In the same volume, he even links "mysticism and the religious impulse" with occultism, on the basis that in the 1930s (especially in Germany and England) these three qualities characterised what he called "the illuminated attitude," which was anti-Establishment in being "anti-individualist, antimaterialist, and antirationalist."[68] Many ideas of lofty lineage were included in this mix, namely Hasidic and Catholic mysticism.[69] Webb also observed that historically many of these theories, including even Blavatsky's Theosophy, had a significant racial component.[70] I rather imagine that racialist ideas are now emphatically the property of fringe movements. However clearly Webb may weave his presentation, the words "occult," "mysticism," and "religious impulse" are simply not understood as equivalents. Further, "rejected knowledge" is not a workable definition: it begs the question of whether we are speaking of knowledge at all. "Rejected knowledge" would appear to cover the ridicule heaped on Ignaz Semmelweiss when he discovered the true cause of puerperal fever, but he was not an occultist. The question is really which ideas were rejected, by whom, and why.

Also, one might wonder whether the "occult" is so much rejected as *rejecting*. For example, Jean-Pierre Laurant sees both esotericism and occultism as desiring to find an autonomous outlook independent of all other disciplines, which would also recover the ancient knowledge, whether understood as "a *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*," with "esotericism" referring more to religious and philosophic systems which supported the techniques and practices of

67. Ibid., 10.
68. Ibid., 276.
69. Ibid., 277 and 290.
70. Ibid., 278.

occultism.[71] The idea of an ancient theology and a perennial philosophy alludes to a perspective which Blavatsky adopted. The Latin word *perennis* suggests a continuing tradition. This tradition can be identified with the idea of an esoteric circle, which stands apart from the "history of crime," and the Masters from whom comes the right to teach with authority.

2.2.1. Faivre and Hanegraaff

Antoine Faivre proposed "a system of criteria . . . [which] bears on these esoteric 'currents.' It does not pretend to be more than a methodological tool, subject to refinement and correction."[72] He went on to aver that esotericism is not: "a specific genre, (rather) it is a form of thought."[73] At this point there is already significant obscurity: what does he mean by a "specific genre" and a "form of thought," and what is the difference between them? Uninstructed, I would have imagined that a "specific genre" was a parade-ground example of a "form of thought." Faivre then makes a series of assertions about the use of the term "esotericism." They are not supported by citation or illustration; one has to trust or not that his sample is representative, and that the discussion will rather hover above the concrete.

Faivre alleges that: "The lexical content of the word 'esotericism' is slight. ('Eso' means 'inside' and 'ter' implies an opposition.)"[74] First, of all, this etymology is not quite correct, as we saw above; in particular, "ter" is a part of the comparative suffix, it does not imply "opposition." Then, how is the "lexical content" of the word "slight"? What would render the "lexical content" more substantial? If Faivre's treatment has been vague and based on assertion, it becomes baffling when he writes the following:

71. Laurant, "The Primitive Characteristics of Nineteenth-Century Esotericism," 277.
72. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 3.
73. Ibid., 4.
74. Ibid.

> In the modern West what we may call "esotericism" is a form of thought identifiable by the presence of six fundamental characteristics or components, distributed in varying proportions inside its vast, concrete, historical context. Four are "intrinsic," meaning that they must all be present for a given material to be classified under the rubric of esotericism. . . . To them two more components are added that we shall call secondary, i.e., not fundamental, but frequently found in conjunction with the others.[75]

If we are to speak of between four and six characteristics found within a historical context, then we are not speaking of a "form of thought" but a philosophy or outlook which can be identified by an objective analysis of its tenets. I would have imagined that then, once those characteristics are identified, one's approach to them exemplifies a "form of thought." Faivre's characteristics are 1. "correspondences," or relations between and within microcosm and macrocosm; 2. a "living nature" which can be "saved," and wherein the correspondences can be traced; 3. imagination and mediation (and mediation to reality through imagination); 4. belief in transmutation; and then 5. the practice of concordance (for example, teaching a universal "ancient wisdom"); and 6. transmission, which often includes initiation.[76] It is striking that the one element here which is intrinsic to the idea of the esoteric, as defined in dictionaries, is the sixth—one of Faivre's "secondary" characteristics. Although "esoteric" is an adjective, and "esotericism" a noun, the two are yet intimately related, and I would not be confident that such a description can be satisfactory. I will not critique his treatment of "occultism." His handling of historical matters is, of course, erudite, but his distinction of occultism from esotericism is merely asserted and has been concisely critiqued.[77]

There is an important treatment of these terms in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism,* published in 2006. Hanegraaff there states the following:

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75. Ibid., 10.

76. Faivre, "Introduction I," xv–xx.

77. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 33–35. For a concise critique, see Hanegraaff, "Occult/Occultism," 887.

> a. According to typological constructs as commonly used in the context of religious studies, "esoteric" and "esotericism" refers to certain types of religious activity, characterized by specific structural features. Thus the term is commonly associated with the notion of "secrecy," and then stands for the practice in various religious contexts of reserving certain kinds of salvific knowledge for a selected elite of initiated disciples . . . another, related typological understanding of the term . . . associates it with the deeper, "inner mysteries of religion" as opposed to its merely external or "exoteric" dimensions. . . . Such approaches tend to promote the esoteric or "inner" dimension of religion as its true core, and oppose it to more "superficial," merely "exoteric" dimensions, such as social institutions and official dogmas . . .
>
> b. According to historical constructs, "esotericism" is understood not as a type of religion or a structural dimension of it, but as a general label for certain specific currents in Western culture that display certain similarities and are historically related. For this reason, and in order to avoid confusion with typological usage, most scholars now prefer to speak of "Western esotericism."[78]

Hanegraaff states that, in the present dictionary, "esotericism" will be employed not in its typological but in its historical meaning, "as a general label for a series of specific currents in Western culture that display certain similarities and are historically related."[79] He then adds the following:

> [A]s in the study of "religion" generally—scholars in this domain often strongly disagree about abstract theoretical definitions although they in fact share a broad consensus about the historical phenomena covered by the term. Specialists may quibble about boundary issues, disagreeing about whether this or that specific current or personality should or should not be included under the broad labels "Gnosis" and "Western Esotericism," but experience shows that by and large they think of the same domain and the same currents when they are using these terms.[80]

78. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism," 337. I am aware of the academic discussion of "secrecy," but shall not pursue it here. See: Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 32–33; Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 40–48; Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 241–44.

79. Hanegraaff, "Introduction," xi.

80. Ibid.

In effect, Hanegraaff recognises "Western esotericism" as a proper noun, while "esotericism" alone remains an adjective. Yet, one might query how one distinguishes which currents and personalities should be included as "Western esotericism" unless there is a typological basis. I am not sure of the soundness of a distinction between "typological" and "historical" senses of a word. I would have thought that the historical must be related to the typological and the typological only comes into view through an examination of historical usage.[81] Can the category of "Western esotericism" change over time, then? For example, I have not yet encountered glossolalia, or a form of the sacrament of confession, as elements in Western esotericism, but could they come to be? And if so, I would suggest, this must be because they typologically corresponded to something essential about Western esotericism. So, I would suggest that the history of the term, especially its original association with the Pythagorean disciples, serves as a touchstone for recognising modern esotericism.

Hanegraaff provides a clear and thorough account of "occultism," concluding that as used today, it is basically a subset of "esotericism":

> In current scholarly usage … the term occultism tends to be used as referring specifically to 19th-century developments within the general history of Western esotericism, as well as their derivations through the 20th century. In a first, purely descriptive sense, it is used as referring to the specifically French currents in the wake of Éliphas Lévi, flourishing in the "neo-martinist" context of Papus and related manifestations of fin-de-siècle esotericism. In a second, analytic and typological sense, it can be seen as referring not only to these currents as such, but to the type of esotericism that they represent, and that is also characteristic of most other esoteric currents from ca. the mid-19th century on (such as e.g. spiritualism, modern Theosophy, or new magical currents in the lineage of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, up to and including such recent developments as the New Age movement). From such a perspective, occultism has been defined as comprising 'all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted

81. This is a different point from the following important observation: "historicist and typological programmes are not divided over the comparative method *as such*, but rather over how, when, and why it should be applied." Asprem, "Beyond the West," 20. However, it is another way of showing that the differences between these two approaches are perhaps illusory.

> world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted world'.[82]

Writing in 2007, David S. Katz could find no clear distinction between our terms:

> You say esoteric; I say occult. . . . Let us keep our options open, and accept for the time being [that] . . . 'An occult quality is one which is hidden from the senses, as opposed to a manifest quality which is readily apprehended . . . it would come to include the more supernatural elements of normative religion, such as providence, prophecy and millenarianism'.[83]

Not surprisingly, perhaps, he goes on to describe the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as composed of esotericists, and Gurdjieff as an occultist, whose movement made the transition to a New Age religion,[84] the opposite of my conclusion (but if the terms are interchangeable, then of course there is no real opposition). The chief weakness of Katz's definition is its broadness, e.g. including providence. On his terms, atoms and magnetic fields pertain to the occult, which would be nonsensical in contemporary usage. Then, if occultism has come to include "the more supernatural elements of normative religion," does it now *necessarily* imply them? The danger is that the "occult" starts to mean whatever one chooses to make it mean: a point Hanegraaff made of one popular 1971 effort.[85] A misleading word can send scholars off after a will-o-the-wisp; the fate of those who pursued study of the "Christian mysteries," according to Stroumsa.[86]

This illustrates, I suggest, the need to look for a differential diagnosis. Two conditions can appear the same, but there may be a point which distinguishes them. I suggest that as between "esotericism" and "occultism," the differential standard is an openness to alchemy, astrology, and magic. For this reason, I have selected the influential figures G.I. Gurdjieff and Aleister Crowley as real-life subjects for study.

82. Hanegraaff, "Occult/Occultism," 888.
83. Katz, *The Occult Tradition*, 16.
84. Ibid., 172–73.
85. Hanegraaff, "Occult/Occultism," 888.
86. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 29.

3.1. Gurdjieff and Crowley

I have three related aims in this section: most importantly, to apply the above research to Gurdjieff and Crowley, asking whether their systems could be considered as esoteric, occult, both, or neither? The next purpose is to study the alleged similarities between the two; and third, to set out Gurdjieff's rather distinctive take on esotericism and occultism. However, it may be more methodical to commence in reverse order. Gurdjieff and Crowley are fine examples for comparison; being contemporaries active in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, they allow for synchronic comparison.[87]

3.1.1. Gurdjieff on Esotericism and Occultism

My main task in this section is to treat of the topic of Gurdjieff and his relationship to esotericism and occultism with some accuracy and with methodological soundness. In what follows, it would be easy to single out egregious errors in writers who speak authoritatively, and even as former pupils of a Gurdjieff-lineage group. For example, P. T. Mistlberger studied in such a group, and does present some sound insights, such as the importance of Ouspensky, Orage, and Bennett to Gurdjieff, and the possibility that Gurdjieff himself devised the ritual idiots toast without recourse to supposed Sufi rites.[88] However, he states that Ouspensky first met Gurdjieff when he attended a performance of Gurdjieff's ballet, the *Struggle of the Magicians*.[89] Of course, Ouspensky attended no such ballet, because it was never staged. In fact, Ouspensky's account of his first meeting Gurdjieff, and his mentions of how the ballet was never presented, are so prominent in *In Search of the Miraculous* that one could legitimately ask whether Mistlberger had actually read the whole of the book or only mined

87. A fuller study would take into account the four broad modes of comparison outlined in Asprem, "Beyond the West"; see 22 for a helpful diagram.

88. Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*, 228, and 430 on his pupils, and 366 on the toasts.

89. Ibid., 1 and 44 for Mistlberger as a pupil; and 43 and 54 for his remarks about Ouspensky.

it for quotations.[90] Likewise, Mistlberger's errors about the "higher centres" are such that he manages to miss the fact that the higher emotional centre has nothing to do with true love or some "higher aspect of the Heart"[91] but with self-consciousness, and from a practical perspective, the most important difference with regard to the higher centres is the substance with which they work.[92]

Similarly, an article by Constance A. Jones titled "Gnostic Sensibility in Gurdjieff's 'Work'," states that: "Consistent with Western esoteric, alchemical, and Hermetic traditions, the (Gurdjieff) practice follows the principle that the human birthright includes vast possibilities for development of consciousness, beyond conceptions of ordinary consciousness. In these characteristics, the Gurdjieff Work is properly considered an esoteric school, with gnostic sensibilities.[93] However, the pages referred to do not support a single one of these assertions, and neither does Jones define any of the critical terms, especially not "Gnostic sensibilities," nor indicate to which aspect of the traditions named she refers.

The word "sensibilities" is the plural of "sensibility." Considering usages of the English language in the United States, the online Merriam-Webster has the plural "sensibilities" under "sensibility (3)" as meaning "peculiar susceptibility to a pleasurable or painful impression (as from praise or a slight)—often used in plural."[94] Its first meaning is "ability to receive sensations" its second is "peculiar susceptibility to a pleasurable or painful impression;" and the fourth is "refined or excessive sensitiveness in emotion and taste with especial responsiveness to the pathetic."[95] I cannot readily discern which of these meanings Jones may have had in mind. Employing a word

90. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 7–8, 16–17, 382–86, where he notes that dances and music from the ballet were presented much later, in the 1920s, long after their first meeting.

91. Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*, 130.

92. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 142, and 194–95. To set out and correct all Mistlberger's errors on the higher centres would require another article.

93. Jones, "Gnostic Sensibility in Gurdjieff's 'Work'," 518, referring to Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 222–31.

94. Merriam-Webster, "Sensibility."

95. Ibid.

like "sensibilities" allows her to intimate that there is a connection without having to establish it. The term itself being rather cloudy, any misty line of argument suffices.

I have recently treated of the argument that Gurdjieff's system bore some resemblance to Gnostic systems.[96] I shall not repeat here my critique of that contention. Suffice to say, I find the material offered as evidence points rather in the opposite direction. Further, it is not wrong to speak of Gurdjieff saying that human consciousness has possibilities beyond those exhibited in ordinary consciousness; but it is misleading. Gurdjieff's starting point was that as we are we do not remember ourselves, we are effectively machines, and our "consciousness" is at best temporary, partial, and generally hallucinatory, being in fact, a form of hypnotic sleep.[97] He offered these blunt observations: "It is necessary to distinguish *consciousness* from the *possibility of consciousness*. We have only the possibility of consciousness and rare flashes of it" and "as we have no consciousness we have no conscience."[98] To not state Gurdjieff's position in his bleak phrases or their equivalents conceals the real differences between Gurdjieff and the Gnostics or anything "gnostic." The entire article in fact assimilates Gurdjieff to a paradigm he does not share, even when quoting him.

Gurdjieff's most important and sustained treatment of the topic of esotericism, then, exactly what Jones purports to write of, is missing from the article. This quotation is lengthy, but it is central to understanding Gurdjieff's system. Ouspensky reports Gurdjieff to have said the following:

> The humanity to which we belong namely, the whole of historic and prehistoric humanity known to science and civilization, in reality constitutes only the *outer circle of humanity*, within which there are several other circles . . . we can imagine the whole of humanity, known as well as unknown to us, as consisting so to speak of several concentric circles.
>
> The inner circle is called the 'esoteric'; this circle consists of people who have attained the highest development possible for man, each one of whom possesses individuality in

96. Azize, "Assessing Borrowing," 21–27.
97. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 116–17, 141–45, 155.
98. Ibid., 117 and 155.

> the fullest degree, that is to say, an indivisible 'I,' all forms of consciousness possible for man, full control over these states of consciousness, the whole of knowledge possible for man, and a free and independent will. They cannot perform actions opposed to their understanding or have an understanding which is not expressed by actions. At the same time there can be no discords among them, no differences of understanding. . . .
>
> The next circle is called the 'mesoteric', that is to say, the middle. People who belong to this circle possess all the qualities possessed by the members of the esoteric circle with the sole difference that their knowledge is of a more theoretical character . . . They know and understand many things which have not yet found expression in their actions. They know more than they do. But their understanding is precisely as exact as, and therefore precisely identical with, the understanding of the people of the esoteric circle.
>
> The third circle is called the 'exoteric', that is, the outer, because it is the outer circle of the inner part of humanity. The people who belong to this circle possess much of that which belongs to people of the esoteric and mesoteric circles but their cosmic knowledge is of a more philosophical character, that is to say, it is more abstract than the knowledge of the mesoteric circle. A member of the *mesoteric* circle *calculates*, a member of the exoteric circle *contemplates*. Their understanding may not be expressed in actions. But there cannot be differences in understanding between them. What one understands all the others understand. In literature which acknowledges the existence of esotericism, humanity is usually divided into two circles only and the 'exoteric circle' as opposed to the 'esoteric,' is called ordinary life. In reality, as we see, the 'exoteric circle' is something very far from us and very high. For ordinary man this is already 'esotericism.'
>
> The 'outer circle' is the circle of mechanical humanity to which we belong and which alone we know. The first sign of this circle is that among people who belong to it there is not and there cannot be a common understanding. . . . This circle is sometimes called the circle of the 'confusion of tongues.' . . . In this circle mutual understanding between people is impossible excepting in rare exceptional moments or in matters having no great significance, and which are confined to the limits of the given *being*.[99]

On this definition, Gurdjieff did not and could never have considered his own to be an esoteric group; each member would have had to have completed the fullness of conscious evolution possible for a human.[100] However, his statement

99. Ibid., 310–11.

100. King, *The Oragean Version*, 7 states that in 1930–1931, Gurdjieff "constituted separate

that we belong to and only know the outer circle need not be taken literally: on 9 December 1930, he said in answer to a question about magnetism that in a mesoteric group a real answer could be given to the question.[101] This suggests that he considered he was speaking to an exoteric group. He had, after all, stated that such a group would be "esoteric" in comparison with the balance of humanity.

When Gurdjieff first met Ouspensky, and the question of secrecy was raised, Gurdjieff asked: "But what are your own ideas on the subject? . . . One must not talk too much. There are things said only for disciples."[102] Gurdjieff does not there state the reason for any reservation, but Ouspensky's comeback deals with this:

> [I]f, in principle, you do not wish to make a secret of your ideas and care only that they should not be transmitted in a distorted form, then I could accept such a condition and wait until I had a better understanding of your teaching. I came once across a group of people who were engaged in various scientific experiments. . . . They made no secret of their work. But they made it a condition that no one would have the right to speak of or describe any experiment unless he was able to carry it out himself. Until he was able to repeat the experiment himself he had to keep silent.[103]

Gurdjieff replied, "There could be no better formulation . . . and if you will keep such a rule this question will never arise between us."[104] He went on to say that he would not, in any event, trust even pupils with secrets in early stages, as "to be able to keep a secret a man must *know himself* and he must *be*. And a man such as all men are is very far from this. Sometimes we make temporary conditions

groups to which he gave the titles of 'esoteric,' 'mesoteric,' and 'exoteric' but as between which I was never able to distinguish any difference at all." The titles of these groups cannot follow the definitions Gurdjieff gave to Ouspensky.

101. Gurdjieff, *Early Talks*, 403.

102. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 13–14.

103. Ibid., 14. Incidentally, it seems that Gurdjieff and Ouspensky had, even at this early stage, already agreed that Ouspensky would write the book which was to be published as *In Search of the Miraculous*; Gurdjieff, the teacher, asks Ouspensky, the pupil, for his views, and implicit in Ouspensky's response is that he will eventually write.

104. Ibid., 14. And this, incidentally, shows how much Ouspensky did understand: Gurdjieff's dismay that Ouspensky did not publish, noted in Azize, *Gurdjieff*, 29–33, means that Gurdjieff considered Ouspensky was "able to repeat the experiment himself," that is, to pass on the teaching.

with people *as a test*. Usually they are broken very soon but we never give any serious secret to a man we do not trust, so it does not matter much."[105] This was amplified much later, when Gurdjieff said that he had no desire either to keep secret what was not "essentially a secret" or to deprive students of the right to speak to their circle; rather, the rules against disclosure were necessary because, as students should soon see that (a) they could not transmit what they had learned without distortion; (b) if they tried they would be misunderstood, and (c) thereby prevent their friends from ever being able to understand the ideas themselves, or approach the work; and (d) lose the benefit of the rule of silence because the inevitable internal resistance to that rule helps people to remember themselves, for "Only a man who can keep silent when it is necessary can be master of himself."[106]

Gurdjieff also states that one who improperly discloses secrets will be expelled from the group, and that "all the members of a group are friends and brothers, but if one of them leaves, and especially if he is sent away by the teacher, he ceases to be a friend and a brother and at once becomes a stranger, as one who is cut off."[107] He immediately modifies this by saying that those who leave are strangers as regards the work of the group, yet, to avoid the inevitable frictions, where there are relations in a group, if one leaves the other must too.[108] These rules are reminiscent of the Pythagorean norms.

Gurdjieff also then spoke of "professional occultism" as being equivalent to "professional charlatanism," among whom he numbered "spiritualists, healers, clairvoyants, and so on" as people who were not suitable for his work, a consideration he reinforced by warning Ouspensky that they would come to learn solely to later promote themselves.[109] Yet Gurdjieff distinguished these occultists from others, and of those his opinion was not so scathing. Telling

105. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 15.
106. Ibid., 223–24.
107. Ibid., 231.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid., 243–44, see also 222 for more criticism of occultists who had a little knowledge, but not enough to obtain an accurate picture.

Ouspensky that there were at least four principle lines of knowledge, the Hebrew, Egyptian, Persian, and Hindu, Gurdjieff added the following:

> [T]he theoretical statements which form the basis of one line can sometimes be explained from the point of view of statements of another line and vice versa. For this reason it is sometimes possible to form a certain intermediate line between two adjacent lines. But in the absence of a complete knowledge and understanding of the fundamental lines, such intermediate ways may easily lead to a mixing of lines, to confusion and error.
>
> In addition to these there are two lines known in Europe, namely *theosophy* and so-called *Western occultism*, which have resulted from a mixture of the fundamental lines. Both lines bear in themselves grains of truth, but neither of them possesses full knowledge and therefore attempts to bring them to practical realization give only negative results.[110]

Gurdjieff's idea of a line of Western occultism, bearing some truth taken from more venerable traditions, may make Gurdjieff the ancestor of the idea of "Western Esotericism." In other respects, his ideas are redolent of Blavatsky's in seeing an esoteric centre apart from the current of ordinary life, and also of the Pythagorean dispensation, e.g. in the probation of students and in the restriction of relations with those who leave the group. Now we come to Gurdjieff's ideas on magic as follows:

> There is mechanics, that is, what 'happens,' and there is 'doing.' 'Doing' is magic. . . . But there can be a falsification, an imitation of the outward appearance of 'doing,' which cannot give any objective results but which can deceive naïve people and produce in them faith, infatuation, enthusiasm, and even fanaticism.
>
> That is why in true work, in true 'doing,' the producing of infatuation in people is not allowed. What you call black magic is based on infatuation and on playing upon human weakness. Black magic does not in any way mean magic of evil. I have already said earlier that no one ever does anything for the sake of evil, in the interests of evil. Everyone always does everything in the interests of good *as he understands it*. . . . Black magic may be quite altruistic, may strive after the good of humanity. . . . But what can be called black magic has always one definite characteristic. This characteristic is the tendency to use people for some, even the best of aims, *without their knowledge and understanding*, either by producing in them faith and infatuation or by acting upon them through fear.[111]

110. Ibid., 285–86.
111. Ibid., 227.

Gurdjieff went on to say that a "black magician" had learned something, but was only half-educated, perhaps having left a school prematurely, convinced he knew all he had to and could now direct the work of others. Yet at least something could be learned from these magicians. Even worse, said Gurdjieff, were "occult" and Theosophical societies which had no contact at all with a genuine school: "Their work simply consists in aping. . . . One man feels himself to be a 'teacher,' others feel that they are 'pupils,' and everyone is satisfied."[112] However, while Gurdjieff did say in response to questions about magic that "doing" is "magic," he never himself introduced this idea, and he never spoke of magic. That is, he never purported to be a magician or to teach magic. Rather, he basically said that the concept of magic was variable and dispensable. What was important, Gurdjieff said, was "doing."

Most extraordinary, however, is Gurdjieff's rider about how *the esoteric inner circle exerts a cultural influence even upon the outer circle of humanity*:

> Man lives in life *under the law of accident* and under two kinds of influences again governed by accident.
>
> The first kind are influences created *in life itself* or by life itself. Influences of race, nation, country, climate, family, education, society, profession, manners and customs, wealth, poverty, current ideas, and so on. The second kind are influences created *outside this life*, influences of the inner circle, or esoteric influences—influences, that is, created under different laws, although also on the earth. These influences differ from the former, first of all in being *conscious* in their origin. This means that they have been created consciously by conscious men for a definite purpose. Influences of this kind are usually embodied in the form of religious systems and teachings, philosophical doctrines, works of art, and so on.
>
> They are let out into life for a definite purpose, and become mixed with influences of the first kind. But it must be borne in mind that these influences are conscious only in their origin. Coming into the general vortex of life they fall under the general law of accident and begin to act *mechanically*, that is, they may act on a certain definite man or may not act; they may reach him or they may not. In undergoing change and distortion in life through transmission and interpretation, influences of the second kind

112. Ibid.

> are transformed into influences of the first kind, that is, they become, as it were, merged into influences of the first kind.
>
> …[I]f a man in receiving these influences begins to discriminate between them and put on one side those which are not created in life itself, then gradually discrimination becomes easier and after a certain time a man can no longer confuse them with the ordinary influences of life.
>
> The results of the influences whose source lies outside life collect together within him, he *remembers* them together, *feels* them together … and after a certain time they form within him a kind of *magnetic centre*, which begins to attract to itself kindred influences and in this manner it grows. If the magnetic centre receives sufficient nourishment, and if there is no strong resistance on the part of the other sides of a man's personality which are the result of influences created in life, the magnetic centre begins to influence a man's orientation, obliging him to turn round and even to move in a certain direction. …
>
> If the magnetic centre works rightly and if a man really searches, or even if he does not search actively yet feels rightly, he may meet *another man* who knows the way and who is connected directly or through other people with a centre existing outside the law of accident, from which proceed the ideas which created the magnetic centre.[113]

Gurdjieff then states that the possibilities for the seeker depend upon "the teacher's situation in relation to the esoteric centre."[114] Further:

> The results of the work of a man who takes on himself the role of teacher does not depend on whether or not he knows exactly the origin of what he teaches, but very much depends on whether his ideas come *in actual fact* from the esoteric centre and whether he himself understands and can distinguish *esoteric ideas*, that is, ideas of objective knowledge, from subjective, scientific, and philosophical ideas.[115]

Gurdjieff paints a picture of an esoteric centre producing influences which enter into the course of general life and affect different people differently. This dovetails with the suggestion made here that we can miss the full meaning of "esoteric" and "esotericism" if we focus too narrowly on the appearance of the

113. Ibid., 199–201.
114. Ibid., 202.
115. Ibid.

words. Whether or not one accepts that there is such a thing as the esoteric centre, or considers "esoterica" to be productions of the same nature as all others, the point is that the idea of esotericism can be circulated through religion and culture generally, as I have suggested we find with the esoteric dimension of the Gospels. Gurdjieff developed the concept of "esotericism" further and more fruitfully than any of the writers we have mentioned, allowing a place for the "outer circle of humanity," the exoteric circle within, the introduction of the concept of a mesoteric centre, and pointing to the relationship between the esoteric centre and outer culture. This adds another dimension to the dynamic between exoteric and esoteric.

I have elsewhere contended, at some length, that Gurdjieff can be seen as a mystic.[116] On the basis of the above, I would suggest that Gurdjieff could also be seen as an esotericist, and perhaps even, on his own definition, as a magician, except that he subordinated that concept within his own system, and it did not mean much to him. On his understanding of esotericism, any mystic could be thought of as an esotericist. The term that does not sit well on him is "occultist."

3.2. Aleister Crowley

Although I have not made a detailed study of it, I have often conjectured that, in the English-speaking world at least, conceptions of magic took on darker hues as a result of the career of Aleister Crowley. A striking aspect of Crowley's career is that he managed to accomplish and write what he did in the face of a particularly imposing obstacle, a foe bleaker and more forbidding than Kangchenjunga; his own self-destructive impulses. At his funeral, Louis Wilkinson spoke of "the variety and the contradictoriness of the elements in his composition."[117] Even sympathetic commentators describe his "inner duality"

116. Azize, *Gurdjieff*, passim.
117. Campbell, *Thelema*, 57.

and contradictions.[118] When speaking of Crowley, "contradictions" seems mild: something like "antagonisms" seems called for. Having read all the available literature by Crowley, much of the academic output, and some of the rest, the salient fact is his self-centredness. We could begin with his seeing himself as the bearer of a new religion which would define the following epoch, the "Aeon of Horus." The term "Messiah" does not do justice to his ambitions,[119] so personal was his obsession with Jesus. He was, in effect, working with the right hand to set himself up as the new Jesus,[120] but all the while, with his left hand, he set out, quite as deliberately, to engrave himself in the public consciousness as the destructive demon of the Apocalypse.[121] He gave his new religion and his abbey in Sicily the name "Thelema," which is thought by a member of the contemporaneous Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O) to derive not from Rabelais but from the New Testament.[122] The "three forms of the Thelemic movement" include the A:.A:., the O.T.O., and the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica.[123]

Although Crowley made comments which would indicate a respect for Christ but not for Christians, there are many passages which make this seem disingenuous (for example, "With my hawk's head I peck at the eyes of Jesus as he hangs upon the cross").[124] The invocation of "Lord Christ" and references to him in *White Stains* (1898) and *Bagh i Muattar* (1910) are simply inconsistent with any respect for Jesus, however considered, from whatever angle. He spoke,

118. Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 41–42, 66–68, 421; Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 2, 8–9, 24, 44–46, speaks of "inconsistency." Indeed.

119. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 17–18, uses it in speaking of Crowley's attempt to discredit Krishnamurti "whom he saw as a false messiah." The two men mixed in rather different worlds.

120. Crowley's rather grand ideas of the significance of his publication of *The Book of the Law* are collected in Bogdan, "Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon," 89, 98 and 98n32.

121. Bogdan, "Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon," 95–96.

122. Readdy, *One Truth and One Spirit*, 17–19. Readdy, 353, regards the organisations the A:.A:., the O.T.O., and the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica as the "three forms of the Thelemic movement."

123. Readdy, *One Truth and One Spirit*, 353.

124. Crowley, *Book of the Law*, III.34.

on several occasions, on Jesus as a figure of legend.[125] Crowley's more measured comments about Jesus only serve to elevate Crowley, as when in the preliminary remarks to *Book 4*, Crowley writes: "Jesus Christ was brought up on the fables of the 'Old Testament', and so was compelled to ascribe his experiences to 'Jehovah', although his gentle spirit could have nothing in common with the monster."[126] That is, Jesus was a kind man, but limited by his formation. Overall, the impression is that he wished to project an image of respecting Jesus but not Christians, when in fact he despised both.

Of course, as others have remarked, in all of this there are unceasing signs of a rebellion against his Christian upbringing, but also as a strange fidelity to it, for his new religion was an "ape" of Christianity. Bogdan has shown how Crowley adapted the religious evolutionary schemes which were then current, especially that of Frazer, as set out in his *The Golden Bough*,[127] and adopted two key elements from his family's faith:

> Although Crowley rebelled against the religious views of his parents when still in his teens—and continued this revolt throughout his life—it is striking that two characteristic aspects of the religious worldview of the Plymouth Brethren, the importance placed on the study of Holy Scripture and the notion of dispensationalism, are echoed in the religious system of Thelema. In Crowley's new religion the Holy Scripture of the Bible was replaced by *The Holy Books of Thelema*. . . . The new dispensation was not that of the imminent period before the return of Christ, but rather the Aeon of Horus, formally inaugurated at the vernal equinox in 1904.[128]

Even a sympathetic scholar like Marco Pasi writes of Crowley that "it is certainly legitimate to speak of a flight from Christianity."[129] *Pace* Pasi, the idea of "flight" is not correct: his obsession with Christianity tethered him to it. Crowley orbited around Christianity all his life. I would select but ten signs of his fixation with Jesus and Christianity:

125. Crowley, "Letter C."
126. Crowley, *Book 4*, 14.
127. Ibid., 90–94.
128. Bogdan, "Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon," 99.
129. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 2.

1. He took the title "the Great Beast 666," and often had a female consort whom he called "the Scarlet Woman," both from the Book of Revelation.[130] His self-identification was therefore drawn from the Christian scripture.
2. His close pupil, Israel Regardie, considered that Crowley's "magical name" *Perdurabo* (I will endure), was probably an "intrusion—however unconscious—of his early religious training among the Plymouth Brethren. For in Mark 13:3–37 there appears: '. . . But he who endures to the end will be saved'."[131]
3. His signature motto, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. . . . Love is the law, love under will,"[132] subverts Matthew 22:37–40, where Love of God, then of one's neighbour as oneself, is taught as what the "whole of the law and the prophets" depends on.
4. He stated that "my Will is to be the Logos of the Aeon,"[133] and while "astral travelling" (invariably if not always on drugs),[134] he saw Jesus the Logos, scenes from Jesus' life, and "behold I also was crucified!"[135] He saw parallels between some of his own work and Christ's curing of the sick.[136] To a significant extent, then, his self-identification was actually with Jesus.
5. He founded a "Church" with a "Gnostic Mass."[137] The text is called, in terms which indicate a preoccupation with the Catholic Church: *Liber XV Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae*, while its "Cakes of Light" are "an equivalent of the Eucharist."[138] The Greek words over the elements slightly

130. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 28–29.

131. Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle*, 112.

132. Crowley, *Book of the Law*, I.40 and I.57, see also III.60: "There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt."

133. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 285.

134. Pasi, "Varieties of Magical Experience," 55 notes Crowley's use of "psychoactive substances during all his life, often in a ritualized, magical context." See also Djurdjevic "The Great Beast as a Tantric Hero," 122 and 123. For Blavatsky's use of narcotics, see Hanegraaff, "The Theosophical Imagination," 13–14.

135. Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 56.

136. Ibid., 256.

137. Ibid., 401, 405, 457; Campbell, *Thelema*, 147; Readdy, *One Truth and One Spirit*, 305–333.

138. Djurdjevic, "The Great Beast as a Tantric Hero," 113–15.

adapt the formulas in the liturgies of St Basil and of St John Chrysostom.[139]

6. His first book was titled *Aceldama*, from Matthew 27:3–9 and Acts 1:19. He later wrote a play *Why Jesus Wept*,[140] and books with titles featuring *Ahab*, *Jephthah*, and *Jezebel*. In apparent gratitude for a Buddhist enlightenment, he wrote poems titled "Ascension Day" and "Pentecost."[141] He penned a book of pornographic poetry entitled *Snowdrops from a Curate's Garden*.
7. Central to his philosophy was the Holy Guardian Angel.[142] He "identified" his own angel with both Jesus and Satan (and Lucifer).[143]
8. In 1916, when he was about 41, he baptised, worshipped and put on trial a frog (sic), then ate its legs, crucified, "resurrected" it, and "caused it to ascend" (sic), saying "Lo, Jesus of Nazareth, how thou art taken in my snare."[144]
9. Crowley, "fascinated" that Cecil Maitland was the son of an Anglican clergyman who had converted to Catholicism, devised a ceremony whereby Maitland baptized a young cock named *Peter Paul* into the Catholic Church. His "Scarlet Woman" demanded its head on a disk (Mark 6:25 and parallels), Crowley beheaded it, and charged the spirit of Peter Paul to aid the "cakes of light" with which he would found his Church (sic).[145]

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139. The text is in Campbell, *Thelema*, 147–72. Kazcynski, "Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation," 165–66 asserts that Crowley's "Mass" "is based largely upon the Roman Missal," and that it was written "under the inspiration of the Liturgy of St Basil." Kazcynski offers only vague similarities. I can see in the "Gnostic Mass" only a parody, generally conceived, of the Catholic Liturgy as it then was. Other than the words over the elements, I cannot even see this for the Liturgy of St Basil. More plausibly, Introvigne, "The Beast and the Prophet," 263, states that Crowley's Mass is a rewriting of a "Gnostic Mass" produced within the 25 years preceding his own.

140. Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 92.

141. Ibid., 79.

142. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 195.

143. Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 221–23, 225 and 280; Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*, 114–17 treats this concept in Crowley well, although the alleged analogue in Gurdjieff strikes me as far-fetched.

144. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 260–61.

145. Ibid., 292.

10. Later, he staged a "Seth ceremony" in which a virgin goat was to be sacrificed and its blood drunk after it had copulated with his Scarlet Woman, so that it was a "drinking thereof from the Cup of Our Lady of Whoredom,"[146] an immature gibe at the Virgin Mary,[147] as when he had lesbian-inspired poems originally written to Isis published by a Catholic printing press which mistook them for Marian poems.[148]

Crowley's career naturally suggests a rebellion against his upbringing, with a desire to justify himself in the terms of the tradition he was ostensibly rejecting by becoming Jesus for a new age of humanity. The "rebellion" therefore re-establishes the old order, but with new proprietors and stock. There is still church, and it is even called "church," but instead of a male preacher at a lectern there is a naked woman upon an altar;[149] and their Scriptures are no longer the Bible, but the Book of the Law. Given the nature of some of his published works (for example, *Snowdrops from a Curate's Garden* [1904]), Crowley's search for proper English respectability seems perverse:

> The elusiveness of respectability was something that haunted Crowley throughout his adult life, and it appears that one of the reasons he sought to be admitted by "regular" Freemasonry was that it would allow him to become part of the respected establishment of British society.[150]

One essential issue is invariably underplayed in treatments of Crowley: the not merely sexual aspect but the pornographic aspect of his programme. Under the

146. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 295; Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 418.

147. Similar childish blasphemies against Mary adorn *White Stains* (1898), and *The World's Tragedy* (1910) is abundant in anti-Christian sentiment. See Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 136.

148. Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 136.

149. A reviewer noted that there is also a naked male. I accept that this may be so in some performances, but my main point is that despite the differences, Crowley instituted a Mass. An examination of the published texts discloses some divergences. Hence, Lingan, *Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 121 states that the priestess does not have to be naked before the congregation, only behind the veil. But she is clearly naked before all according to Campbell, *Thelema*, compare 158 and 161. Neither mention a naked male. I have seen two performances on Youtube; one has a naked woman only, the other no nudity at all.

150. Bogdan and Starr, "Introduction," 10.

old dispensation, the only licit sexual relations were between married adults, one male and one female. Under Crowley's, what were illicit sexual relations are strongly urged if not compulsory; after all, his "Mass" featured a nude woman.[151] The evidence for Crowley's sexual obsessions is as abundant as it is understated by his interpreters. There is no sound reason why his early pornographic literature should be missing when scholars present overviews of Crowley's career. Considering this material, it is not unreasonable to think that there is a continuity through Crowley's career; not only a line of rebellion, against sexual mores, and against Christianity, but an obsession with sex. I wonder if Crowley's Thelemic Law is not best explained as a license for sexual activity. Lust was a consistent aspect of Crowley's mind, all the way from *Aceldama* through to the diary notes of his yearning to force the attentions of the resolutely heterosexual Cecil Russell.[152]

This is not an essay on Crowley, however, but on esotericism. My point here is that no good purpose is served by studies of Crowley which underplay if not ignore his sexual obsessions and his writing of some fairly elaborate pornography. Having presented my understanding of the nature of Crowley's achievement, we must consider Crowley on esotericism, and then contrast him with Gurdjieff.

3.2.1. Crowley on Esotericism

Crowley was both literate and capable, and wrote much on magic (in his spelling, "magick"), which to him may have been the equivalent of both we have termed "esotericism" and "occultism." However, I suspect he was not too concerned about relating magic to those words. Above all, his approach to magic was personal:

151. Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle* (1970), 16–17, noting how Gerald Yorke and he counted themselves fortunate for evading his attentions.

152. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 288. *Aceldama* expresses his fixation on sex of a particular sort, as but one example: "No prostitution may be shunned by him / Who would achieve this Heaven." Canto XIII.

> In my third year at Cambridge, I devoted myself consciously to the Great Work, understanding thereby the Work of becoming a Spiritual Being, free from the constraints, accidents, and deceptions of material existence.
>
> I found myself at a loss for a name to designate my work, just as H.P. Blavatsky some years earlier. "Theosophy," "Spiritualism," "Occultism," "Mysticism," all involved undesirable connotations. I chose therefore the name "MAGICK" as essentially the most sublime, and actually the most discredited, of all the available terms. I swore to rehabilitate MAGICK to identify it with my own career; and to compel mankind to respect, love, and trust that which they scorned, hated and feared. I have kept my Word.[153]

Note that he states his intention was not to identify himself with magic or with his pursuit, but the reverse: to identify magic with himself. On my reading of Crowley, this exemplifies the main currents in Crowley's life: the desire to make all love and respect him (he who had been despised); and the fact that in so far as he was a serious thinker, he stands in the same tradition as Theosophists and Occultists, and even to some extent with the other traditions he mentions, but is obsessed with stamping his own character upon them. Through Mathers, he adopted the Theosophist idea of "secret masters" as "secret chiefs," and the authority they bestowed.[154]

Crowley sometimes gives evidence of what might be a deep understanding of the paradoxes of occultism; for example, at the end of *The Book of the Law* he wrote: "The Book of the Law is Written and Concealed." That is, an occult text can be written or revealed, and yet remain "hidden" because the reader lacks penetration (as we saw in mentioning John 10:24–26). He restates the same idea in *Bagh-i-Muattar*, where he writes, "I do not believe in either the advisability or the efficacy of this secrecy business. The Apocalypse has been published for some years now, and I have yet to meet anyone who really knows how to extract the gold."[155] There is insight, but it is not developed.

153. Crowley, "Magick in Theory and Practice." I have simplified the layout.

154. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 60, 118–19 and 182n220, n221 and n223. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 60–61 on the Golden Dawn's idea of secret chiefs.

155. Crowley, *Bagh-i-Muattar*.

My research could not find an instance where Crowley used the word "esotericism"; searches of *Magick in Theory and Practice* and *Magick without Tears* were fruitless, but did locate numerous instances of "occult" and its derivatives. He did, however, most emphatically have the concept, so he speaks in *An Account of A.·.A.·.* of the "sanctuary" and of "inner" and "exterior," albeit in terms which add nothing to Blavatsky's view of the matter.[156] Typical of its style and content is the opening:

> It is necessary, my dear brothers, to give you a clear idea of the interior Order; of that illuminated community which is scattered throughout the world, but which is governed by one truth and united in one spirit. The community possesses a School, in which all who thirst for knowledge are instructed by the Spirit of Wisdom itself; and all the mysteries of nature are preserved in this school for the children of light.[157]

This document purports to be a revision of Karl von Eckartshausen's *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary*, a book which Sutin avers was "the single most influential text—after the Bible and *The Book of the Law*—in the whole of Crowley's life."[158] While the influence of *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary* is evident in *An Account of A.·.A.·.*, that document lacks the Christ-centred perspective of von Eckartshausen. *Liber LII*, a sort of companion to *Liber XXXIII*, speaks of "exoteric organization," "initiates," and "occult bodies," while declaring that the O.T.O. "teaches Hermetic Science or Occult Knowledge, the Pure and Holy Magick of Light."[159]

All of this amounts to Crowley's declaration that he is in possession of secret knowledge. Again, we encounter the paradox of occultism, that once the hidden teaching is imparted, it is not hidden, or at least is not hidden in the way it had once been. At a deeper level, Crowley's understanding of "magick" is without horizon: "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur

156. Crowley, *An Account of A.·.A.·.*, for example speaks of "external worship," an "interior Order," and vigilant "Masters." My text lacks pagination and numbering.

157. Crowley, *An Account of A.·.A.·.*.

158. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 41.

159. Crowley, *Liber LII*, 2 and 4.

in conformity with Will,"[160] and "Every man must do Magick each time that he acts or even thinks, since a thought is an internal act whose influence ultimately affects action, though it may not do so at the time."[161] This is so broad as to blur the distinction between magic and anything else, but then that would accord with Crowley's world-remaking ambitions. Even his celebrated definition lacks helpful limitation by reference to spiritual agencies or not needing to employ physical means. Pasi realises that the "definition" is no definition at all, but asserts that Crowley "usually had in mind a rather precise set of practices and ideas, based mostly on traditional ceremonial magic."[162] This is merely circular; in that case, Crowley would be saying, "Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will by magic."

Pasi then goes on to state that when he discovered sexual magic, Crowley found "most of the material apparatus of ceremonial magic superfluous."[163] This is not to say that Crowley ever disowned magic or even ceremonial magic, just as he never disowned the extreme measures of controlling speech, action, and thought enjoined in the approximately eight hundred words of his *Liber III vel Jugorum*.[164] But the practical emphasis shifted quite decisively, as Pasi notes, and this seems to support my contentions, first that Crowley's obsession with sex has actually been understated, and that his formulation of "magick" was vague to the point of futility. This effacing of boundaries between magic and any other department of life effectively *assimilates* the exoteric to the esoteric. Thus, Crowley says the following of learning magic:

> In the course of this Training, he will learn to explore the Hidden Mysteries of Nature, and to develop new senses and faculties in himself, whereby he may communicate with, and control, Beings and Forces pertaining to orders of existence which have been hitherto inaccessible

160. Crowley, "Magick in Theory and Practice."
161. Ibid.
162. Pasi, "Varieties of Magical Experience," 66.
163. Ibid.
164. Hall, *Beelzebub and the Beast*, 218.

> to profane research, and available only to that unscientific and empirical MAGICK (of tradition) which I came to destroy in order that I might fulfil. I send this book into the world that every man and woman may take hold of life in the proper manner.[165]

In *Book 4* he describes magick as being "a Science of Life complete and perfect."[166] Later he states that "all phenomena are sacraments."[167] That is, "magick" in Crowley's world is a lake which overflows its banks and covers all the land. Perhaps this attitude, "occultist imperialist," to coin a phrase, is part of the reason he took the step of breaking his oath of secrecy to publish Golden Dawn rituals in *The Equinox* (as well as providing a means of stripping the Golden Dawn of its claim to guard secrets).[168] Pasi's interpretation of a "democratization of magic" could also be related to his naturalization of "magick," or "Scientific Illuminism."[169] The man who spoke of "the whole discarded humbug of the supernatural" will be inclined to assimilate "magick" to "the panoply of the positive natural philosophy of modern science."[170]

To conclude, Crowley's view of the occult was superficially similar to Blavatsky's but, more fundamentally, he tacitly held that true knowledge and wisdom were the province of magicians or adepts who would convert the world to a new religion where "magick" would inform all. Finally, the fact that Crowley favoured the terms "occult" and "magick," and seems to have eschewed the "esoteric" and "esotericism" supports my contention that there is a real difference in nuance between these words, and that "occult" is a better word for those who use, whether exclusively or not, magic, astrology, or alchemy.

165. Crowley, "Magick in Theory and Practice."
166. Crowley, *Book 4*, 54.
167. Ibid., 99. This is the equivalent of there being no sacraments at all, for the concept only has meaning when it can be contrasted with the profane.
168. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 59; Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 193.
169. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 60–61; Asprem, "Magic Naturalized?" *passim.*
170. Both quotations are from Asprem, "Magic Naturalized?" 147.

3.3 Were Gurdjieff and Crowley Engaged on the same Quest?

To anticipate, I suggest that the differences between Gurdjieff and Crowley were greater than their similarities; Gurdjieff was fundamentally a mystic, who taught an entire intellectual, emotional, and physical discipline, with a thought-out esoteric cosmology and practical psychology, requiring a three-centred awareness based on simultaneously experiencing feeling, sensation, and intellect to make possible a new stable form of being, comprising both consciousness and conscience.[171] In so far as Crowley's mysticism was ever realized in practice, it seems to have mainly depended upon drugs and "sex magic," and was only ever one element in a career which depended on ritual and standard occult pursuits such as the Kabbalah, Tarot, and astrology. Sometimes attempts are made to find a relationship based on such vague matters as an "interest in modernizing," or following an "integrative path," or even a concern for "wholeness" and "healing inner fragmentation."[172] On such a basis, we may as well compare them with Peter the Great, or with Freud.

Tobias Churton contends that Gurdjieff and Crowley

> with respect to their teaching, had far more in common than emphases that differentiated them. Many of Gurdjieff's cherished attitudes were expressed succinctly by Crowley: love as the uniting of opposites, for example; the importance of will, and the idea that the cosmos falls into line with the correctly orbiting will; this wisdom they shared. Gurdjieff's real "I am" is analogous psychologically to Crowley's "True Will" and "Holy Guardian Angel."[173]

Churton concedes that Gurdjieff and Crowley had different views on sex and gender roles.[174] His attempt to connect the two teachings commences

171. This is the thesis of Azize, *Gurdjieff*. I am aware that the posthumously published book by David Hall, *Beelzebub and the Beast*, makes an argument that Gurdjieff and Crowley had much of their substance in common. I have chosen to examine Churton's more recent effort, Hall having written in about 1975, and therefore before Webb's book and many other works mentioning Gurdjieff.

172. Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*, 6–9, 198, and 207.

173. Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 292.

174. Ibid., 294.

with Crowley's visit to Gurdjieff's base, the Prieuré near Fontainebleau, on 10 February 1924, when Gurdjieff happened to be in the United States. On the basis of reports, Crowley nonetheless adjudged Gurdjieff to be: "a tip-top man . . . clearly a very advanced adept."[175] According to Pasi, this visit is corroborated from Crowley's diary.[176]

Churton notes that, in March 1924, Crowley had confided to his diary that he proposed to take on and "complete" Gurdjieff's pupils, and that this was needed as some "will not fit into his very artificial scheme." Not until mid-1926 did he meet Gurdjieff. I might note that, in a note which seems to refer to 1926, Edith Taylor recorded Crowley being present at a lunch with Gurdjieff and others.[177] Also, Fritz Peters, who turned thirteen years of age in 1926, states that:

> Crowley was apparently convinced that Gurdjieff was a "black magician" and the ostensible purpose of his visit (to the Prieuré) was to challenge Gurdjieff to some sort of duel in magic. The visit turned out to be anti-climactical as Gurdjieff, although he would not deny his knowledge of certain powers that might be called "magic" refused to demonstrate any of them. In his turn, Mr Crowley also refused to "reveal" any of his powers so, to the great disappointment of the onlookers, we did not witness any supernatural feats. Also, Mr Crowley departed with the impression that Gurdjieff was either (a) a fake, or (b) an inferior magician.[178]

Apparently referring to the same visit as Taylor and Peters, Webb reports Gurdjieff's in-person denunciation of Crowley, with a warning never to return. Crowley had spent a weekend at the Prieuré and been shown around like any guest. Webb states:

> Apart from some circumspection, Gurdjieff treated him like any other guest until the evening of his departure . . . Crowley made his way toward the door and turned to take his leave of Gurdjieff. . . . "Mister, you go?" Gurdjieff inquired. Crowley assented. "You have been guest?" . . . "Now you go, you are no longer guest?" Crowley . . . humoured his mood by indicating that he was on his way back to Paris. But Gurdjieff having made the point that he was not violating the canons of hospitality, changed on the instant into

175. Ibid., 293.
176. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 168–69.
177. Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven*, 90.
178. Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic*, 240–41.

> the embodiment of righteous anger. "You filthy," he stormed, "you dirty inside! Never again you set foot in my house!" . . . he worked himself up into a rage which quite transfixed his watching pupils. Crowley was stigmatized as the sewer of creation was taken apart and trodden into the mire. Finally he was banished . . . by a Gurdjieff in fine histrionic form.[179]

Churton aims to prove that the incident never occurred, as reported by Webb, from the following considerations:

1. Webb places the expulsion in July 1926, but Crowley was not in France until 7 August 1926.[180]
2. Webb furnishes no sources, and there is no contemporary confirmation from anyone who had been at the Prieuré.[181]
3. Stanley Nott, who was at the Prieuré when Crowley visited, does not mention it, but that he "would have done, had he known it," while another account of Crowley's visit mentions a placid lunch at which both Gurdjieff and Crowley were present.[182]
4. Gurdjieff and Crowley had another meeting, probably in 1928 or 1929, and Crowley is not known to have criticised Gurdjieff or held a grudge, and this is unlikely had Webb's story been true.[183]
5. Crowley did tell an unfavourable story about Gurdjieff to Nancy Cunard, who said "He (Crowley) was indignant at Gurdjieff."[184] Churton surmises that Crowley probably did not tell Cunard a story of his expulsion from the Prieuré, but rather, Gurdjieff perhaps tried his "extreme psychological methods and exposure of weakness . . . on Crowley. Perhaps Crowley saw through it."[185]
6. Churton states that "Beekman Taylor recorded that someone invited the Beast "in anticipation of a combat of magical powers, but apparently both

179. Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, 315,
180. Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 298.
181. Ibid., 298–299.
182. Ibid., 299.
183. Ibid., 294.
184. Ibid., 300.
185. Ibid., 300–301.

> he and Gurdjieff behaved well." This is a very different slant again on Crowley's summer 1926 visit."[186]

I am not sure that, even on his evidence, Churton has established a plausible case that there was a philosophical similarity between Gurdjieff and Crowley. First, the alleged similarities inspire no confidence; I doubt that Gurdjieff ever said that love is "the uniting of opposites," although it is trite that love can unite opposites. Gurdjieff's emphasis was on the idea that such as we are, we cannot love, and that, until we have being, to speak of it is futile.[187] Likewise, Gurdjieff did not vaguely speak of "the importance of will," but of how we have no will to speak of.[188] To attribute to Gurdjieff the notion that the "cosmos falls into line with the correctly orbiting will" is utterly fanciful, and is not supported by any reference. For Gurdjieff, real "I" (not real "I am") would imply "true will," but any likeness to Crowley's ideas of "True Will" and "Holy Guardian Angel" is the merest assertion. On his own showing, Churton says that Crowley's idea was not to be confused with "self," while for Gurdjieff "I" would represent a true self.[189]

Then, although Churton states, "nor is there any contemporary evidence from any member of the institute to support the account,"[190] he observes in a footnote, that Ethel Merston, who was at the Prieuré, did say that Gurdjieff expelled Crowley. However, Churton did not read the manuscript himself, relying rather, on a report, and states the following: "In the context of all else contained in this chapter, the snippet may be fairly regarded as inconclusive."[191] Stating that evidence is "inconclusive" does not make it so; Ethel Merston, a resident of the Prieuré, states the following in her memoires:

186. Ibid., 300.
187. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 21, 102–3.
188. Ibid., 100–101 and 161.
189. Ibid., 117–21.
190. Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 298–99.
191. Ibid., 298.

> We had J.G. Bennett for a couple of weeks, who later started an Institute of his own near London; Bishop Wedgewood the head of the theosophical Liberal Catholic Church, in his long purple robes; Algernon Blackwood, the author, a friend of Orage, and a very charming man; Alastair [sic] Crowley, the reverse, and the only person I ever knew Mr Gurdjieff to turn out after only a couple of days' stay.[192]

This directly confirms Webb's account, although it is less detailed. There were hardly two expulsions of Crowley. It is a failure of methodology to think that direct evidence can be rebutted by indirect circumstances. Taylor's account of Crowley's visit is unclear, and in parts inaccurate: he does not say what his authority for the anticipated duel or their behaviour was. His footnote completely misstates Peters' testimony, and even the book in which Peters wrote it.[193]

Contrary to Churton's assertion, Webb does not place the expulsion in July 1926. He states variously "that year" and "the summer of 1926."[194] Since Churton makes Crowley's August arrival in France an obstacle to Webb's account, this is an extraordinary misstatement of the evidence. Next, while Webb does not disclose his sources, he explains in some detail both why he does not, and asseverates that "the reader will have to accept my word . . . and my judgment of each as a reliable source of information."[195] Granted Webb's record of scholarship, those guarantees are not without weight. It is puzzling that Churton did not mention them.

I should note that Pasi was also sceptical of the meeting as retold by Webb; however, he was not so dismissive of the possibility that Webb had a reliable source. Further, Pasi did not know of Merston's memoires.[196] In his foreword to Hall's posthumously published *Beelzebub and the Beast*, Alistair Coombs

192. Ethel Merston, undated memoires (see bibliography for details).

193. Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven*, 90 and note 54. I regret to say that Taylor is quite wrong in his reading of James Moore–Moore's endnote attributes his information to Webb. It is not "another version."

194. Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, 314–15.

195. Ibid., 12.

196. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 168–69. I find Pasi's view that the meeting as recounted by Nott is the same as that told to Suster hard to fathom; Nott has Crowley speaking to children at the Prieuré, in Gurdjieff's presence, which is clearly not the meeting of which Yorke spoke.

finds Webb's account plausible, noting that the reported swings in Gurdjieff's behaviour accord with his well-attested "spontaneous ferocity."[197] Mistlberger offers a similar observation, and likewise entertains the possibility that Webb's report is accurate.[198] The evidence is unequivocal: Webb states that he had information that Gurdjieff banished him, and it is corroborated.

3.4. The Argument from Silence

Examining Churton's argument raises some important methodological questions. I have recently offered some suggestions for assessing whether there has been borrowing from one source or culture into another.[199] This section continues that study. Churton supports his thesis that Gurdjieff and Crowley were similar in many respects in part from a later meeting between Gurdjieff and Crowley, which, he says, was arranged by Gerald Yorke, although he here provides no reference.[200] In his 2017 book on Gurdjieff, Churton wrote, "Yorke was sole witness to a half-hour encounter Yorke said he organised between Crowley and Gurdjieff at a Paris café."[201] This time he does provide a reference.[202] The argument boils down to this: Gurdjieff and Crowley were observed peaceably together. People who have once had a row can never again be peaceable—this proposition is implied but unstated: Even assuming that Gurdjieff knew Yorke (for which I have not yet found any evidence), and that there was such a meeting, the gratuity of Churton's argument is evident. Therefore, Gurdjieff and Crowley never had a row.

However, when one reads Gerald Suster's book, the account is significantly different from what Churton led us to expect:

197. Hall, *Beelzebub and the Beast*, xxiv.
198. Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*, 391–96.
199. Azize, "Assessing Borrowing," *passim*.
200. "Gerald Yorke claimed to have introduced the competitors . . . " Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 281.
201. Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 300.
202. Ibid., 300 and 331n9. The footnote takes us to 92–93 of Suster's *The Legacy of the Beast*.

> It was Yorke who gave me an accurate account of the meeting between Crowley and another celebrated magus, G. I. Gurdjieff, for he was the only other person present. . . . According to Yorke, Crowley and Gurdjieff met in Paris for about half an hour and nothing much happened other than a display of mutual male respect: "They sniffed around one another like dogs, y'know. They sniffed around one another like dogs."[203]

To suggest that Yorke arranged the meeting is to suggest that Gurdjieff wished or was at least content to meet Crowley. But that is not the evidence. The evidence is simply that they met. Other than that it was in Paris, we know nothing of it. It could have been a chance meeting. As with the misstatement of Webb's dating, the error is remarkable. What is more, Churton himself states that Cunard states Crowley was "indignant" with Gurdjieff; explaining it away as Crowley having "seen through" Gurdjieff.[204] He makes no attempt to explain how a sentiment which is clearly consistent with the Webb and Merston account could be explained by Crowley's being fly to Gurdjieff's tricks.

Then, we have an argument from silence: to argue that Stanley Nott would have mentioned the expulsion "had he known it" is the merest assertion. It is notorious that there are strange and apparently inexplicable omissions from written histories, e.g., Marco Polo did not refer to the Great Wall of China and other matters which it has been supposed he would have.[205] One striking example of an omission made in apparently unthinkable circumstances is that in 1979, G. A. Flick published *Natural Justice: Principles and Practical Application*. It was "originally written as a thesis which was submitted in 1977 for the degree of PhD at the University of Cambridge."[206] In a class at the University of Sydney in 1979, he mentioned to us that after the book was published, he had often been asked why he had not mentioned *Ridge v. Baldwin*, the most important case of all on the topic. The reason, he declared, was that he had forgotten to.

203. Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast*, 92–93.

204. Churton, *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, 301.

205. The controversy is set out in Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China*. Specifically relating it to the argument from silence, and noting its weakness, see Henige, *Historical Evidence and Argument*, 176.

206. Flick, *Natural Justice*, vii.

When the second edition appeared in 1984, the new foreword by a Supreme Court judge eloquently referred to the significance of that case, which appeared no less than seven times in the index.[207] Not only had the doctoral candidate omitted the most important single case on his topic, but his supervisors and the examiners at one of the world's leading law schools, also overlooked it, although other readers did not, and when the book was revised, it featured prominently. To argue, then, that if someone had known of something they would have mentioned it, one needs better grounds than its importance to their discussion: one needs to explain the lacuna, especially by countering the possibility of an egregious oversight.

David Fischer refers to "the fallacy of the negative proof . . . an attempt to sustain a factual proposition merely by negative evidence."[208] However, Churton's argument presents a variation, because he is also attributing an intention to Nott to cover certain material relevant to Gurdjieff and Crowley, and also assuming that Nott has the requisite knowledge of the incident being studied, and had not forgotten or decided for other reasons not to publish it. That is, Churton's argument is actually weaker than even the fallacy of the negative proof.

Douglas Walton refers to Fischer's work, and takes it further.[209] He states that the *ad ignorantiam* argument is a knowledge-based argument, arising from the observation that a proposition is not included in a knowledge-base, and then has a third characteristic. That third characteristic assumes either a closed or an open world. This presents us with two types of *ad ignorantiam* argument; the first is conclusive, the second is non-conclusive, respectively.[210] Walton's survey is lengthy, and considers many examples not pertinent to our enquiry; but he seems to take the argument as an inherently fragile means of *proof*, yet

207. Ibid., xxx.

208. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 47.

209. Walton, *Arguments from Ignorance*, 64–68.

210. Ibid., 76–78. These are also what Walton refers to as "monotonic" and "nonmonotonic" forms of reasoning.

valuable when used as a *consideration*, especially where there is little evidence available, or it is employed in a closed world.[211] Timothy McGrew adds that "[e]ven in cases where the probability of the conditional is quite high, the argument may be weak because rival explanations account for the absence of evidence even better than the desired conclusion does."[212] Later in the article, he provides some striking examples of an unexplained omission by someone who did in fact know the matter omitted, although we might have expected it to be mentioned.[213] To this we can add our example of Flick's *Natural Justice*, all the more potent because the University of Cambridge accepted it for a doctorate.

So, in the instance of Gurdjieff and Crowley, the assertion is that X would have said Y were the evidence true, when all the time we do not know that X in fact knew Y, and if he did, what reasons he might have had for maintaining a silence. A consideration of what is known of Nott and Crowley suggests a very simple reason for Nott's omitting to retail the event, even if he had known of it: Nott idolised Orage, Orage had been a friend of Crowley from the first decade of the twentieth century through to at least 1932, and to depict Gurdjieff attacking Crowley could be read as an indirect criticism of Orage. Nott states that a mutual friend had him meet Crowley who sought two things: money and an introduction to the Prieuré. Nott declined to help with either, but Crowley nonetheless shortly thereafter appeared at the Prieuré. Nott sums up his impression of seeing Gurdjieff and Crowley together:

> I got a strong impression of two magicians, the white and the black, the one strong, powerful, full of light; the other also powerful but heavy, dull, and ignorant. Though "black" is too strong a word for Crowley; he never understood the meaning of real black magic, yet hundreds of people came under his "spell." He was clever. But, as Gurdjieff says: "He is stupid who is clever."

211. I am summarising my reading of Walton, *Arguments from Ignorance*, 64–167, see especially 101, 140, 146, 162, and 285–87.

212. McGrew, "The Argument from Silence," 220.

213. Ibid., 225–26.

> Orage said about this: "Alas, poor Crowley, I knew him well. We used to meet at the Society for Psychical Research when I was acting secretary. Once, when we were talking, he asked: 'By the way, what number are you?' Not knowing in the least what he meant, I said on the spur of the moment, 'Twelve'. 'Good God, are you really?' he replied, 'I'm only seven'."[214]

However, Orage's relationship with Crowley appears to have been closer than this. Beatrice Hastings, who met Orage in 1906, said that she was surprised to discover that Orage's best friend was not Holbrook Jackson, but Crowley. She took it upon herself to throw out Orage's offending documents: "I consigned all the books and 'Equinoxes' and sorcery designs to the dustbin."[215] Further, Pasi reveals that Orage wrote a reference for Crowley in March 1908 when the latter wished to be admitted to the Reading Room of the British Museum and, on 7 July 1932, Orage wrote to Crowley with respect to a future meeting.[216]

Having set out the pertinent material, it strikes me Crowley arranged his visit to the Prieuré in order to further his own desire for money and pupils. This would have been the purpose of the proposed duel. Gurdjieff took a deep dislike to the man and ordered him never to return to him. Crowley was afterwards indignant at Gurdjieff, and Gurdjieff is not recorded as ever having mentioned him. That is what the testimonies relate. I can accept Yorke's account that Gurdjieff later met Crowley, although I wonder how they came to meet. I do question that it is evidence of mutual respect. Gurdjieff had been guarded but hospitable to Crowley at the Prieuré, but a meeting elsewhere was a different matter. If nothing else, the fox would not be near the poultry yard, and that, after all, was what Crowley had been after.

Then, we should also consider the differentials. I suggest that the differences between Gurdjieff's system and Crowley's were vast and outweigh any similarity.

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214. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 122.

215. Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, 210. *The Equinox* was a journal Crowley had published beginning from 1909. See Asprem, "Magic Naturalized?" 140.

216. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 176.

Gurdjieff taught a doctrine of unity and diversity, exemplified at the cosmic and the individual dimensions, where movement is from the One to the many with a possibility in the case of humans of conscious return to the One. To this end he brought a distinctive and coherent system theory which included cosmology, anthropology, and psychology. He taught many practical disciplines, and from the 1930s taught contemplative exercises. From early in his career he taught Sacred Dances or "Movements." He composed a significant body of music and wrote a substantial book and two more modest efforts, with collaborators. He died after a period of three years (1946–1949) surrounded by pupils. He had only one wife, but he fathered children with other women. He employed neither ceremonial nor sex magic, Crowley's two chief techniques.[217] Gurdjieff had no interest in politics, let alone international politics, as Crowley did.[218] The differences from Crowley are unmistakeable. Even Crowley's more serious writing comes across as the work of a bower bird, relating concepts and practices from diverse cultures to his own central "magickal" ideas, as in *Liber 777*. Crowley regularly used drugs both personally and in his "magick," while Gurdjieff never did except for one occasion, in Russia, as part of a demonstration.[219]

Speaking of esotericism, there were significant differences beyond Crowley's speaking of "magic" rather than "esotericism." Gurdjieff's view of esotericism and exotericism, which he saw were conceptually linked together, is developed and precise, siting the question within a large cultural and social context. I have not discovered, on the material available to me, that Crowley had a deep

217. This hardly needs comment, but Readdy, *One Truth and One Spirit*, 87, states the following: "The O.T.O. would develop into an initiatory society that placed an emphasis on sexual magic."

218. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*. For Crowley's unsolicited advice to the nations of the world, unaccountably unheeding, and his high hopes, see Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 11, 17, 30–31, 33, 35–36, 57, 78–82. He believed that adopting Thelema could save Nazi Germany from the Church and made attempts to promote it to them; see Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, 53–54.

219. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 251–53. The late George Adie said that Ouspensky had told him that Gurdjieff had used a narcotic on this instance, a report which is supported by Gurdjieff's comment at Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 162.

understanding of esotericism, beyond the belief in "secret chiefs" which has been referred to. His view of magic was nothing if not expansive, seeing in his teaching of Thelema the solution to all problems. The discussion this far would indicate that the term "esotericism" could properly be applied to Gurdjieff's system, although he was just as much a mystic. Neither would he have accepted the idea of being a "magician," although as Peters stated, "he would not deny knowledge of certain powers that might be called 'magic'."[220] Crowley succeeded, to some extent, in associating "magic" with himself (unless of course the magician wears a silk top hat from which he extracts specimens of *Oryctolagus cuniculus domesticus*).

4. Conclusion

The "esoteric" is a coherent concept. The dictionary's witness to contemporary usage is quite satisfactory. The word's etymology is clear, and the historical trajectory from the Pythagoreans and early Greek philosophy, as one half of the word pair "esoteric / exoteric" accounts for the kernel of its meaning. The concept of "the esoteric" operates to point to a hierarchy of knowledge and can serve to distinguish and elevate the sacred. Especially in religion, the concept of the esoteric identifies a localisation of the holy, and brings it into relation with the exoteric, as higher relates to lower. The esoteric demands personal merit of those who approach it, and by virtue of regulated access, manages the dangers inherent in any premature or blasphemous approach to it. The esoteric and the exoteric thus stand in a necessary complementary relationship.

The "esoteric" does not share the association of "occultism" with astrology, magic, and alchemy, although "Western Esotericism" does, as that is now a proper noun. I have queried the rigidity of Hanegraaff's distinction between historical and typological meanings for "Western Esotericism," as one cannot be established in isolation from the other. Further, painting the esoteric with too broad a brush may obscure the reasons for which a teaching is reserved for

220. Peters, *My Journey with a Mystic*, 241.

an inner circle. We also saw that the existence of such an elite can endanger the transmission of the esoteric secret, since the conduit is so narrow, and also can arouse opposition from those kept beyond the veil.

This distinction between esoteric and exoteric was embodied in the New Testament, and so was always accessible whenever and wherever the New Testament is read. The New Testament also brings out how the very purpose of the esoteric teaching may be to prepare for its revelation to the world: a movement which places a responsibility upon the shoulders of the initiates who make it known. The Gospel of John adds an interesting detail, which is that the secret may be preserved not because it was let undisclosed, but because the hearers could not comprehend it.

I took Gurdjieff and Crowley as case studies and tried to apply these words to them. I concluded that while both could be described as in the tradition of Western Esotericism, Gurdjieff could not be described as an occultist, but Crowley could. We spent a good deal of time debunking the contention that Gurdjieff and Crowley had similar philosophies and methods. In the course of this we examined the argument from silence. We saw that this "argument" is more a "consideration" than a proof, and that while it can be useful in the absence of evidence, it is rarely more than a slender support.

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