Introduction
Hic sunt dracones

> Quod tanto impendio absconditur, etiam solummodo demonstrare, destruere est.
>
> Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* III.5

We are vaguely aware of its existence in our culture and our history. But we would not be able to define what it is, and are at a loss about what to call it. It has many names, but none of them seems to have a clear and straightforward meaning, and each carries associations that are somehow questionable or confusing. And yet, all these names – "esotericism," "hermeticism," "the occult," "magic," "mysticism," "superstition," "the irrational," and so on – refer to something that unquestionably seems to exist, in our history and all around us. Bookshops have special sections devoted to it, artists and poets claim to be inspired by it, theologians warn against its dangers. We are bound to come across its representatives or its ideas when we are studying the sources of our cultural past, or just while reading a popular magazine or watching television. And whenever that happens, most of us are at least dimly aware of an emotional response of some kind: discomfort, irritation, amusement, contempt, or perhaps some vague feeling of curiosity, puzzlement, even excitement. What we do *not* do, or only very rarely, is take a persistent look at it and ask ourselves questions about what we see. What is all this, really? Where does it come from? How does it all hang together? What is it doing in our society and our history? And why is it that we tend to smile about it, feel embarrassed, or look the other way?

The generic "we" in the above refers primarily, although not exclusively, to intellectuals and academics like myself. Questions of this kind have occupied me since the day, during my years as an undergraduate student, when I came across a book by a German scholar, Will-Erich Peuckert. It was titled *Pansophie*, and dealt with a range of early modern authors

I had never heard of before: a platonic philosopher (Marsilio Ficino), an author on magic (Cornelius Agrippa), a rebellious physician (Paracelsus), a cobbler given to visions (Jacob Böhme), and many others. I learned about their ideas, which turned out to be complex, unusual, and located in some hard-to-define no-man's-land between philosophy, religion, literature, art, and science. And it became clear that, far from being marginal outsiders, they had been remarkably influential in their own time, and stood at the origin of large and complex intellectual traditions that could be traced through the centuries and even up to our own time. In short, an unknown world opened up for me. Why had I never come across all of this before?

I was intrigued, and wanted to learn more, so I asked my professors for advice. And that is when I began having my first experiences with a phenomenon that has ultimately led me to write this book. My interest in this domain seemed to make my teachers uncomfortable, and to my repeated requests for information and suggestions, they responded by tossing the embarrassing topic on to another colleague as if it were a hot potato. Nobody seemed willing to touch it, and it did not take me very long to decide that if this were the case, then somebody had to do it. This is how I began my explorations of an unknown continent that seldom appeared on the maps of respectable learning, except with a negative travel advice attached to it: *hic sunt dracones*. Few guidebooks were available, and even fewer proved reliable. With only rare exceptions, scholars who had made serious ventures into this unknown territory had stayed in only one of its towns or provinces, refusing to go anywhere else, and many were those who claimed profound knowledge about it without having learned even just one of its languages. Almost nobody had attempted to map the continent as a whole, however provisorily, and the very few who had tried disagreed about its very boundaries.

Over the past twenty years, the situation has begun to improve. At the time when I began exploring it, there was exactly one academic chair devoted to this continent of learning as a whole, and no university program where students could study it as part of a regular curriculum. At the time of writing, there are at least three, all in Europe: still a very modest number, especially if one considers the vastness of the terrain, but an encouraging beginning that promises more to come. Several academic journals and learned societies, countless international conferences, and great numbers of articles and books demonstrate that what used to be, arguably, the single largest stretch of *terra incognita* in modern academic research is now

attracting scholars in ever greater numbers. They even seem to have agreed about what to call it: Western esotericism.

In this book I make no attempt to provide a map of the domain, or write its history. Instead, I have set out to write the history of how scholars and intellectuals have *imagined* it, ever since the time that its contours first began to be drawn by those who claimed to know of its existence. It is only through their eyes that we will be introduced to it here, and it will quickly become apparent that many of those who have confidently described its nature – sometimes as a lost paradise, sometimes as a dark realm filled with demons, or a resort of fools – have been projecting their own hopes or fears onto it, or have just been repeating what others said about it. But no matter how extravagant the claims that have been made about this continent, one thing is clear: it has always been considered the domain of *the Other*. It has been imagined as a strange country, whose inhabitants think differently from us and live by different laws: whether one felt that it should be conquered and civilized, avoided and ignored, or emulated as a source of inspiration, it has always presented a challenge to our very identity, for better or worse. We seldom realize it, but in trying to explain who "we" are and what we stand for, we have been at pains to point out that we are not like *them*. In fact, we still do.

How much truth there is to these perceptions of otherness is an open question, which I will not try to answer directly. What must be emphasized, however, is that our perceptions of "esotericism" or "the occult" are inextricably entwined with how we think about ourselves: although we are almost never conscious of the fact, our very identity as intellectuals or academics depends on an implicit rejection of that identity's reverse mirror image. It is for this reason that the field of "Western esotericism" has potentially explosive implications for academic research as a whole. If our inherited assumptions about it prove to be inadequate, because they are reflective of ideological constructs and stereotypes rather than unprejudiced investigation of the historical record, then we will be obliged to reconsider the foundations of our own identity. Our imaginal constructs of esoteric or occult otherness are simultaneously constructs of ourselves, and therefore if "they" turn out to be different, the question is what does this imply about us.

In short: setting out to explore the blank spaces on the maps of learning and confront their dragons is a dangerous business. It will affect us possibly beyond recognition, and should do so: if we return from our expeditions unchanged, this means that the dragons have won. In this book we will

be following a range of scholars who made the attempt, with greater or lesser degrees of success. I have written it in the hope that after traveling through six centuries in their company, and returning home to our own time, intellectuals and academics will discover that their familiar world no longer looks quite the same.

CHAPTER 1

The history of truth
Recovering ancient wisdom

> Down that road, the past did not grow darker with distance, but brighter; that way lay the morning lands, wise forefathers who knew what we have forgotten, radiant cities built by arts now lost.
>
> John Crowley, *The Solitudes*, 96

The history of human thought emerged as a topic of intellectual fascination among Italian humanists in the fifteenth century,[1] and the historiography of what we now call Western esotericism was born along with it. The grand Renaissance project of recovering the sources of classical antiquity and its philosophical traditions forced Christian thinkers to reconsider basic questions concerning the relation between human rationality and divine revelation, and stimulated them to trace the historical origins and chronological development of both. However, at a time when critical neutrality had not yet emerged as a historiographical ideal, any such history had to be based upon theological and metaphysical premises and assume the shape of a *history of truth*: it was not expected merely to discuss the various opinions of earlier thinkers, but rather, to demonstrate the sources of true knowledge and wisdom, trace the paths they had followed through time, and make clear how those trajectories harmonized or coincided with the unquestionable truth of Christian doctrine. This Renaissance project, generally recognized as central to the history of Renaissance hermeticism

[1] See the monumental history of the history of philosophy edited by Giovanni Santinello, *Storia delle storie generali della filosofia*; vol. 1 translated into English, under the general editorship of C. W. T. Blackwell, as Bottin *et al.*, *Models of the History of Philosophy*. See there esp. Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents," 4, and the bibliography on p. 59. See also, for example, Spini, "Historiography," 92–93; Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 332. That the history of philosophy originated in the Italian Renaissance was emphasized as early as 1888 by Ludwig Stein in the first issue of *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, in an article that contained a full transcript of an *Epistola . . . de Nobilioribus philosophorum sectis et de eorum inter se differentia* (1458, addressed to Marsilio Ficino), by Johannes Baptista Buonosegnius, "the first modern historiographer of philosophy" (Stein, "Handschriftenfunde"; cf. Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents," 8–9; and Braun, *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie*, 54).

and Western esotericism, is usually referred to as *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) or *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy).

From contemporary academic perspectives, the very idea of a "history of (metaphysical) truth" might strike us as contradictory and self-defeating: how can truth be absolute and yet subject to historical development, or conversely, how should we imagine a history of something that is immutable and beyond change? But such questions are inspired by a secular development of historical consciousness that was still alien to the Renaissance humanists who will be discussed in this chapter: for them, metaphysical verities grounded in divine revelation were the self-evident foundation for intellectual inquiry, and there was not yet any compelling reason to see them as incompatible with the business of historiography. Although we can now see these Italian intellectuals as having made the first tentative steps in a direction that would eventually lead towards the history of philosophy as an autonomous discipline[2] (while also laying some early foundations for the future development of another one, the comparative study of ancient religions),[3] it is of the utmost importance to emphasize that their essential project was not historiographical in our sense of the word, but doctrinal and theological throughout: in studying the ancient wisdom discourse[4] of the Renaissance, we will be dealing with a species of Christian apologetic theology[5] that derived its vigor and its religious urgency from the intellectual challenge posed by the newly discovered "pagan" literature.

The overall argument of this chapter is that this Renaissance project resulted in the emergence of a powerful grand narrative which seriously challenged traditional perspectives on the relation between philosophy and theology, or rationality and revelation, and remained a highly important factor in Roman Catholic thought until its decline under the influence of the "anti-apologetic" discourse developed by Protestant authors during the seventeenth century (the main topic of Chapter 2). After the victory of anti-apologeticism during the eighteenth century, this grand narrative

[2] Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents," 14–25 (section "'Prisca Theologia' and 'Perennis Philosophia'"). The pioneering importance of Renaissance platonism, and Agostino Steuco in particular, for the historiography of philosophy was highlighted by Otto Willmann as early as 1894 (*Geschichte des Idealismus* III, 126–154).

[3] Kohl, "Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft," 227–229.

[4] In what follows, I will adopt the convention of using the term "discourse" for the entirety of discussions about ancient wisdom, whether by defenders or opponents, and "narrative" for the perspectives of the defenders only. In other words, the narratives of those who wished to defend the ancient wisdom gave rise to a complex apologetic/polemical discourse.

[5] As emphasized by Walker in the opening sentence of his classic study on the *prisca theologia* tradition: "By the term 'Ancient Theology' I mean a certain tradition of Christian apologetic literature which rests on misdated texts" (Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 1).

of "ancient wisdom" survived as a widespread but officially discredited countercurrent at odds with mainstream intellectual thought. It has been accepted or implied, in one version or another, by most of the authors and practitioners studied under the umbrella of Western esotericism, up to the present; but, interestingly, it has also strongly influenced the thinking even of the most important modern scholars who have shaped and developed that field. Were these scholars attracted by the ancient wisdom narrative in spite of its incompatibility with post-Enlightenment intellectual and academic culture or, rather, *because* of it? As the narrative unfolds, we will see that in addressing such questions, we get to the heart of what is at stake in the modern and contemporary study of Western esotericism.

The story that will be told here is one of apologetic and polemical battles and negotiations over the "wisdom of the pagans," and their continuations or reverberations right into the present: a story with winners and losers, but without a final victory in sight. Moreover, it will be argued, not only do we see the complex processes of secularization and modernization reflected in this story at each and every turn, but, far more importantly, the battle between the apologists of "ancient wisdom" and their anti-apologetic enemies has *shaped* and *determined* the emergence of modernity to an extent that has rarely been recognized.

COMPETING MACROHISTORIES

Much has been written about the "ancient theology" or "perennial philosophy" of the Renaissance,[6] but, surprisingly, there have been almost no attempts to be precise about definitions or think systematically about the relation between the two central terms *prisca theologia* (first used by Marsilio Ficino and "launched" into scholarly debate in 1954)[7] and *philosophia*

[6] The most important general discussions (in chronological order) are Walker, "*Prisca Theologia* in France"; Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, chapter 1 ("Poetic Theology"); Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy"; Facoltà . . . Perugia (ed.), *Filosofia e cultura in Umbria* (a conference volume largely devoted to articles on the perennial philosophy, plus a very extensive appendix based upon round-table discussions); Schmitt, "*Prisca Theologia* e *Philosophia Perennis*"; Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, vol. II, chapter 15 ("From *Theologia Poetica* to *Theologia Platonica*"); Walker, *Ancient Theology*; Di Napoli, "Il concetto di 'philosophia perennis'"; Purnell, "Theme of Philosophic Concord"; Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents"; Muccillo, *Platonismo, Ermetismo e 'Prisca Theologia'*; Allen, *Synoptic Art*, chapters 1–2; Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*; Vasoli, "Mythos der 'Prisci Theologi'"; Mulsow, "Ambiguities."

[7] D. P. Walker claimed to have "launched" the term in 1954 (*Ancient Theology*, 1 n. 1, referring to his groundbreaking "*Prisca Theologia* in France"), but it appears literally in Marsilio Ficino's writings, for example "De laudibus philosophiae" (*Opera*, 768: "Prisca vera Aegyptiorum et Arabum theologia"); Argumentum to the *Pimander*; or *De Christiana religione* 22 (*Opera*, 25: "Prisca Gentilium Theologia").

perennis (introduced by Agostino Steuco and put on the agenda of Renaissance historiography in 1966).[8] The only notable exception is the historian of Renaissance philosophy Charles B. Schmitt, who in an Italian article of 1970 called attention to the fact that the notion of an "ancient" wisdom is different from that of a "perennial" one, both in its contents and its implications:

> The concept of *prisca theologia* indicates that the true knowledge would be anterior to Greek philosophy and would actually be found, although perhaps in an enigmatic and esoteric form, among the pre-classical sages such as Zoroaster, Mercurius Trismegistus, and Orpheus. Usually it is thought that, directly or indirectly, they had derived their wisdom from Moses, and therefore they assumed a high level of authority within the Jewish–Christian tradition. From this point of view the *sapientia*, having been developed among the *prisci*, or ancient sages, passed on to the Greeks by way of the platonic current: that is to say, from Orpheus to Aglaophemus to Pythagoras and, finally, to Plato.[9]

From such a perspective, the rediscovery and translation not only of the works of Plato, but also of writings attributed to Zoroaster, Hermes and Orpheus in the later fifteenth century, had to be a momentous event resonating with millenarian overtones.[10] For the first time in history, and at a time when the moral degeneration of the Church was becoming more obvious every day, Christians had unexpectedly been granted access to the most ancient and therefore most authoritative sources of true religion and philosophy: surely the hand of Providence was at work here, showing humanity a way towards the needed reformation of Christian faith by means of a return to the very sources of divine revelation.

We will see that Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), the virtual founder of the Renaissance *prisca theologia* narrative, indeed believed that in translating Hermes, Orpheus, Plato and the later platonists he was acting as God's chosen instrument.[11] However, in a penetrating analysis of his perspective, Michael J. B. Allen has warned against too easy associations between the concept of *prisca theologia* and that of *philosophia perennis*, linked to the name of Agostino Steuco.[12] Charles B. Schmitt, too, had called attention to the differences:

[8] The term was introduced in 1540 by Agostino Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, and put on the agenda of Renaissance scholarship by Charles B. Schmitt in 1966 ("Perennial Philosophy").
[9] Schmitt, "*Prisca Theologia* e *Philosophia Perennis*," 212–213 ("scienza" is translated here as "knowledge").
[10] *Ibid.*, 213. [11] Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 14, 17–18. Cf. also Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents," 52.
[12] Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 42.

the *philosophia perennis* . . . would seem to have larger implications. It likewise makes wisdom originate in a very ancient time, often applying the same genealogy of the transmission of *sapientia* like the *prisca theologia*, but it also puts emphasis on the continuity of valid knowledge through all periods of history. It does not believe that knowledge . . . has ever been lost for centuries, but believes that it can surely be found in each period, albeit sometimes in attenuated form.[13]

This second perspective strongly emphasizes the unity and universality of wisdom, rather than its decline, and therefore lacks the millenarian implications of Ficino's outlook. It seems significant that Agostino Steuco published his grand synthesis *De perenni philosophia* in 1540, only a few years before the Council of Trent: while the Roman Catholic adherents of *prisca theologia* and the new Protestant theologians both wanted to reform the Church by means of a return to what each of them saw as its origins and foundations, Steuco's grand synthesis did not seek to reform but to *preserve*. It did so by strongly affirming the unity and universality of the one, perennial faith, very much in line with a perspective that had been proclaimed in the strongest possible wordings even by St. Augustine: "The very thing which is now called the Christian religion was with the ancients, and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from when on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian."[14] What we find, therefore, is a strong tension between two opposed tendencies: on the one hand, a historically/chronologically oriented narrative of ancient wisdom which held considerable revolutionary potential, and, on the other, an essentially conservative doctrine which preaches the futility of change and development by emphasizing the trans-historical continuity and universality of absolute truth.

Still, this is not all. If we further unpack the Renaissance discourse on ancient wisdom, we may even distinguish a third, "prophetic" tendency: this one claims that, due to divine inspiration, the ancient philosophers before Christ had been granted prophetic glimpses into the superior religion of Christianity.[15] Such a third option, which might conveniently be referred to as *pia philosophia*,[16] introduces an element of "progress": whereas

[13] Schmitt, "*Prisca Theologia* e *Philosophia Perennis*," 213.

[14] Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.12.3 (trans. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 21).

[15] With regard to this third option, I am grateful to Jean-Pierre Brach for his fruitful suggestions during a train journey from Strasbourg to Paris in October 2008.

[16] There is an element of convenience in the use of *all* three terminologies. We already saw that the exact term *prisca theologia* is used so rarely in the Renaissance that Walker thought he had invented it (see n. 7). The term *philosophia perennis* was invented by Steuco, but Schmitt expresses surprise at how rarely it is actually used in his *De perenni philosophia* ("Perennial Philosophy," 522); and,

the *prisca theologia* combines a narrative of decline with hopes of imminent revival, and *philosophia perennis* emphasizes continuity, *pia philosophia* thinks in terms of growth and development, imagining a gradual "education of humanity" to prepare it for the final revelation.

If we wish to do justice to the full complexity of the ancient wisdom discourse, this third tendency must be clearly recognized. And yet, its actual relevance to Renaissance culture remains relatively limited. Contrary to the two other perspectives, it concerned a period that had ended with the birth of Christ, and therefore had little social or political relevance for the present: neither revolutionary nor conservative in its implications, it amounted to little more than a historical opinion concerning a time that now belonged to the remote past.[17] It could certainly offer some theological support for antiquarian studies of pre-Christian sources, but lacked political potential in the tense religious climate of Renaissance society. However – and this is an important point – adherents of the *prisca theologia* perspective could and did evoke it rhetorically, to counter criticisms that their narrative of ancient decline and contemporary recovery left no room for explaining how the advent of Christianity had been a step forward in the history of truth.

In sum: the concepts of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* are most central to the ancient wisdom discourse of the Renaissance, but, to avoid simplification, we need to keep the *pia philosophia* option constantly in mind. From a systematic perspective, then, the problem inherent in this discourse was that it somehow encompassed no fewer than three mutually exclusive macrohistorical schemes: evolution, degeneration, and

ironically, it only became famous after having been divorced from its original meaning, by Leibniz in 1714 (letter to Remond of August 26, 1714; see Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy," 506, 532; see below, page 130), after which it embarked upon a new career in a variety of new contexts, including neo-scholastic theology and the East/West philosophy of Aldous Huxley (see references in Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy," 505–506). Likewise, *pia philosophia* is merely one option among many similar terms that were used at the time, such as, for example, *prisca sapientia*, *christiana philosophia*, *mosaica philosophia*, *caelestis philosophia*, *vetus theologia*, and even *nova theologia* (see Di Napoli, "Il concetto di 'philosophia perennis'," 266–268).

[17] There are exceptions even to this: the hermetic philosopher Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500) developed a variation on the ancient wisdom narrative that implied progress from the ancient revelation of wisdom given by Poimandres to Hermes long before the time of Moses, via the incarnation of Poimandres as Jesus Christ, to the final return of Christ/Poimandres in the person of his spiritual teacher Giovanni "Mercurio" da Correggio (see Hanegraaff, "Lodovico Lazzarelli and the Hermetic Christ," 47, 95–96). However, this radical doctrine was intentionally concealed by Lazzarelli, and can only be reconstructed today by close textual comparison of the various manuscripts. It notably influenced Cornelius Agrippa, who adopted Lazzarelli's identification of Poimandres with Christ, but not his adherence to Correggio (Agrippa, *Oratio habita Papiae* [Zambelli ed.], 125; see discussion in Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic").