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**DOI**

[10.1163/15700593-02202017](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02202017)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Aries

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Hanegraaff, W. J., Brach, J.-P., & Pasi, M. (2022). Antoine Faivre (1934–2021): The Insider as Outsider. *Aries*, 22(2), 167–204. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02202017>

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ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY  
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM 22 (2022) 167–204



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# Antoine Faivre (1934–2021)

## *The Insider as Outsider*

Wouter J. Hanegraaff | ORCID: 0000-0001-9570-2010

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

W.J.Hanegraaff@uva.nl

with Jean-Pierre Brach\* and Marco Pasi\*\*

### Abstract

This article provides a biographical overview and analysis of the life and career of Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), the French scholar who first conceptualized esotericism as an academic field of study and also stood at the cradle of the journal *Aries*. After his early years as a scholar of literature, Faivre's mature career can be divided into four main periods: (1) from 1961 to 1969, he established his reputation as a leading historian of eighteenth-century Christian Theosophy and Illuminism; (2) then from 1969 to 1979, the year in which he was appointed to the first academic chair for 'Western esotericism' at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, he embarked on a parallel career of religionist activism marked by a strong Christian-spiritual engagement; (3) from 1979 to 1992, his experiences as a visiting professor at the University of Berkeley and in various other international contexts led to a broadening of his scholarly vision and a gradual retreat from religionism back to more standard historical perspectives; (4) from 1992 to his retirement in 2002, his prodigious scholarly output in several languages established his lasting international reputation as the foundational scholar of 'Western esotericism'. Faivre remained active as a scholar until just a few years before his death. This article explores the complex interaction, in his personal development, between a strictly academic 'outsider' perspective and a simultaneous 'insider' involvement in several contemporary esoteric traditions, from Sophianic Theosophy and (neo)Martinism to the Christian-Masonic *Rite Écossais Rectifié*.

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\* École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, France; jpbrach@noos.fr.

\*\* University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; M.Pasi@uva.nl.

## Keywords

Antoine Faivre – insider/outsider problem – esotericism – religionism – Christian Theosophy – Martinism – Freemasonry – Rite Écossais Rectifié

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First, his guiding function, linked to his extreme mobility; second, his mastery of speech and interpretation, warrant of a certain type of knowledge. ... Mercury wanders about and communicates for the sheer pleasure of it. His route is not the shortest distance between two points; it is a world in itself, made of serpentine paths where chance and the unforeseen may happen.<sup>1</sup>

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On 19 December 2021, at the age of 87, Antoine Faivre died of cancer in a hospital in Paris. His health had begun to fail a few years earlier so that his passing was not entirely unexpected, but still it came as a shock to all those who had known him as colleagues and friends. With Faivre's death, the international community of esotericism scholars loses its original founding father, the pioneer who first conceptualized esotericism as a field of study and succeeded to put it on the map of international academic research. It was also Faivre who, in 1983 (together with Roland Edighoffer, 1923–2017) created the original journal *ARIES* that, with its relaunch as a new series in 2001, became *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*. Faivre's personal and intellectual trajectory is fascinating in its own right and deserves serious study, for its significance goes considerably beyond the strictly biographical interest of an important scholar and his academic achievements. It opens a window on the history of esoteric speculation and spiritual practice among high-level intellectuals in France since the 1960s and its close links to the autonomization and professionalization of esotericism research that took place in academia since the 1990s. Antoine Faivre's activities covered the full spectrum between personal involvement and the historical study of esotericism as a strictly scholarly pursuit. In this field as in the study of religion, the relation between 'insider

<sup>1</sup> Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 13–14.

and outsider' perspectives is far from simple and straightforward but allows for subtle shades and nuances, for which Antoine Faivre's life and work provide an excellent illustration.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Early Years (1934–1961)

Antoine Faivre (generally known as Tony during the early decades of his life), was born on 5 June 1934 in the city of Reims, as the son of André Faivre (1902–1969), a tax officer, and his Alsatian wife Marie Madeleine Clour.<sup>3</sup> Tony's father was active in the French resistance during World War II. In 1944 he was arrested by the Nazis and imprisoned in the Neuengamme concentration camp, but managed to survive and return to his family. He later received several decorations for his activities during the war, including the Legion d'Honneur; and a street was dedicated to him in Reims after his death. This parental legacy of anti-fascism and the experience of liberation by the U.S. forces left a strong impression on Faivre during early childhood<sup>4</sup> and inspired a life-long abhorrence of totalitarian politics and authoritarian mentalities. Undoubtedly, it also contributed to Faivre's strong feelings of sympathy for American culture, particularly his love of classical Hollywood cinema. Over time, he would build up a unique collection of silent movies in the genre known as *burlesque*, which he loved to play for visitors at his home in Meudon.<sup>5</sup>

2 Apart from the obvious reference to methodological core debates in the study of religion (e.g. McCutcheon, *Insider/Outsider Problem*), the subtitle of this article owes something to Peter Gay's classic *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider*. For previous discussions of Faivre and his work, see Davis, 'Hermes on the Seine'; Giegerich, 'Antoine Faivre'; McCalla, 'Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism'; and the chapter 'Antoine Faivre and Western Esotericism' in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 334–355. See also the large Festschrift presented to Faivre in 2001: Caron, Godwin, Hanegraaff & Vieillard-Baron, *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique* (including Faivre's bibliography until 2000; for the years 2001–2018, see Faivre, 'Bibliographie'; and the website <https://antoine-faivre.com>); Faivre's personal page at the website of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (E.P.H.E.) <https://prosopo.ephe.psl.eu/antoine-faivre>; and the overview of Faivre's teaching activities at the E.P.H.E. at <https://www.persee.fr/search?ta=article&q=favire>. Apart from these publicly available resources, Faivre granted the authors generous and unrestricted access to his invaluable private *Journal* (1974–1998; a project of publishing these diaries is currently underway). In addition, some information in this article is based on personal remarks by Faivre to Brach, Hanegraaff, and Pasi.

3 *La vie rémoise* (<https://sites.google.com/site/lavieremoise>): Biographies rémoises.

4 Faivre, *Journal*, 26 September 1976.

5 See Faivre's Preface to Courderc, *Les petits maîtres du burlesque américain*.

After finishing secondary school, Faivre studied literature for one year at the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris (1952–1953) and then continued his studies in German and English literature at the Sorbonne (1953–1955). In 1955, together with his friends Jean Huguet, Jean Pothier, and Jean Bancal, he created a successful organization called *Jeunesses Littéraires de France*.<sup>6</sup> From 1957 to 1971, it published a journal, *Cahiers d'Action Littéraire*, to the earlier issues of which Faivre contributed a series of short journalistic articles.<sup>7</sup> Before leaving France for his military service in Algeria (1959–1962), he sent the first draft of a book about vampire mythology to the occultist and early scholar of esotericism Robert Amadou (1924–2006). Amadou then arranged its publication, without informing Faivre, who only discovered it after his return.<sup>8</sup> Today, *Les vampires: Essai historique, critique et littéraire* (1962) is considered the first work of serious scholarship on that topic, which is why Faivre has been called ‘the father of contemporary vampire studies’.<sup>9</sup> Literature in general, and the genre known as *le fantastique* more in particular, was clearly Faivre’s point of entry into the larger domain that the French call *l’imaginaire*; and a love for myths, images, and symbols would remain a constant feature in all his later work.

6 Faivre was President of J.L.F. ‘for many years’ (Faivre, *Journal*, 10 June 1978).

7 As most of these titles are missing from Faivre’s official bibliography (Caron & Pasi, ‘Antoine Faivre: Bibliographie [1960–2000]’), we list them here: ‘Brasseur & Chaplin’, *Cahiers d'Action Littéraire* 17–18 (1957), 17; ‘Définitions autour d’un procès mal compris’, *ibid.* 19 (1958), 3; ‘Jean-Claude Ibert et “Le saut de l’ange”’, *ibid.* 19 (1958), 9; ‘“Poèmes et prose choisis” de René Char’, *ibid.* 20 (1958), 9; ‘Paul Claudel et Pierre Emmanuel’, *ibid.* 21 (1958), 9; ‘Proses et autres poésies’, *ibid.* 22 (1958); ‘Un collègue du cinéma’, *ibid.* 27 (1958), 8; ‘La poésie a-t-elle, aujourd’hui, un public?’, *ibid.* 30–31 (1959), 9; ‘Sueurs froides’, *ibid.* 30–31 (1959); ‘La jeunesse qui écrit ...’, *ibid.* 34 (1959), 4–5; ‘Passage des panoramas’, *ibid.* 41–42 (1960), 17; ‘Saint-John Perse et le langage’, *ibid.* 46 (1961), 9; ‘Le monde de J.-L. Borges’, *ibid.* 48–49 (1961), 14–15; ‘Requiem pour Gilles de Georges Bordonove’, *ibid.* 54 (1961), 11, 13; ‘Formation de l’esprit critique’, *ibid.* 70–71 (1963), 23–24; ‘Le fantastique en livre de poche’, *Cahiers d'Action Littéraire*, nouvelle série 4 (1966), 35–39; ‘Un grand conteur fantastique: Algernon Blackwood’, *ibid.* 7 (1967), 40–41. See also the reviews of Faivre’s work by Yves Legras, ‘Les vampires: Un essai de Tony Faivre’, *Cahiers d'Action Littéraire* 66–67 (1963), 9; ‘La littérature fantastique’, *Cahiers d'Action Littéraire*, nouvelle série 1 (1966), 41; and ‘Kirchberger et l’illuminisme’, *ibid.* 10 (1967), 47–48.

8 Faivre had been close to Amadou before this episode and had been part of the latter’s broad network of scholars/practitioners interested in esotericism and parapsychology. This is also attested by what is probably Faivre’s very first scholarly article, published in 1960 and devoted to vampires as well (Faivre, ‘Les Vampires de Dom Calmet’). Oddly, it was published under the name of ‘Armand Faivre’, probably just because of a mistake by an editor. The article appeared in Amadou’s journal *La Tour Saint-Jacques*, which played an important role between the mid-1950s and early 1960s as a pioneering periodical for the scholarly study of esotericism. Faivre and Amadou became estranged as a result of the misshapen publication of *Les vampires* and were never on good terms again afterwards.

9 Introigne, ‘Antoine Faivre: Father of Contemporary Vampire Studies’.

## 2 The Historian of Christian Theosophy (1961–1969)

The year 1961 was decisive for Faivre on a personal and a professional level. During his adolescence he had drifted from the Roman Catholicism of his childhood towards an agnostic perspective; but one evening during his army service, sitting alone on a hill in Algeria in an atmosphere of danger, he was reading the Gospel of John and had a profound religious experience of Jesus Christ's presence. It infused him with a personal faith about which he chose to remain discreet, but that would never leave him afterwards.<sup>10</sup> While always distrustful of religious institutions and attitudes of doctrinal exclusivism, Faivre identified as a Roman Catholic for the rest of his life; and this is important in view of the strong insistence, in all his later work, on an 'incarnational' affirmation of bodily experience as opposed to a 'docetic' rejection of matter and the senses. Around the same time, his acquaintance with the Christian-existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) further helped him overcome the abstractions of strict philosophical idealism in favor of an incarnational philosophy compatible with the Nicæan creed.

[Marcel] had begun to welcome me as a friend since the day I told him that the concrete aspect of his philosophy, its absence of systematization, had made it possible for me to free myself from the so-called 'idealist' philosophy that very much bothered me and failed to satisfy me; I had explained to him that the discovery of his thinking had helped me bring order in my own, at a time (around 1962) when I already had a lively interest in the Western theosophical tradition but still wasn't able to legitimize this interest of mine. It was precisely Marcel's philosophy that allowed me to be less timid, as it authorized me, so to speak, to firmly take hold of this theosophy so as to make it into an object of study and personal reflection. Thanks to Marcel, I understood that this field of research was not a forbidden territory, a closed field, 'esoteric' in the bad sense of the word, but that it clarified itself through a manner—his own—of considering Hermetism from a new angle, not in order to reduce it to something it is not,

10 Faivre, *Journal*, Good Friday 1977; see also 11 June 1978, 'To say that I had to wait until the age of twenty-five [NB. Faivre must have meant 'twenty-seven' here] to find back the faith that I lost at seventeen, and until the age of thirty to suddenly understand that the true Christianity is not the one that a priest obsessed by the flesh had imprinted on me when I was an adolescent'. For some time after his 1961 experience, Faivre even considered joining the priesthood and entering the *Oratoire de Jésus*, but found celibacy too much of a hurdle.

but in order to understand it better. It is not much later that I discovered Bachelard and Eliade.<sup>11</sup>

During the period shortly before Marcel's death, when the philosopher was almost blind, Faivre used to visit him in his study and read German theosophical texts to him about the corporeality of spirit and the spirituality of the body—the concept of *Geistleiblichkeit* (spiritual corporeality) that was central to Christian Theosophy in the tradition of Jacob Böhme and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger. They specifically discussed the distinction in German between the *Leib* of the living and the *Körper* that is eventually dissolved, 'the first suggesting the idea of the form, respectively the "glorious" aspect, of our body, while the second refers exclusively to the material and perishable body'.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the basic worldview that informs Faivre's scholarly interests as a whole, it is essential to grasp the connection between *Geistleiblichkeit* and the human faculty of *imagination*, both of which are concerned essentially with mediation between theoretical opposites. In a diary entry from the 1980s, Faivre remarks that 'If atheism is the negation of God in favor of the world, then its counterpart—the negation of the world in favor of God—is acosmism. The second may well be as dangerous as the first'.<sup>13</sup> In terms of Cartesian dualism, standard natural science reduced the world to dead matter (the *Körper* as corpse) while pure idealism reduced it to disembodied mathematical abstractions. Neither of these two could account for the reality of bodily existence as actually experienced by human beings. The key to that experiential dimension was the imagination. In the same diary entry, Faivre specified that 'one must read Boehme not with the spirit of Koyré but with that of Corbin, that is to say, by putting as much confidence in the imaginal world as in the profane sciences'.<sup>14</sup> Pure spirit gets embodied in matter, while simultaneously pure matter

11 Faivre, *Journal*, 6 May 1974. Marcel himself seems to have considered the young Faivre as among the few people who best understood his philosophy.

12 Ibid. For Oetinger's concept of *Geistleiblichkeit* and its sharp contrast with Swedenborg's doctetic tendencies, see Hanegraaff, *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant*, 76–85 (with references for further reading). It must be noted that in terms of Christian Theosophy, the *Körper* is more specifically a result of the Fall, whereas the *Leib* should have the ability to return to its original prelapsarian state (on this key notion, known as the *palingenesis* or new birth, see Zuber, *Spiritual Alchemy*).

13 Faivre, *Journal*, 12 January 1984.

14 Ibid. Of course, the reference is to Alexandre Koyré, the author of an early standard work, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme* (1929). Koyré taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études for most of his career. Corbin had been a student of Koyré and, like him, became a professor at the E.P.H.E. in 1954. It is interesting to note that François Secret took over Koyré's chair at the E.P.H.E. in 1965, after it was redesigned as the first chair of 'Christian

gets spiritualized as *Leiber*, living bodies endowed with the capacity for sensory experience; the result is an intermediary world of *real imaginal forms* to which we have access through all our senses—thus human beings may be defined as ‘imagining animals’.<sup>15</sup> What makes this perspective initially hard to grasp for many readers is precisely its insistence on the concrete and tangible *reality* of this imaginal world, which is not just ‘seen’ in human consciousness (and could then be confused with fantasy) but is actually touched, heard, smelled and tasted in our lives on a daily basis. In terms of Böhme’s theosophy, for Faivre the incarnate God of Christianity had to be considered not as an abstract divine principle but ‘an all-powerful, all-wise, all-knowing, all-seeing, all-hearing, all-smelling, all-feeling, all-tasting God’.<sup>16</sup>

Around the same time in 1961, still during his army service in Algeria, Faivre found himself utterly captivated by Auguste Viatte’s two-volume study *Les sources occultes du Romantisme: Illuminisme, Théosophie 1770–1820* (1928). This pioneering classic in the study of esotericism was published by its author at the astonishingly young age of twenty-six, and described Romanticism as deeply indebted to a cluster of interrelated traditions that flourished since the Enlightenment period but had been severely neglected by previous scholarship. These were the rival systems of Christian Theosophy linked to the names of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the esoteric milieus referred to as Illuminism that flourished largely in Masonic contexts before the French Revolution, and the revival of these Theosophical-Illuminist traditions during the early Romantic period. At the time it was published, Viatte’s work had caused a scholarly sensation, because it questioned standard assumptions about the ‘rational’ eighteenth century while throwing an entirely new light on the ‘occult roots’ of Romanticism. The result was a veritable boom in French Illuminism studies before and after World War II.<sup>17</sup> Faivre, too, decided now to redirect his focus from literature toward the study of religion, so as to specialize in this exciting new field of research.

He first got his ‘licence’ in history of religions at the Sorbonne in 1963 and two years later earned his doctorate simultaneously at the Sorbonne and the 5th section (Religious Studies) of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (E.P.H.E.),

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Esotericism’ in 1965, at a suggestion by Corbin the year before (see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 348).

15 Faivre, *Journal*, 29 December 1974 (with reference to C.G. Jung).

16 Böhme, *Aurora* 3.11.

17 Eliade, ‘Occultism and Freemasonry’, 89; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 338. Among the most important authors mentioned by Eliade in this regard we find Gérard van Rijnberk, Alice Joly, Jacques Roos, Léon Cellier, Louis Guinet, Robert Amadou, Max Geiger, Paul Arnold, and René Le Forestier, followed of course by Faivre himself.

with a thesis about Nicolas-Antoine Kirchberger (1739–1799).<sup>18</sup> This Swiss aristocrat had been on friendly terms with important thinkers such as Rousseau, Goethe, and Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), while maintaining an intense correspondence with the key Christian theosophers Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803) and Karl von Eckartshausen (1752–1803).<sup>19</sup> Faivre's study of Kirchberger therefore led him to Eckartshausen, who became his next focus of research. This original arithmosophist, theosopher and Christian kabbalist turned out to be a crucial but neglected figure in eighteenth-century esotericism, connected through his enormous correspondence with a very wide network of Theosophers and Illuminists during the high period of the Enlightenment. Faivre pursued his studies of Eckartshausen as a research associate with the French Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (C.N.R.S.) from 1965 to 1969, and earned the title of Docteur d'État in German studies with an almost 800-page monograph, *Eckartshausen et la théosophie chrétienne* (1969).<sup>20</sup>

As Faivre's energies were now focused entirely on the history of Christian theosophical and Illuminist networks during the eighteenth century, he spent much of the 1960s studying forgotten books and manuscripts in European public or private archives. In this context, it is worth mentioning his spectacular discovery of the letters (long believed to be lost) that the founder of the Christian-chivalric *Rite Écossais Rectifié*, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730–1824), had written to his correspondent Bernard-Frédéric de Turckheim (1752–1831). In 1967, due to a chance meeting over dinner with a friend from the past, Faivre got introduced to her uncle, an already aged Baron de Turckheim who lived in the family's estate in Dachstein. Turckheim and his guest descended with burning candles into the dungeons of this castle, where the former pointed to some large wooden crates that 'had not been opened since the Vienna Congress'—and one of those turned out to contain the treasure: a large collection of unknown letters by Willermoz and Turckheim, along with various masonic documents. Much later, in 1984, another small crate was discovered with additional precious documents.<sup>21</sup>

Faivre's scholarly output in this period was strictly historical-descriptive in its approach, grounded in meticulous study of primary sources. The two large

18 Faivre, *Kirchberger*.

19 For a short introduction in English, see Faivre, 'Kirchberger'.

20 Faivre, *Eckartshausen*. In fact, Faivre's first chosen doctoral theme was the influence of Böhme on later German and French theosophical writers; but with the consent of his supervisor, Eugène Susini, he abandoned this plan as being too ambitious.

21 Faivre, 'Histoire d'une découverte'; *Journal*, 2 October 1982, 22 March 1984. See also Faivre, 'Une collection maçonnique inédite'; and Faivre & Keller, 'Le fonds Bernard de Turckheim'.

monographs on Kirchberger and Eckartshausen have become indispensable standard works in the study of eighteenth-century Theosophy and Illuminism. But clearly Faivre had developed a personal curiosity about the esoteric practices that he was studying, particularly the ‘Martinist’ tradition that encompassed both the more contemplative approach of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (‘la voie cardiaque’, or way of the heart) and its more active-theurgical counterpart (‘la voie opérative’ or ‘mentale’) linked to Martines de Pasqually and his *Ordre des Élus Coëns*.<sup>22</sup> Thus in 1963, Faivre was initiated by Philippe Encausse (1906–1984) into the *Ordre Martiniste* and, just a few months later, by Robert Ambelain (1907–1997) into the closely associated *Ordre des Élus Coëns*. The neo-Martinist Order did not actually go back to the eighteenth century but had been created by Philippe Encausse’s father, Gérard Encausse (1865–1916), better known as ‘the pope of occultism’ Papus.

For my part, I will never forget my initiation in the O[rdre] Martiniste, in 1963, with Philippe Encausse (the son of Papus) at B[oulevard] de Montparnasse, surrounded by candles, white robes and the smoke of incense. I couldn’t forget the visit we made, before and after the ceremony, to his oratory (situated in the same apartment) which, among a hundred diverse esoteric objects, contained a bust of Cagliostro; the atmosphere there is quite impressive, in spite of a somewhat questionable very ‘fin-de-siècle’ taste. ... The group had its meetings in the Rue de Liège, in a well-furnished room; that’s where I went, once or twice a month, from 1963 to 1969.<sup>23</sup>

Although he kept attending these meetings, it would seem that Faivre rather quickly began taking his distances. He sharply rejected Encausse’s belief in reincarnation, found him intolerably lax in his admission policy (or rather, the absence of any), disliked the Order’s sentimentalism and its exaggerated devotion to ‘Le Maître Philippe’,<sup>24</sup> and regretted the absence of doctrinal clarity, let alone unity, in a Christian Order that claimed to continue the theosophy of

22 On the original history of ‘Martinism’ and ‘Martinesism’, see Var, ‘Martinism: First Period’; Nahon, ‘Élus Coëns’ (in this article we follow the spelling used by Var and Nahon, although Faivre himself often uses the alternative but strictly incorrect spelling ‘Élus Cohens’). For the later development of ‘neo’-Martinism, see Introvigne, ‘Martinism: Second Period’.

23 Faivre, *Journal*, 22 April 1975. Philippe Encausse and his ‘oratory’ can be seen in a short film ‘Philippe Encausse, fils de Papus’ (1965) available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y686Pj9oqKQ>.

24 See Var, ‘Philippe, Anthelme-Nizier’.

Saint-Martin.<sup>25</sup> The simple truth is that as a deep academic specialist of Martinism, Faivre knew far too much about its original perspectives to be impressed by these occultist reinterpretations. As for Ambelain's neo-Martinist Élus Coëns (a much smaller all-male group), they had their meetings in the same room at Rue de Liège, where they studied Martines de Pasqually's *Traité de la Réintégration* and talked a lot about theurgical 'operations'. In a fascinating diary passage, Faivre describes how in his small apartment in Courbevoie, he not just experimented with these Martin(es)ist techniques himself, but his efforts were in fact rewarded (at several instances in succession) by the appearance of luminous phenomena of the exact kind that Martin(es)ists interpreted as angelic presences. 'And thus', Faivre remarks in his diary with a touch of irony, 'I had entered the society of the angels.'<sup>26</sup>

### 3 The High Tide of Religionism (1969–1979)

Faivre's academic career developed with great speed and success. Without passing through the usual lower university positions, he was appointed full professor at the Institut Universitaire de Technologie (I.U.T.) of the University of Paris XIII (Saint-Denis), where he worked from 1969 to 1972. This position was followed by similar ones at the University of Bordeaux III from 1972 to 1985 and the University of Haute Normandie from 1985 to 1990.<sup>27</sup> He was teaching in the

25 Faivre, *Journal*, 28 January 1975; 22 April 1975; 26 December 1980; 25 September 1983; and see Faivre's Addendum to Le Forestier, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Templière et Occultiste*, vol. 2, 1018–1019.

26 Faivre, *Journal*, 22 April 1975. Note that Faivre absolutely did not share the interest of this small circle of Élus Coëns, including Ambelain himself, for hallucinogenic substances as means to stimulate such angelic phenomena. Together with a friend, he did decide to experiment with LSD one single time in 1975, out of pure curiosity and without a ritual setting or any spiritual intentions (Faivre, *Journal*, 6 August 1975).

27 These professorships therefore continued alongside Faivre's position as 'Directeur d'Études' at the E.P.H.E. that began in 1979 (see text, below). Some E.P.H.E. professors (known as "cumulants") can be in this situation, which is not necessarily desirable. Faivre was in fact happy to end the combination of multiple positions and finally become a full-time professor at the E.P.H.E. in 1990. In Paris, Faivre had been appointed by the director of the I.U.T., his friend from the J.L.F. Jean Bancal (Faivre, *Journal*, 17 March 1975; 18 Mai 1976). In Bordeaux, Faivre seems to have started in 1972 as 'Professeur sans chaire', but was elected in March 1975 as 'Professeur à titre personnel' with a teaching assignment 'German Literature and Thought' that gave him great liberty in choosing his topics (*Journal*, 17 March 1975). Shortly afterwards, in April 1975, he stepped down as Director of the Institute of German Studies, a position 'which had brought me nothing but disappointment' (*Journal*, 9 April 1975).



FIGURE 1  
From left to right: Gilbert  
Durand, Henry Corbin,  
Antoine Faivre

domain of German Studies (literature, in particular), which gave him much room to continue his research in Theosophical-Illuminist traditions. Thus he was carrying on his historical research, resulting in many publications focused on the later eighteenth to early nineteenth century; but he now also began to broaden his theoretical and methodological focus into new and different directions.

We have seen that Faivre discovered Eliade's writings early during the 1960s, next to those of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), who had written much about poetics, dreams, and the imagination. In 1967, Faivre made his first visit to Ascona, to attend the annual Eranos conference. It is here that he became part of an intimate circle that included Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and Gilbert Durand. In the following years, Faivre's face became well-known to Eranos audiences because he volunteered to summarize Corbin's long and difficult lectures in German.<sup>28</sup> It is very clear that during these later years of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Faivre's worldview and scholarly perspectives were deeply impacted by the 'spirit of Eranos' exemplified in particular by Jung, Eliade, Corbin, and Durand. The so-called 'religionist' perspective<sup>29</sup> exemplified by these scholars had become extremely popular during this period, not just at Eranos itself but also in European and American popular culture, partly due to the translation and publicity efforts of the Bollingen foundation and the enormous impact of Eliade's 'Chicago School' of History of Religions.<sup>30</sup>

28 For Faivre at Eranos, see Hakl, *Eranos*, 234–236.

29 On the technical understanding of 'religionism' as a specific approach to history of religion and spirituality, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 127–128, 149–150, 295–314.

30 For a longer discussion of Faivre's religionist period than is possible here, see Hanegraaff,

It is important to see that Faivre's explicit religionist agendas and philosophical speculations during this period were anything but idiosyncratic. They essentially reflected his intellectual openness to new perspectives that were becoming prominent on the international scene and were very much typical of the 1970s cultural *Zeitgeist*, both in French academic circles and in the wider society. For instance, Faivre's researches of Romantic-theosophical *Naturphilosophie* (with a special focus on Franz von Baader) now led him to explore parallels with the 'new physics', from Raymond Ruyer's much-publicized 'Gnosis of Princeton'<sup>31</sup> to the non-Aristotelian logic of Stéphane Lupasco.<sup>32</sup> Another major influence in this period was the esoteric philosopher and writer Raymond Abellio (ps. of Georges Soulès, 1907–1986), who advocated a 'new gnosis' as well, and had developed an arithmological theory informed by esoteric traditions (kabbalah, tarot, astrology, *I Ching*) and Husserlian phenomenology called *La Structure Absolue* (The Absolute Structure).<sup>33</sup> From present-day perspectives, it is often surprising to see how prominently such overtly esoteric philosophies (to which one might add the remarkably strong 'subterranean' influence of speculations about *La Tradition* in the wake of René Guénon) were circulating in French intellectual milieus at the time. It is clear from Faivre's unpublished *Journal* that after having emerged from

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*Esotericism and the Academy*, 334–355. For the impact of Eranos on American popular and academic culture, see also Haki, *Eranos*; and McGuire, *Bollingen*.

- 31 The French philosopher Raymond Ruyer (1902–1987) had produced an international best-seller titled *La gnose de Princeton* (1974), in which his own panpsychist views were fictionalized as the discussions of a mysterious group of anonymous American scientists. It became a major influence not just on an Eranos speaker like Adolf Portmann but also on poststructuralist thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Faivre writes in 1977 that Corbin, too, had become 'obsessed' by this Gnosis of Princeton (*Journal*, 13 February 1977); and one year later, he was himself 'reading and re-reading' Ruyer alongside similar books by Jean Charon, Edgar Morin, Michel Ambacher, and Fritjof Capra, to the point of even considering writing a book on these topics—but with Franz von Baader as his chief authority (*Journal*, 17 April 1978; nevertheless, a few months later he qualified Ruyer's book as a *canular*, 'a hoax'; *Journal*, 11 June 1978).
- 32 Stéphane Lupasco (1900–1988) was a well-known French philosopher with Romanian origins whose 'logic of contradiction' rejected Aristotle's principle of the excluded middle term. Faivre knew him well, and mentions him frequently in his *Journal*. He had met Lupasco in Paris in Romanian circles, along with Eliade, Paul Barba-Negra, Eugène Ionesco, and Emile Cioran. His interest for Lupasco helped trigger his later friendship with the French-Romanian physicist Basarab Nicolescu.
- 33 See Rouse-Lacordaire, 'Abellio, Raymond'; and the collective volume by Faivre & de Foucauld, *Raymond Abellio*. Abellio's book titles are significant: next to *La structure absolue* (1965), they include *La fin de l'ésotérisme* (1973), *Approches de la nouvelle gnose* (1981), and *Manifeste de la nouvelle gnose* (1989).

the archives and attained tenure as a professor, he now passionately involved himself in multiple networks of intellectuals who shared a common interest in problematizing the boundaries between science and the spiritual. Again, as in Faivre's concern with *Geistlichkeit* and the imagination, it was always about the ambiguous, liminal middle ground between theoretical extremes.

To get a balanced view of Faivre's activities during this period, it is relevant to see clearly which esoteric and intellectual traditions he did *not* find attractive. First of all, unlike quite a few other French intellectuals who had a penchant for esotericism, he was not very interested in René Guénon and Traditionalism.<sup>34</sup> The most important reason was that Guénon himself, like most other Traditionalist authors, had not been particularly attracted by the German *Naturphilosophie* and Christian theosophy that were at the heart of Faivre's interests throughout his life as a scholar. Secondly, he and his friends steered clear of the boom of occultist 'conspirituality' for the masses inspired in French popular culture by Louis Pauwels' and Jacques Bergier's runaway bestseller *Le matin des magiciens* (1960), and the milieus linked to the journal *Planète* with its many international offshoots.<sup>35</sup> It is also worth noting that Faivre's esoteric networks hardly seem to have merged or overlapped with the traditions of French surrealism in the wake of André Breton, in spite of a common fascination with spiritual alchemy.<sup>36</sup> As for the rise of poststructuralism during this period, this was a trend that he followed from a distance but found hard to take very seriously.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Faivre and his friends shared an abhorrence of the dogmatic

34 Significantly, Faivre was invited to an important scholarly conference on Guénon held at Cerisy-la-Salle in July 1973; but in his contribution, he spoke very little about Guénon. Instead, most of it was devoted to the subjects that were really dear to him, that is, theosophy and *Naturphilosophie*. See Faivre, 'Démystification et remythisation'.

35 The term 'conspirituality' was coined in 2011 by Ward & Voas, 'Emergence of Conspirituality' but is perfectly applicable to the 'fantastic realism' of *Planète* (at the origin, *inter alia*, of the popular mythology of 'Nazi occultism'), on which see Karbovnik, 'L'ésotérisme grand-public'; Renard, 'Le mouvement *Planète*'. Bergier, the main source of information about esotericism in *Le matin des magiciens*, is never mentioned in Faivre's *Journal* and clearly did not belong to his networks. Pauwels is mentioned with enormous irritation for repeating the 'errors' and 'dishonesties' of the leading New Right intellectual Alain de Benoist in his *Comment peut-on être païen?* (1981), qualified by Faivre as a 'livre malfaisant' ('a malicious book') and an 'immondice' ('filth') (*Journal*, 26 March 1981).

36 See Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*. This point is all the more interesting given the fact that Faivre's friend Frédéric Tristan (ps. of Jean-Paul Baron, a well-known French writer and winner of the prestigious *Prix Goncourt* in 1983) was on close terms with Breton. Tristan's autobiography *Réfugié de nulle part* contains a lot of interesting information about these French 'hermetic' milieus since the 1970s.

37 Faivre, *Journal*, 16 March 1974: with reference to Marcel Duchamp's famous 'L.H.O.O.Q.' (the Mona Lisa with moustache), Faivre briefly discussed surrealism, the anti-psychiatry

Marxism that had come to permeate much of French academic life since the events of 1968. Communism for them was the new fascism, a totalitarian threat that sought to stifle freedom of thought and would leave no room for spiritual values—if it ever came to a communist take-over in France, Faivre noted, he would make sure to pack his suitcase and head for the United States.<sup>38</sup>

Around 1969, it seems that Henry Corbin's writings about the divine Sophia caused a major turnaround in Faivre's thinking: they 'revealed to me what one cannot summarize in ten lines, and made suddenly clear to me that it is possible to work as a philosopher without thereby neglecting history. The latter, like the Sleeping Beauty woken up from her night, is then no longer just an archaeologist's business'.<sup>39</sup> If Gabriel Marcel's philosophy had once given him 'permission' to fully embrace Christian Theosophy as an object worthy of deep study and intellectual reflection, Corbin's work now did something similar by encouraging Faivre to step beyond the methods of strict historiography and speak out as a Sophianic philosopher. The theosophical figure of the divine Sophia, as female counterpart to the all-male Trinity, would always play an important role in Faivre's thinking; in the basic terms of *Geistlichkeit*, and against a background informed by Jungian concepts of *animus* and *anima*, it enabled him to speculate playfully about amorous, even erotic and somehow sensuous theosophical relations with the divine feminine on the subtle level to which Corbin referred as the imaginal.<sup>40</sup>

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movement, and 'the theses of Michel Foucault' in terms of a confused 'subversion of categories' that cannot fool professional psychiatrists or literary scholars. See also his remarks about a fascinating dinner with Michel de Certeau (his later competitor for the chair at the E.P.H.E.): 'brilliant, subtly aggressive, a trained dialectician' who reminded him of Michel Foucault (*Journal*, 7 May 1976). When William J. Bouwsma in 1980 inquired about his opinion of the latter, he described him (together with Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan) as a virtuoso 'manierist' for whom form and style count more than content. Faivre told Bouwsma that he neither ignored nor admired Foucault's writings but belonged to the third category of 'those who read, take note, and have fun' (*Journal*, 13 March 1980).

38 Faivre, *Journal*, 15 March 1977.

39 Faivre, 'Ternaire alchimique', 613–614; see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 340 (the reference is probably to Foucault's 'archeology of knowledge'). Two of these articles were written in response to Jung's controversial *Answer to Job*: Corbin's large and difficult article 'La Sophia éternelle' (1953) and his 'Postface' (1964) to the French edition of Jung's book. To this should be added Corbin's famous *L'imagination créatrice dans le Soufisme d'Ibn-'Arabi* (1958), which contains a major discussion of 'Sophiology' and 'The Creative Feminine'.

40 For a synthesis written late in his life, see Faivre, 'Sensuous Relation with Sophia'. At a personal biographical level, as expressed throughout his *Journal*, these views obviously resonate with Faivre's love of women and his thoroughly positive attitudes towards eros

Around the same time, in 1969, Faivre was initiated as a Freemason in the *Grande Loge Nationale Française-Opéra* and began practicing the *Rite Écossais Rectifié*—the Christian chivalric system created by Willermoz in 1778.<sup>41</sup> Having tried and been disappointed by Encausse's occultist neo-Martinism, therefore, he now joined the original tradition of high-degree masonry that he had studied in depth as a scholar. Interestingly, it was a Jesuit priest, Michel Riquet s.j. (a friend of his father, and well-known in France for his courageous anti-Nazi activism during World War II)<sup>42</sup> who gave him the final push:

He knew my admiration for Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, the founder in the eighteenth century of the Order of the *Chevaliers Bienfaisants de la Cité Sainte*, and it was he who, in July 1969, suggested to me to seek initiation at the *Grande Loge Nationale Française*, Boulevard Bineau in Neuilly. 'There is a need', Father Riquet told me, 'of people like you in Freemasonry. One must expand the ranks of masons with a true interest in traditional Christian symbolism, and it is in Willermoz's *Rite Écossais Rectifié* that these people should regroup. The G.L.N.F. has several Lodges that work according to this Rite. Join them—your presence will not be out of place!' He was addressing someone already convinced, but removed the last barriers that kept me back, for he convinced me that same day that the Catholic that I am need not fear to be put under the visible or invisible ban of the Church of Rome. 'There are Masons and Masons!', Father Riquet added—I had always known that, but I was happy to be given absolution in advance, by a priest who, at that time, had the ear of the Vatican.<sup>43</sup>

Riquet and Faivre had already been chatting quite a lot about René Le Forestier's unpublished monograph on Christian-esoteric Templar Freema-

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and the body (a point that was rather spectacularly misunderstood by Erik Davis in his early discussion of Faivre, 'Hermes on the Seine').

41 The *Grande Loge Nationale Française* was founded in 1913, and used to be known as the GLNF-Bineau (because of its location at Boulevard Bineau; nowadays the reference is to 'Christine-de-Pisan', the new address in Paris), to distinguish it from the GLNF-Opéra that split off from it in 1958 and whose 'regularity' is not recognized by the Grand Lodge of England. For the system into which Faivre got initiated, see Dachez & Pétilot, *Le Rite Écossais Rectifié*.

42 Bernay, 'Le Père Michel Riquet'. Riquet was imprisoned by the Nazis in Dachau from 1944–1945 and must have known André Faivre from the networks of the French Resistance.

43 Faivre, *Journal*, 6 May 1975 (note that in spite of the reference to Boulevard Bineau, in fact Faivre joined GLNF-Opéra). For Riquet's personal connections with the pope (Paul VI), his remarks about Michel De Certeau, and his research on the Abbé Barruel, see also *Journal*, 7 May 1976.

sonry, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Templière et Occultiste aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (written between 1928 and 1950), which Faivre was in the process of editing and that came out in 1970.<sup>44</sup> This impressive work of historical scholarship made a big impression on Faivre himself and his friends. The Christian Chivalric system of the *Rite Écossais Rectifié* (R.E.R.) and its inner Order, the *Chevaliers Bienfaisants de la Cité Sainte* (C.B.C.S.) now moved into the center of attention for them, not just from a scholarly but from a personal spiritual perspective as well. Deeply impressed by the beauty of its rituals, Faivre introduced Corbin and Durand into the R.E.R. a few years later, in 1972. Corbin in particular seems to have been deeply moved and inspired by the Christian-chivalric and Templar symbolism, which dominated the final years of his life and work and deeply informed his original conception of the *Université Saint-Jean de Jérusalem* (U.S.J.J.), affiliated to a neo-Templar priory and created in 1974.<sup>45</sup>

'Under the cedar tree' at the round table of Eranos, in August 1972, the atmosphere of friendship and profound enthusiasm about all these new discoveries and spiritual perspectives led to a fascinating episode (perfectly serious and yet playful at the same time, very much in line with Faivre's character—one is reminded of Goethe's formulation *halb Kinderspiele, halb Gott im Herzen*) referred to as 'opération pâquerette', the Daisy Operation. Corbin, Durand, Faivre, and his friends Jean de Foucauld, Robert Salmon, and Jean-Claude Frère<sup>46</sup> created what they called a 'secret lodge' of six persons who thought of themselves as the center of a daisy flower (*pâquerette* in French) with as its petals a whole series of initiatives that they were planning.<sup>47</sup> If the daisy's golden center was like the sun, the white petals were its rays; and in fact, Faivre

44 On the author and the history of his researches, see Faivre, 'Préface', in: Le Forestier, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Templière et Occultiste* (2nd ed., 1987), vol. 1, 7–14.

45 For a longer discussion, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 341–343; and idem, 'Henry Corbin as Knight of the Temple' (forthcoming). Faivre and Durand needed to put heavy pressure on Corbin to sacrifice his original 'esoteric' conception of the U.S.J.J. in favor of a more open and academic format: during their first preparatory meetings during the spring of 1974, 'Henry was of the opinion that this colloquium should bring together just about twenty carefully chosen persons entirely devoted to our ideas. According to him, this should be a meeting of esotericists in perfect spiritual agreement among one another. Chateaubriant, Durand and me, who did not at all agree, had a lot of trouble to make him accept our point of view' (Faivre, *Journal*, 4 March 1974).

46 Faivre knew de Foucauld and Salmon from Encausse's *Ordre Martiniste* (*Journal*, 22 April 1975). They became close friends and accompanied him into the Freemasonry of the *Rite Écossais Rectifié*. Frère, on the other hand, soon got into a serious conflict with the others, as evident from Faivre's *Journal* and a review of Frère's book *L'Ordre des Assassins* (Faivre, Review of Frère).

47 Faivre, *Journal*, 4 March 1974.

and his friends were dreaming of a new journal called *Soleil* ('Sun') that should spawn an international series of 'Soleil Groups'. It is impossible not to see this as a counter-offensive directed against the pop-esotericism of Pauwels and Bergier's spectacularly successful journal *Planète* and the 'groupes *Planète*' that had been created in various countries—clearly, the idea was that such dubious 'New Age' phenomena, for all their popularity, were really just planets circling the Sun and dependent on its light. The *Soleil* plan came to nothing,<sup>48</sup> but another 'petal' was implemented with success: the C.E.R.E.R. ('Centre d'Études du Rite Écossais Rectifié, soon renamed, at de Foucauld's initiative, as 'Centre Européen de Recherches, d'Études et de Rencontres'), described by Faivre as 'the most beautiful of the daisy's petals'. It took the form of monthly lectures and discussions at '6 rue Saint-Bon, in a large cave very close to the Tour Saint-Jacques, at the geometrical center of Paris'.<sup>49</sup> Filled as they were now with spiritual and initiatory enthusiasm, the six conspirators even went so far as to create a special ceremony just for themselves, the 'Rituel Abrahamique' and a closely associated 'Rituel de Melchisedech'; it was practiced in Paris just one single time, and 'put to sleep' again under the cedar tree at Eranos, in August 1973.<sup>50</sup>

Faivre kept publishing strictly historical articles in the domains of Christian theosophy, Illuminism, and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, many of which were re-published in 1976 as *Mystiques, théosophes et illuminés au siècle des Lumières*. Simultaneously, he was also experimenting with more theoretical and philosophical perspectives, many of them connected (understandably,

48 However, it seems to have been at the origin of several publication series that were successfully implemented, and in which Faivre was centrally involved, notably 'La chaîne d'Or' and 'Cahiers de l'Hermétisme' (Faivre, *Journal*, 4 March 1974).

49 Ibid. Yet another 'petal' consisted of the Rectified Scottish Freemasonry as such.

50 'Rituel Abrahamique' and 'Rituel du chapitre Abrahamique des Clerici Templi: Rituel de Melchisedech' (typed manuscript, private archives Antoine Faivre). Apparently, Corbin kept wanting to change ritual details but then quickly lost interest; Frère made trouble because he wanted to be the group's leader, and eventually alienated himself from the others (see note 46). By mediation of Frère and his friend Jean Moreau, all members of the group were admitted with extreme speed into the C.B.C.S. within the R.E.R. at the Grande Loge Nationale Française Opéra, in May and June 1972; as part of this, the same group of six created a new 'blue lodge' called 'Les Compagnons du Temple de Saint-Jean' that expanded to circa thirty persons, including some academics. As Corbin, Durand, and Frère moved out of its orbit, the remaining three members decided to team up with Moreau (who had been excluded from the original project by Corbin and Durand) to create a new *pâquerette* of just four persons (Faivre, *Journal*, 4 March 1974). The schisms within and from the G.L.N.F., in which Faivre and his friends played a central role, would require a separate discussion.

given his Christian-theosophical orientation) with a new emphasis on spiritual alchemy.<sup>51</sup> There is no doubt that, like Corbin and Durand, he now saw himself as engaged in a kind of culture war against existentialist pessimism, the ‘superstition’ of materialism, the abstract formalism of French structuralism, as well as the nihilist implications of poststructuralism and the ‘archeology of knowledge’. Speaking explicitly as a Christian now, Faivre was lashing out at the contemporary evils of desacralization, historicism, ‘reductionism’, and the reversal of traditional values. His alternative was grounded in a positive valuation of myth, metaphysics, correspondences, analogical thinking, and the creative imagination.<sup>52</sup>

This religionist fervor reached its peak in the summer of 1974, with two major lectures at the first conference of the U.S.J.J. in July and the Eranos meeting in August (Faivre’s second and last appearance as a lecturer in that context).<sup>53</sup> Faivre himself described the latter as ‘the most personal, the least historical’ he had ever given, and knew that it would ‘displease’ some of those present. Indeed it received quite some criticism from the inner circle of Eranos insiders, referred to ironically as the ‘sérail’ (the Sultan’s palace or harem). The relation between Faivre and this group of insiders (whose elitism and authoritarian tendencies he disliked) had clearly begun to cool from both sides, and this 1974 Eranos lecture would remain Faivre’s last one.<sup>54</sup> About a month later, he received a letter from his friend Durand, who qualified the Eranos lecture as an ‘erreur de tir’ (a misdirected shot) and advised him to better avoid such ‘enormous’ panoramas and concentrate on his true areas of expertise, especially Romantic

51 See notably Faivre, ‘Pour un approche’; ‘Alchimie occidentale et logique aristotélicienne’; ‘Ternaire alchimique’; ‘Mystische Alchemie und geistige Hermeneutik’. As demonstrated by Zuber (*Spiritual Alchemy*), the spiritual alchemy of rebirth originated around 1600 and was developed by Böhme and his successors up to Mary Atwood (1850), after which it became a core concern among Eranos-related authors such as Jung and Eliade.

52 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 344–348.

53 Faivre, ‘Philosophie de la nature et naturalisme scientifique’ (U.S.J.J.) and ‘Les normes et la sécularisation du cosmos’ (Eranos). Discussion in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 346–347. Faivre had given his first Eranos lecture ‘Mystische Alchemie und geistige Hermeneutik’ one year before, in 1973. For Faivre’s religionist advocacy at the U.S.J.J., see also his ‘Église intérieure et Jérusalem céleste’ (1975) and ‘Théosophie chrétienne et prophétie’ (1976); after these, he returned to more standard historical perspectives.

54 Faivre, *Journal*, 29 August 1974. Faivre’s feelings of irritation were palpable: ‘Snobism and vanity are the two most visible characteristics of *Eranos*, at least as concerns the “sérail” of which I have the doubtful honor of being part at this moment. It’s all about who flatters whom—but not just anyone. Cliques mentality, hypocrisy, lack of intellectual discernment, routine, the indiscreet cult of persons no longer alive ...’ (one of whom was certainly Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, ‘a smart woman, a good organizer, competent, passionate, misogynous, authoritarian, and disagreeable’).

*Naturphilosophie*. Faivre actually took this advice to heart, and over the next years one sees him returning step by step to more strictly academic perspectives. Unlike Corbin and Durand, Faivre was not a philosopher by training but a specialized historian; and in the long run, the virulent anti-historicism that permeated Corbin's U.S.J.J. was simply not sustainable. Durand's critique must have made him realize that on the level of theory, he would always remain dependent on more original creative thinkers such as Jung, Eliade, Corbin, Bachelard, Lupasco, or Abellio—'in the end', he admitted to himself, 'it will be too risky for me to play the general game of the anthropologists. As a Germanist, I have a strong card to play'.<sup>55</sup>

Thus Faivre's intellectual development during this period might be described in terms of a pendulum movement between two extremes. The specialized historian and Germanist of the 1960s began experimenting with generic spiritual and (in fact) anti-historical theories during the early 1970s; but he discovered that this was not his true strength, and he eventually reached a balance with history moving back to the dominant pole. He also began to realize that this 'anti-historical' stance (of which Durand was a prominent representative) was definitely not going to become the next dominant paradigm in French academia. In an article of 1972, Faivre made his first attempt at defining 'Christian esotericism' in general terms, continued one year later in a volume for the general market titled *L'ésotérisme au XVIIIe siècle*—his chief book-length attempt at combining historical erudition with a Christian-religionist message.<sup>56</sup> Faivre was growing more distant from Corbin while moving closer to Durand, whose *Centre de Recherches sur l'Imaginaire* (founded in 1966) inspired him in 1975 to create a similar center at the University of Bordeaux III. Toward the later 1970s, we see him playing the 'Germanist card' more prominently, with a small volume *Les contes de Grimm: Mythe et initiation* (published in the series 'Circe' directed from Durand's CRI in Chambéry) in which he sought to highlight the 'mythical structures' of fairy-tales from psycho-analytic, structuralist, and 'initiatic' perspectives. As a historical specialist, Faivre was now shifting his focus from eighteenth-century French Illuminism and Christian Theosophy towards the closely related traditions of German Romanticism and 'Hermetic' *Naturphilosophie*, as seen for instance in a pioneering collective volume, with an impressive A-list of scholars, co-edited with Rolf Christian Zimmermann in 1979.<sup>57</sup>

55 Faivre, *Journal*, 10 October 1974. 'Anthropology' in this context refers to Durand and his work on *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1960).

56 Analysis in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 344–346.

57 Faivre & Zimmermann, *Epochen der Naturmystik* (contributions by Wolf-Dieter Müller-

#### 4 The Professor of Esotericism (1979–1992)

In 1979, Faivre was appointed as Directeur d'Études (full professor) at the unique chair for 'History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe' at the 5th section of the E.P.H.E. Originally titled 'History of Christian Esotericism', it had been created in 1965, at a suggestion of Henry Corbin, and was occupied for fifteen years by the specialist of Christian kabbalah François Secret (1911–2003). Unlike other prominent French scholars of esotericism, such as Jean-Pierre Laurant and Jean-Pierre Brach, Faivre never saw himself as a student of Secret; but in 1969 he had been invited by the latter to teach as a lecturer affiliated to his chair at the École Pratique. He continued until Secret's retirement, after which the title of the chair was changed, and Faivre prevailed over his main competitor Michel de Certeau.<sup>58</sup> With his appointment, the first institutional foundations were created for the eventual development of Western esotericism as a new field of academic research.

The main reason for this is that, contrary to his predecessor, Faivre attached much importance to defining the specificity of his chair from both a historical and a theoretical perspective. His key ideas in this regard were still strongly indebted to his earlier theoretical engagement, notably the scholarship of Corbin combined with Lupasco's non-aristotelian logic. Faivre was arguing that the triumph of Averroism during the later Middle Ages had led to a momentous divorce between (on the one hand) a traditional worldview based on analogical thinking and (on the other hand) the new Aristotelian logic of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded middle. As the latter perspective prevailed, it was applied increasingly not just to science and technology but to metaphysics as well, resulting in the evaporation in the Western mainstream of what Corbin called the *mundus imaginalis*. Henceforth, pure matter was imagined (sic) as sharply opposed to pure spirit, thus paving the way for Cartesian dualism and materialism as ultimate consequences. All traditions that resisted this logic and kept thinking in terms of correspondences and analogy found themselves pushed to the margins of intellectual discourse; and as a result, they now

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Jahncke, Walter Pagel, Winfried Zeller, Pierre Deghaye, Serge Hutin, Bernard Gorceix, Inge Jonsson, Ernst Benz, Edmond Mazet, Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, Donald Ault, and Jean-François Marquet).

58 For further details and references, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 348–349. As indicated above with reference to the 'cumul' (note 27), Faivre also maintained his positions at the University of Bordeaux III and then the University of Haute Normandie, a situation that ended in 1990.



FIGURE 2 Antoine Faivre (1990s)

‘coalesced into a strange mass that, for lack of a better term, has been called *esotericism* since about a century ago, and is still seen by many as just a cabinet of curiosities where the best rubs shoulders with the worst’.<sup>59</sup>

Faivre’s major overview article about ‘Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements’ (French original 1984–1986) was based on the same perspective. Importantly, it implied that the autonomization of ‘Western esotericism’ as a separate domain must be seen as an essentially *modern* phenomenon that had emerged in a *Christian* intellectual context as a result of developments in late medieval scholastic philosophy and theology. As a logical result, ancient and medieval as well as Jewish or Islamic traditions had to be seen as ‘influences on’ or ‘backgrounds to’ rather than as integral ‘parts of’ what Western esotericism was all about.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Faivre was in fact describ-

59 Faivre, ‘Philosophie de la nature et naturalisme scientifique’, 92–93 (see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 346 and 349, with Faivre’s key publications in this regard listed in note 347).

60 Therefore ‘Western’ esotericism really meant *Christian* esotericism, so that Faivre’s field could be seen as a logical counterpart to Scholem’s Jewish and Corbin’s Islamic esotericism; in the background lies Corbin’s (not Scholem’s) idea of a ‘comparative esotericism of the religions of the book’ (see Faivre, ‘La question d’un ésotérisme comparé des religions du Livre’). As Faivre’s perspective has been challenged increasingly during the first decades of the twenty-first century, today the study of esotericism is seen widely as com-

ing modern esotericism as a reservoir of 'rejected knowledge'. A worldview grounded in correspondences and analogical thinking mediated by the imagination used to be found more or less everywhere in ancient and pre-modern pagan-hellenistic, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions; but it shrank into a relatively 'autonomous' domain because of the 'fatal' divorce (understood as a momentous downward turn) that had led from Averroism through Cartesian dualism to the 'disenchanted' worldview of secular materialism and atheism.<sup>61</sup> An important further implication was that 'esotericism' had to mean *true* esotericism, defined by its grounding in a non-causal worldview of correspondences. Faivre was still concerned to keep it apart from all those 'trivial' forms of 'pseudo-esotericism' in popular culture that had been corrupted by modern scientific and secular perspectives.<sup>62</sup>

It was with such ideas about esotericism 'properly speaking' that Faivre arrived in San Francisco, in 1980, for the first of a series of annual guest professorships at the University of Berkeley. Parallel to his teaching activities at the E.P.H.E., from now on he would spend several months almost each year on the American Westcoast. That scholars and students at Berkeley were interested in what this European professor of 'esoteric and mystical currents' had to tell them was, of course, anything but surprising. In the wake of the spiritual resurgence of the 1960s, these were the years of high fascination in American culture, including academia, for everything that had to do with 'mysticism', 'esotericism', 'the occult', and 'new religious movements' (often referred to as 'cults'). The alternative lifestyles associated with the 'New Age' flourished nowhere more prominently than in the Bay Area, and were riding a wave of high public profile and commercial success as neoliberalism swept through American culture during the Reagan years.

Faivre therefore found himself confronted on a daily basis now with what modern scholars call popular 'occulture'—a phenomenon that he had always dismissed as a regrettable popularization and trivialization of what esotericism

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prising the entire historical scope from late antiquity to the present, and as including not just Christian (and post-Christian) but Jewish and Islamic esotericism as well. The *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005), conceptualized by the end of the 1990s (see text, below, with note 84), was still a compromise in this regard.

- 61 For this basic concept of modern Western culture as a historical anomaly, see Hanegraaff, 'Globalization', 83–85; and for how Faivre fits such a perspective grounded in 'two ways of thinking', see *ibid.*, 77–80.
- 62 See references in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 350–351 with notes 353 and 355. While Faivre never adhered to Guénonian Traditionalism, the background assumption is reminiscent of Guénon's rejection of spiritualism and modern Theosophy as pseudo-esotericisms corrupted by modern thought.

was *really* all about. In public lectures and class discussions, he was introducing his American students and colleagues to historical traditions such as Christian Theosophy and German *Naturphilosophie* that had been utterly unknown to most of them—but of course, they were still curious to also learn his opinion about modern and contemporary esotericism. It became clear to Faivre that he did not know enough about those topics and had to expand the scope of his expertise; so he embarked now on much more serious studies of later nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomena such as animal magnetism, spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, modern occultism, and new religious movements. As he learned more about these traditions and their ideas, gradually they would begin taking their place in the general historical overviews he was asked to write about ‘Western esotericism’. Nevertheless, his major publications in French were still very much focused on his favourite themes and on periods prior to the ‘secularization’ of esotericism.<sup>63</sup> Most notably, in 1986 he published a major re-edition of articles (many based on U.S.J.J. lectures) with a new introduction under the title *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*. In 1990, it was followed by a smaller volume about alchemical mythology, *Toison d’Or et Alchimie*.

Faivre’s publications during the 1980s show a new fascination with the Greek Hermes, understood as a figure of the mythical imagination and described as ‘the antitotalitarian god par excellence’ who does not respect rigid orthodoxies but bridges barriers to establish connections.<sup>64</sup> Around the same time, he also began exploring the reception history of the Hermetic writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. Faivre was paying much more attention now to the best-selling books of Frances A. Yates (1899–1981) about ‘the Hermetic Tradition’, which had played no major role in his native French academic milieu but were hard to avoid in the American context.<sup>65</sup> The so-called ‘Yates Thesis’ had led to a new boom of academic research into alchemy and other ‘Hermetic’ topics—the main arena of academic scholarship in the field of ‘Western

63 By the mid-1990s, Faivre did embrace the argument that traditional esotericism had been thoroughly transformed by its reception ‘in the mirror of secular thought’ (Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*).

64 Faivre, ‘Children of Hermes’, 432. Faivre’s early article along those lines, ‘Les métamorphoses d’Hermès’ (based on a lecture for the U.S.J.J.), was actually hardly about Hermes at all, but focused on such topics as the ‘gnosis of Princeton’ and other speculations related to the ‘new physics’, including the work of Fritjof Capra.

65 Faivre read Yates’ *Rosicrucian Enlightenment* shortly after its appearance (*Journal*, 18 January 1974); but as regards her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), the reception of the Hermetica during the Renaissance became a topic of research for him only by the mid-1980s (he began lecturing about this topic at the E.P.H.E. in 1985).

esotericism' before that broader terminology began gaining prominence during the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Without any doubt, Faivre's growing interest in the reception history of Hermetic texts was also inspired by his intensive contacts with the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, created by the businessman J.R.R. Ritman in Amsterdam and then at the height of its expansion and public visibility.<sup>67</sup> Generally, Faivre's interest in the 'Warburg School' perspectives (Dame Frances A. Yates, but of course D.P. Walker as well) contributed to gradually steering him away from Durand's and Corbin's perspectives and back towards 'history' and textual approaches, also concerning topics outside his ordinary field of expertise.

But two souls were still living in Faivre's breast, and both insisted on being heard. While the historian kept publishing erudite articles based on research into primary sources, the spiritual religionist was pursuing a 'Hermesian' program of remythologization.<sup>68</sup> In 1982, this led to a somewhat painful experience, not unlike what had happened in the wake of his 1974 lecture at Eranos. Faivre had been invited to give the closing speech at the large conference *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* in Washington, a major event that brought together almost all the international top scholars working in these domains. But his thoroughly 'Hermesian' lecture 'The Children of Hermes and the Science of Man' was clearly out of joint with the historical approach of most of his colleagues.<sup>69</sup> Two years later, Faivre had quite similar experiences at another large conference about alchemy, in Wolfenbüttel; to his considerable puzzlement, he discovered that the 'French school' of *l'hermétisme* and its evident esoteric commitments caused himself to be regarded with quite some suspicion by specialized historians in the emerging fields of hermeticism and alchemy.<sup>70</sup>

66 On this development from Hermetic studies to Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 314–334.

67 For the development of Faivre's contacts with the B.P.H. and his involvement in events initiated by J.R.R. Ritman, see Faivre, *Journal*, 4 April 1984; 30 March 1985; 29 April–2 May 1985; 18–20 November 1986; 23/28 March 1993.

68 'Hermésisme' was defined by Faivre as 'the spiritual attitude that is common to all Western esotericism placed under the sign of the god with the caduceus' (Faivre, *Accès* [1986], 49).

69 Faivre's ambivalence feelings are clear from his *Journal* (25–27 March 1982). While insisting on his 'Hermesian' message, he was uncharacteristically nervous in advance, and afterwards quite obviously worried about its dim reception by many colleagues. Still he did not revise the text before its publication six years later (Faivre, 'Children of Hermes', in the major volume by Merkel & Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*) and even re-published it in his *Eternal Hermes* volume of 1995. Nevertheless, he claimed to feel embarrassed by it in his later years.

70 Conversations at Wolfenbüttel with Joachim Telle, Robert Halleux, and Friedhelm Kemp,

Faivre came from a rather self-contained world of largely francophone scholarship, with Eranos as his main window on international perspectives; but he found himself moving now in new European and American networks, full of professional scholars and historians who not just did not share his spiritual leanings but were intent on strictly policing the boundary between scholarship and belief. By contrast, we have seen that Faivre's perspective had always been grounded in a strong concern with mediation, the crossing of boundaries between theoretical extremes. Very much in the spirit of his favorite 'plastic, mobile, and ambiguous' god Hermes,<sup>71</sup> he disliked rigid or exclusivist attitudes and always felt most comfortable in the ambiguous or liminal middle ground, the place where opposites could meet and fruitful exchange became possible. Faivre would never abandon that mindset, but towards the end of the 1980s he was becoming much more discreet about his personal spiritual perspectives, not just in public academic settings but even in private conversations. With this shift of emphasis, he was laying the groundwork for his eventual rise to prominence as the leading historian of Western esotericism.

## 5 The International Scholar (1992–2002)

In view of Faivre's international career during the 1990s, it would be hard to overestimate his enthusiastic involvement in the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion (A.A.R.). Before he appeared on the scene, 'esotericism' had been understood there as more or less equivalent to 'perennialism' or Traditionalism as understood by American scholars, with Huston Smith (at that moment an emeritus visiting professor at Berkeley) as the most famous example.<sup>72</sup> When Faivre first came to these meetings in 1984, he was not impressed by the papers but enjoyed the opportunity to make new acquaintances with scholars such as Joscelyn Godwin, Ivan Strenski, Ewert Cousins, Richard Payne,

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as recorded in Faivre, *Journal*, 4 and 13 April, 19 July 1984. The 'French school' as perceived by these scholars included authors who had made their appearance in Faivre's publication series *Cahiers de l'hermétisme*, such as René Alleau, Bernard Gorceix (in fact a perfectly competent historian and academic), Serge Hutin, and Eugène Canselier. Halleux said he would have avoided any contact with Alleau or Canselier; Faivre, by contrast, was of the opinion that there was always something to learn from such encounters.

71 Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, 13.

72 The initiative for some panels on 'esotericism' had been taken from 1980 to 1983 by James Cutsinger, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Robert McDermott; see Hanegraaff, 'Study of Western Esotericism', 505 note 13. For a comprehensive discussion, see Houtman, *From the Philosophia Perennis to Perennialism*, chapter 4.

Huston Smith, and many others.<sup>73</sup> As the new 'Esotericism and Perennialism' group at the A.A.R. developed from 1986 to 1990, Faivre became a regular participant. But as he disliked the dogmatic antimodernism and intolerant attitudes of the perennialist faction, he began to insist ever more strongly on a strict historical perspective, while developing a new appreciation for his native French traditions of secular scholarship and religious neutrality known as *laïcité*.

It is clear that Faivre made quite an impression on his colleagues at the A.A.R. As the only academic generalist who could speak with unquestionable authority and impressive erudition about the entire scope of Western esotericism, from late antiquity to the present, he kept being asked for general overviews of what the field was all about. His continuing efforts to provide a historical synthesis finally led to a small but seminal volume published in 1992 as *L'ésotérisme*.<sup>74</sup> That same year, together with his American colleague Jacob Needleman, Faivre also published a major collective volume titled *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (as part of the multi-volume 'World Spirituality' series edited by his friend Ewert Cousins).<sup>75</sup> His *Access to Western Esotericism* was published just two years later and contained a complete English translation of the 1992 volume, next to selected articles from the French *Accès* (1986) and a comprehensive 'Bibliographic Guide to Research'.<sup>76</sup> These three books all gave prominent attention to Faivre's new and soon-to-be-famous definition of esotericism as a 'form of thought' characterized by four intrinsic and two non-intrinsic characteristics (Correspondences, Living Nature, Imagination/Mediations, Transmutation; plus Concordance and Transmission). Next to these titles devoted specifically to esotericism, Faivre also published a smaller volume *Golden Fleece and Alchemy* in 1993 (a translation of the 1990 French volume), followed by *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* in 1995.<sup>77</sup> Simultaneously,

73 Faivre, *Journal*, 10 December 1984.

74 Faivre, *L'ésotérisme* (in the famous French series of pocket introductions 'Que sais-je?' published by the Presses Universitaires de France); it would later be translated into several other languages.

75 Faivre & Needleman, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (with contributions by Faivre, Françoise Bonardel, Dietrich von Engelhardt, G. Mallary Masters, Heinrich Schipperges, Roland Edighoffer, Pierre Deghaye, Edmond Mazet, Jean-Pierre Laurant, Robert A. McDermott, Emily B. Sellon, Renée Weber, Jean Borella, Jacob Needleman, and Gerhard Wehr). The book title was not to Faivre's liking, but imposed by the publisher in terms of the uniformity of the book series.

76 Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*. A second volume modeled on this one was published in 2000, under the title *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*.

77 Faivre, *Golden Fleece and Alchemy*; idem, *The Eternal Hermes*. These two volumes in particular are still quite representative of the spiritual or 'hermesian' Faivre of the 1970s and 1980s.

a collection of articles on German *Naturphilosophie* and Christian Theosophy was published in French as *Philosophie de la nature* in 1996; and finally, his French *Accès* came out in a greatly expanded two-volume version that same year.<sup>78</sup>

With so many titles coming out in just a few years' time, Faivre's name was now impossible to miss for anybody with a scholarly interest in 'esoteric' topics. The effect of his work was to make readers aware of a large and complicated field of spiritual currents that had been integral parts of Western culture from antiquity to the present but had been sorely neglected by academia. Not only did Faivre provide his readers with thorough historical overviews of all its chief dimensions, always paying close attention to primary sources while referring abundantly to the scholarly literature in multiple languages; he also addressed theoretical problems of definition and demarcation, discussed questions of methodology, and proposed his own perspectives as provisory proposals 'susceptible to being completed and corrected' under the impact of future research.<sup>79</sup> The essential modesty of such formulations reflected a basic attitude of curiosity and openness to new perspectives that was highly typical of Faivre's work and personality—until the end of his life, he would always be prepared to keep learning from his colleagues and revise his own ideas. One can see this with particular clarity in his continuing labors to revise the original *L'ésotérisme* volume for each new edition.

By the second half of the 1990s, Faivre had fully embraced the 'empirical-historical turn' that made it possible for Western esotericism to get accepted and integrated in the academy as a normal field of scholarly research.<sup>80</sup> This included a clear stance of methodological agnosticism regarding any axiomatic 'meta-empirical' beliefs and commitments, including the religionist engagement of his previous years. Some of Faivre's older friends and colleagues

78 Faivre, *Philosophie de la nature*; idem, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, 2 vols. (1996).

79 Faivre, *L'ésotérisme*, 4. Interestingly, the expanded second edition of his *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* maintained his original religionist perspective in volume 1 ('Réflexions sur la notion d'ésotérisme'), while his new 'empirical-historical' approach was developed prominently in volume 2 (*Avant-propos: L'ésotérisme et la recherche universitaire*).

80 For this development, see e.g. Hanegraaff, 'The Study of Western Esotericism'; idem, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 355–367; idem, 'Esotericism Theorized'. The concept of 'empirical' method as neither religionist nor reductionist came from Hanegraaff, 'Empirical Method', and defined the position that Faivre adopted explicitly after 1995 (Faivre, *Accès* [1996], vol. 2, 32–41: 'the third [position], referred to as "empirical", is ours. ... This empirical method ... corresponds perfectly with the attitude of *laïcité* in the positive sense that this word has come to assume in French, where it characterizes the spirit in which one pursues the study of religion in the public institutions created to that end')

reacted to his renewed embrace of *laïcité* with puzzlement and incomprehension, even alarm. But as they confronted Faivre about his change of mind, they were bound to encounter his mercurial persona—the master of language, fluidity, and skillful mediation who refused to get ever pinned down on a fixed ideological position. As we have seen throughout this article, Faivre had always been at home in the ambiguous ‘imaginal’ middle ground between theoretical extremes; and so it should perhaps not have come as such a surprise to see him mediating now between the radical alternatives of esoteric religionism and social-scientific reductionism that were dominating American debates in the study of religion at that time. As his friends were alarmed by the attacks on Eliade that were part of this development, they expected Faivre to take up arms against perceived ‘enemies’ such as Umberto Eco or Daniel Dubuisson;<sup>81</sup> but Faivre, who knew them both, insisted on open dialogue:

I answered [to a letter by Durand] that during the 1960s, when I became acquainted with Durand, Corbin, Eliade, etc., a leaden sheet [*une chape de plomb*] paralyzed the French university, to such an extent that, at that time, there was really a battle to fight. But that today, and already for quite some years, the situation had changed. For my part, the engagement had moved to another place: today, it has to do with respect for *laïcité* against any ideological attempt to take power (whether it is political or religious) and with freedom of speech. I am ready to give the word even to those whose discourse may be the farthest removed from our own positions, if only so that the subjects of debate (Eliade, in this case) may be the object of caustic confrontations.<sup>82</sup>

This commitment to tolerance and critical debate was very much typical of Faivre’s mature perspective, as he became widely known as the essential key scholar of Western esotericism. From the mid-1990s on, most of Faivre’s personal activities were focused on a range of initiatives for promoting the academic professionalization of his field. As here is not the place for a detailed history of the study of Western esotericism as an academic domain, it must

81 For Umberto Eco’s public statements, which shocked many scholars of esotericism at that time, see the discussion in Baroni, ‘Philosophical Gold’. Daniel Dubuisson is known for his extreme critique of Eliade; see notably his *Mythologies du XXe siècle* (1993), with chapters on Eliade later extracted as *Impostures et pseudo-science*.

82 Faivre, *Journal*, 29 December 1996. Very similar formulations and a strong commitment to *laïcité* and freedom of expression in Faivre to Durand, 27 December 1996 (Faivre, private archives).

suffice to just mention Faivre's main contributions in this regard. First of all, his role was essential in creating a platform for the study of esotericism at the International Association for the History of Religion (I.A.H.R.), beginning with its 17th quinquennial congress in Mexico City, 1995.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, he was seminally involved in a 1200-page reference work, conceptualized by the end of the 1990s, which for the first time covered all aspects of 'gnosis and Western esotericism' from antiquity to the present and was designed to set a standard of excellence for historical research in these domains.<sup>84</sup> Thirdly, Faivre's influence and academic authority were essential to the creation, in 1999, of a new chair and teaching program for 'History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents' at the University of Amsterdam that became crucial to the further development of Western esotericism as a field of research.<sup>85</sup> And finally, he took an active role in moving the small, French-oriented journal *ARIES* (published since 1985 by Faivre together with Pierre Deghaye and Roland Edighoffer) to Brill academic publishers, where it was relaunched as the new journal in which the present article appears.<sup>86</sup> As these were all highly important steps towards

83 This was a collaborative effort by Faivre, Hanegraaff, and Karen-Claire Voss. The proceedings were published as Faivre & Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (1998); a programmatic article was published by *Numen* in the year of the conference by Faivre & Voss, 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions'. The breakthrough initiative at the I.A.H.R. (for the barriers of deep suspicion about 'esotericism' that had to be overcome were much more formidable than younger generations tend to realize) was continued in the form of an extraordinarily large esotericism program at the 18th congress in Durban, South Africa in 2000 (no conference volume). By the time of the 19th congress (Tokyo 2005), the battle had been won and it became unproblematic for scholars of esotericism to be accepted in this venue.

84 The setting of a high standard was ultimately more important than the choices that were made about what to include or exclude. Critics who find fault in this *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* tend to forget that a reference work of this size (with ca. 120 authors, and countless entries that had to be translated from other languages than English) takes a minimum of five to six years to complete (not to mention quantitative limits imposed by the publisher: there was no question of a third volume). The concept of the *D.G.W.E.* had been established by the late 1990s on the basis of intense discussions between Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, Jean-Pierre Brach, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (the eventual editor-in-chief because he ended up shouldering most of the editorial work while coordinating the whole). Unquestionably, Faivre had a dominant influence on the choices that were made regarding modern and contemporary esotericism; but as the field developed rapidly, even by the time of publication in 2005 it was already moving beyond the 'Faivre paradigm' (see e.g. Hanegraaff's remarks in 2004: 'The Study of Western Esotericism', 507–508)

85 Van den Broek, 'Birth of a Chair'; Faivre, 'From Paris to Amsterdam and Beyond'.

86 *ARIES* was the acronym of an 'Association pour la Recherche et l'Information sur l'Éso-

the establishment of Western esotericism as a recognized field of research, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance of Faivre's contribution.

In 2001, one year before his retirement as *Directeur d'Études* at the E.P.H.E., Faivre was honored with a monumental *Festschrift*.<sup>87</sup> It reflected his enormous network of friends and colleagues and the many domains on which he had focused attention during his academic career. Counting 948 pages and with no fewer than sixty-two contributions in three languages, five sections were needed to cover the entire scope of Faivre's scholarly interests: 'Alchemy, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah', 'German Romanticism, *Naturphilosophie*, and Christian Theosophy', 'Freemasonry, Perennialism/Traditionalism, Sects and Secret Societies', 'Imagination, Imaginaire, Imaginal', and 'Methodological Perspectives in the History of Esotericism'.

## 6 Final Years (2002–2021)

Faivre reached the age of professor emeritus in 2002, but it could hardly be said that he 'retired' from his activities at the E.P.H.E.<sup>88</sup> As a highly sociable person who thrived on personal contacts, he kept teaching his habitual weekly course on Friday mornings, followed by lunch with his students and friends in a Chinese restaurant close to the Sorbonne. Even when the maximum term allowed for emeriti to keep teaching expired in 2011, still the tradition was continued on a non-official basis in that same restaurant.<sup>89</sup>

Faivre kept publishing prodigiously about his favorite topics, in French and English, including a large number of major contributions to the *D.G.W.E.* But after the publication of that reference work in 2005 and the establishment of the Amsterdam program, his work on behalf of the field was done. Still in the same year 2005, he participated in the creation of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (E.S.S.W.E.), and later attended the first two conferences in Tübingen and Strasbourg as one of its first two honorary members. But during the 2010s, he slowly began to withdraw from public activities and academic meetings. Still, this did not mean that he ceased his scholarly

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térisme', and is now available as free downloads on the website of the E.S.S.W.E. (<https://www.esswe.org/page-18140>).

87 Caron, Godwin, Hanegraaff & Vieillard-Baron, *Ésotérisme, gnosés & Imaginaire symbolique*.

88 As Faivre was succeeded by Jean-Pierre Brach, the title of the chair was changed again, now to 'History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe' (i.e. without the reference to 'mysticism').

89 See description and overview in Faivre, 'Bibliographie', 40–41.



FIGURE 3  
Antoine Faivre (ca. 2013)

labors. During the 1970s already,<sup>90</sup> he had developed an interest in the forgotten figure of Carl Friedrich Tieman (1743–1802), a governor of young Russian noblemen who (like Kirchberger, the protagonist of Faivre's first major book) never published anything of importance under his own name but had spent much of his life traveling the length and breadth of the European networks of Freemasonry and Illuminism, establishing contact with everybody who played some minor or major role in this cosmopolitan (sub)culture. Faivre described Tieman as a Mercurial figure, 'with winged feet, always willing to offer his services, to establish contacts between persons and organizations.'<sup>91</sup> It cannot be a coincidence that this description was also perfectly applicable to Faivre himself, as his friends and colleagues had come to know him over the years.

During the final decade of his life, Faivre focused most of his attention on completing the book about Tieman that he had been forced to postpone after the 1970s. Thus he was completing a circle that led him back to his origins—the strict historiography grounded in meticulous archival research that characterized his work of the 1960s, as well as his favorite domain of eighteenth-century Christian Theosophy and Illuminism. The result of these labors was published in 2018, as an utterly impressive monograph of over 650 pages: *De Londres à Saint-Petersbourg: Carl Friedrich Tieman (1743–1802) aux carrefours des courants*

90 Faivre, *Journal*, 8 June 1975, 26 September 1976, 7 November 1977.

91 Faivre, *De Londres à Saint-Petersbourg*, xxiv.

*illuministes et maçonniques*.<sup>92</sup> In personal communications towards the end of his life, Faivre recognized that the book got finished in the nick of time. Just very briefly after completing the lengthy proof-reading process, his health began to take a downward turn that made it impossible for him to find the energy and concentration required for such work. Until the final days of his life, however, he did not lose his spirit, his mental clarity, his ability of full engagement with friends and colleagues, and the unique sense of self-relativizing humor that had always characterized him as a human being.

Antoine Faivre was the foundational scholar of Western esotericism, but he was much more than that. Although widely remembered for his famous definition of esotericism as a ‘form of thought’ and known for his erudite overviews of all its historical manifestations, the fact is that most of his labors were devoted to specialized historical topics that remain largely unknown to most scholars in the field. In the modern study of esotericism, precisely the Christian Theosophy, Illuminism, and Romantic *Naturphilosophie* that form the backbone of Faivre’s scholarly oeuvre are still waiting to be discovered by a new generation. Moreover, Faivre’s personal spiritual engagement of the 1970s and 1980s would deserve much closer study in its own right, as it opens an important window on the transitional decades between the 1960s revolutions and the new global consensus that took shape in Western societies toward the end of the millennium. Antoine Faivre was himself a profoundly transitional scholar, blessed with a mobile and flexible mind, and always concerned with the journey more than with reaching any destination.<sup>93</sup> Therefore the oeuvre he leaves behind is not a conclusion but should be seen as a starting point, like a pebble thrown in a pond—a treasure-trove of knowledge, ideas, reflections, insights, and interpretations that still largely remains to be discovered and explored by readers of the future.

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92 For a review and short summary in English, see Hanegraaff, Review of Faivre.

93 See Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 13 (with reference to Karl Kerényi).

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