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Rejected Knowledge and the Future of Libraries

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Publication date

2016

Published in

Octagon

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hanegraaff, W. J. (2016). Ad loca secretiora: Rejected Knowledge and the Future of Libraries. In H. T. Hakl (Ed.), *Octagon: The quest for wholeness mirrored in a library dedicated to religious studies, philosophy and esotericism in particular* (Vol. 2, pp. 25-34). Scientia Nova.

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“Ad loca secretiora”: Rejected Knowledge and the Future of Libraries

A library is a memory bank. Thanks to the existence of libraries, a culture or a society can remember its own past and reconstruct what its members might otherwise forget about their history and about themselves.¹ Attentive and responsible “memory management” is therefore of more than just antiquarian interest, for if we lose our memories, we literally no longer know who we are. After all – and this is true on the collective just as on the individual level – our very sense of *identity* is caught up intimately with our knowledge of where we have come from and how we have reached the point where we find ourselves now. It is only on such a foundation that one can make responsible decisions about one’s next course of action. This means that while our libraries may be repositories of times past, they are also essential to our future.

Market Economics and the Information Revolution

In this regard, we presently find ourselves at a critical juncture, due to a combination of two factors: the global emergence since the 1980s of “neo-liberal” market economics as the dominant paradigm not just in the financial world but in all domains of society (including the universities, including Humanities departments) and the simultaneous explosion since the 1990s of the Internet and advanced digital information technologies. Storing and preserving physical books is expensive, and that those expenses will be carried is no longer self-evident. Managers of academic libraries today must be able to justify those costs by demonstrating that their collections are important and useful to society at large. Therefore the very right of an academic library or collection to exist and be preserved no longer depends on intrinsic scholarly criteria decided upon by specialists, but ultimately on political arguments formulated in terms of economic viability. In short: no matter how rich and wonderful a collection may be, and no matter how valuable or essential it may be to this or that scholarly community, at the end of the day one will be asked the question “why should society support your collection with

1 Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Per Aspera Ad Fontes,” *Pentagram* 2012:1 (2012), 18–25 (a lecture at the occasion of the re-opening of another crucial library in the field of Western esotericism, the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in Amsterdam).

taxpayers' money?" Since just a minority of those taxpayers consists of academics who love books and care about history, while the large majority (including most politicians with the power to make decisions) keeps being fed with populist media images that portray academics as stuffy and spoiled ivory tower addicts out of touch with what society really needs, it is easy to predict the outcome: a gradual decline of willingness to preserve budgets for libraries and archives, especially in those domains that are most vulnerable to negative stereotyping in terms of the logic of market economics – that is to say, in the Humanities.

Currently the most popular response to this situation is digitization. If physical book storage is so expensive – the costs can be calculated in terms of square meters – then what could be more logical than exploring digital storage as a presumably cheaper alternative? And of course, there is much to be said in favour of it: countless scholars in the Humanities today, including the author of these lines, are benefitting daily from the unprecedented online availability of historical sources, including manuscripts and incunables, as well as the equally unprecedented possibilities of “big data” search and analysis, and a whole range of other technical possibilities that were unthinkable twenty years ago. Those benefits are absolutely real, and we have abundant reason to be grateful to them. However, they come at a price. One factor that tends to be overlooked or underestimated is that digital storage is by no means more secure than old-fashioned paper storage, even to the contrary.² Even more seriously, I am afraid that ultimately it will prove very hard to explain to “the taxpayer” why we need to preserve physical libraries *at all*. Once we reach the point at which it is believed (correctly or not) that “all books are digitally available” for anyone who needs to consult them, we should expect a serious political debate about the considerable costs of preserving their paper originals, and the need of doing so. Such a future scenario may sound almost apocalyptic to book lovers, but seems perfectly realistic in terms of the logic of market capitalism combined with digital technologies.

We have not reached that point yet, but we are moving in its general direction. There may have been a time when university libraries or archives were grateful to receive some unique collection as a free donation, because its intrinsic value was considered more important than the costs of storage and maintenance, and because one could be confident about societal and political support for the preservation of rare materials if specialists vouched for their importance. But those times are over. Nowadays such donations are perceived, first and foremost, as a financial burden; and given that priority, the opinion of specialists does not matter that much. Administrators know far too well that, by definition, *any*

2 For a convenient overview, see the Wikipedia article “Digital Preservation”; and see also the Dutch documentary “Digital Amnesia” (Bregtje van der Haak, VPRO television) available at various locations on YouTube.

specialized scholars who are asked for their opinion will *always* find their own particular field supremely important and worthy of protection. Clearly – or so the reasoning goes – one cannot leave it up to the specialists to decide what should be protected and what not. Non-specialists end up making those decisions, according to criteria that make sense to themselves.

Preserving Rejected Knowledge

Under these grim conditions, esoteric libraries find themselves in a very special situation that makes them even more vulnerable than non-esoteric libraries. The reason is that they focus on the domain of “rejected knowledge,” that is to say, they are concerned precisely with those traditions of thought and practice that have been dumped into the dustbin of history since the age of the Enlightenment.³ By definition, the contents of a dustbin need not be preserved but must be disposed of. In the words of the Enlightenment pioneer in this regard, Christoph August Heumann (1681–1764), such materials must be destroyed and forgotten forever. With a mixture of supreme contempt and mocking irony, Heumann wrote that

... nobody should hold it against me if I have not the slightest respect for all those Collegia philosophica secreta, but judge that the passing of time has quite rightly made a secret of these mysteries, by dumping them into the sea of oblivion; and that even if the writings of these philosophorum barbarorum were preserved by posterity, they would deserve to be sent ad loca secretiora right away, for superstitious idiocies belong in no better library.⁴

The case of Heumann is exemplary in that he not just dismissed esoteric traditions as unworthy of attention or respect, but highlighted them as the radical antithesis of true science and rationality. In his work and that of many of his contemporaries, one can observe how the emerging modern academy was establishing its very identity against what was being constructed simultaneously as its rhetoric counterpart: the domain branded as “magic”, “superstition”, or “the occult”. What this means is that the status of what we nowadays refer to as “esotericism” is unique and highly specific. We are not just dealing here with yet another domain of research that happens to be of interest to only a minority of scholars – in addition, and crucially for our concerns, what sets this field apart is the fact

3 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter Three.

4 Christoph August Heumann, “Von denen Kennzeichen der falschen und unächten Philosophie,” *Acta Philosophorum* 2 (1715), 179–236, here 210–211; cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 132–133.

that it happens to represent the structural “Other” of the modern academy and its basic values.⁵ Following the logic of what Gerd Baumann has described as a “grammar of orientalizing,”⁶ academics in the wake of the Enlightenment define their core identity in oppositional terms: whoever claims to be on the side of science is expected to reject “magic,” whoever claims to be on the side of reason is expected to reject “superstition,” whoever claims to be on the side of an open democratic society grounded in critical discourse is expected to reject “esoteric knowledge” or “the occult,” and so on. And this requirement of “taking sides” and showing clearly where one stands is felt to be all the more urgent because the binary logic of orientalizing is always subject to reversal, resulting in a sophisticated dialectics of rejection and desire. Due to its very alterity, the excluded or rejected “Other” has the potential of becoming an object of attraction: the more strongly “magic” or “the occult” is being constructed as an alternative option in the collective imagination, the chance (or, if one prefers, the risk) increases that people may shift their allegiance to it and go over to “the other side.” Hence *das Andere der Vernunft*⁷ is not just an easy object of ridicule for rationalists, but is felt to be a serious danger that must be resisted and contained continually.⁸

As I have tried to show elsewhere, the Enlightenment campaign against its rhetorical “Other” was based, explicitly and deliberately, on a theoretical principle known as *eclecticism*.⁹ In previous periods, the assumption had been that historians of philosophy and other fields of thought and learning should give due attention to the whole spectrum of historical traditions or “sects” in their full variety, regardless of the historian’s personal preferences. This principle was widely

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- 5 This is true at least for the modern university in its first two phases: the original one based on the idea of “reason,” and the successive phase based on the idea of “culture,” organically connected to the nation state. It might no longer be true for the third phase, which we are currently experiencing, dominated by the idea of “excellence” and connected to the breakdown of the nation state due to globalization. The “university of excellence” has been gaining dominance roughly since the 1980s and is currently destroying what remains of the classical “university of culture.” For this development, see the excellent but disturbing analysis by Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1996), esp. chapters 1–5.
 - 6 Gerd Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach,” in: Gerd Baumann & Andre Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (New York / Oxford: Berghahn, 2004), 18–50; cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 374.
 - 7 Hartmut Böhme & Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).
 - 8 An extreme but highly representative example is the modern skeptical movement. See the excellent analysis by Olav Hammer, “New Age Religion and the Sceptics,” in: Daren Kemp & James R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 379–404, and especially Hammer’s discussion of the “sense of urgency” typical of the skeptical “war” against unreason (ibid., 394ff).
 - 9 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 129–130. Cf. Michael Albrecht, *Eklektik: Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (fromman-holzboog: Stuttgart, 1994).

abandoned during the eighteenth century, in favour of the new eclectic method: henceforth the historian was expected to apply his own power of rational judgment to sort the “wheat” of history from the “chaff”: only the former deserved to be preserved and studied, while the latter should be discarded, destroyed, and forgotten. As one sees in the Heumann quote above, such recommendations could be understood quite literally: “superstitious idiocies” cannot claim the right to be preserved in any libraries or archives but must be dumped into “the sea of oblivion.” If no trace will be left of them in our collective memory, so much the better.

Given these backgrounds, it should be clear that the position of esoteric libraries in modern society is particularly precarious. Not only are they subject to all the general dangers (summarized above) that nowadays threaten *any* library or archive devoted to “obscure” fields of learning understood by just a small minority of scholars; but in addition, it can be very difficult to explain to general academics or administrators why Heumann’s advice should not be followed to the letter. Why indeed should society spend even just a penny on preserving libraries that, according to mainstream academic perspectives, are little more than a dustbin full of “rubbish” or “nonsense?”

The Case for Preservation

There are excellent answers to this question, but they are of a strictly scholarly and intellectual nature and are unlikely to convince those who should be convinced. Paradoxical as it might seem at first sight, it is precisely *because* of their focus on “rejected knowledge” that esoteric libraries are crucial to our collective memory – arguably even more so than libraries devoted to better known and more widely accepted traditions. If the mission of historiography consists in providing us with the most reliable knowledge possible about our common past in all its complexity, then *all* the available evidence is equally relevant, and the goal must be a collective memory that is not selective but as complete and as accurate as possible. Types of knowledge that are widely endorsed in society at large are relatively secure in this regard: it is unlikely that they will ever be forgotten. In contrast, precisely those types of knowledge that are rejected by the social, political, and intellectual elites – as the polemical “Other” against which they define their own identity – can easily fall victim to neglect and oblivion.

This is why – paradoxical as it might seem at first sight – modern secular societies have a special intellectual obligation to preserve *precisely* those traditions on the rejection of whose tenets they have been founded! What is more, they have an intellectual obligation to *study* and try to understand those traditions seriously and in depth. This obligation follows from the basic imperatives on which the very project of modern science and scholarship was founded: intel-

lectual *honesty* and respect for factual evidence (whether the data are welcome or not), a firm conviction that *knowledge* is always to be preferred over prejudice or ignorance (regardless of the social or political consequences), and the conviction that we should attempt to get as close as possible to the *truth* about whatever aspects of reality we are studying.

Now, the very mention of such big words as “knowledge” and “truth” is bound to raise eyebrows with many scholars and academics today, who are likely to respond that such statements reflect naïve and outdated points of view. Have we not learned that there are no such things as “facts,” that “evidence” can easily be manipulated, that all “knowledge” is merely contextual, that claims about “truth” or “error” are just veiled attempts to gain the intellectual high ground in an intellectual economy that is all about power and prestige, and that an ethics of intellectual honesty is unlikely to get us very far in the universal battle over scarce financial resources for scholarly research? My response to this is simple: I’m aware of those objections and their considerable power, but *they do not matter*. The point of scientific and scholarly research is not whether we can ultimately reach the goal in all its pristine perfection, but whether we are determined to keep moving into its general direction. It is not about reaching the finish but about making progress.¹⁰ If we give in to cynicism and give up on believing in the very ideal of advancing knowledge and trying to find truth through scholarly research, we have already prevented ourselves from ever reaching it. Precisely because perfect knowledge or the perfect truth will always elude us, we have all the more reason to try and move at least as close towards it as we can.

These principles are not negotiable, or should not be. They are the very ideals on which the project of *Wissenschaft* is founded, and without them, the very search for knowledge becomes empty and pointless. When that happens, what inevitably usurps its place is the search for power and prestige. As basic motivations for devoting one’s life to research, these two are mutually exclusive: it is in the nature of knowledge to subvert power, and therefore power will always seek to limit and control knowledge.¹¹ This, of course, explains the paradox mentioned above. In so far as they uphold the foundational ideals of science and scholarship – grounded in the free and unlimited search for knowledge and truth – modern secular scholars should feel a binding obligation to preserve and study not only those traditions they accept but those that they reject as well. But unfortunately, in so far as they are embedded in socially dominant institutions,

10 Cf. Will-Erich Peuckert: “wo gar kein Schritt geschieht, da wird auch nie ein rechter geschehen” (*Pansophie: Ein Versuch zur Geschichte der weißen und schwarzen Magie*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1956, 254).

11 It goes without saying that this argument is meant as a deliberate antithesis to the common post-Foucauldian assumption that knowledge and power are inseparable because claims of knowledge are ultimately just attempts to gain hegemony.

scholars easily end up following the logic of power instead. As such, they tend to endorse, privilege, or actively support perspectives that (implicitly or explicitly) suppress, control, neglect, ridicule, discredit, or otherwise devalue those types of knowledge that they personally feel should be rejected. The outcome is that instead of a non-eclectic historiography committed to unprejudiced study of all the available evidence, we get an eclectic and hence highly selective historiography obsessed with recycling the accepted canon and defending its tenets.¹²

The stronger such a selective historiography on eclecticist foundations comes to dominate an intellectual environment, a culture, or a society as a whole, the less room does this leave for dissenting voices. Historical sources that document unwelcome ideas are filtered out or neglected as a matter of routine, and even their very existence may well vanish from general awareness. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to question the accepted narratives by calling attention to the principles of selection that govern them, or retrieving the information that has been left out of the picture. If those sources are no longer available or accessible, while the principles by which they have been filtered out become implicit and are hidden from sight, then ultimately “the truth” becomes indistinguishable from whatever the reigning ideology says it is.

I realize that what I have just outlined looks very much like the familiar logic of political propaganda. Totalitarian regimes have always known how important it is to control and streamline knowledge in conformity with the official narratives, and to suppress or discredit information that might suggest alternative readings. Unfortunately, the same basic dynamics of knowledge manipulation and memory control are not limited to dictatorships: they are pervasive in democratic societies as well, and if we do not perceive them, that is precisely because they are working so efficiently. Even if professional politicians or administrators are personally motivated by the best of intentions, as may well be the case, it just so happens that the ideal of free, objective, impartial, nuanced, or “disinterested” knowledge can only be welcome to them as long as the outcomes support the interests of power (that is: *their* power). If the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge runs against those interests, it becomes a threat to the pragmatics of “getting done what needs to be done”: a nuisance that must somehow be controlled or contained. Historical research, in particular, is bound to produce complex narratives and nuanced interpretations that do not care about political correctness; and as such it tends to undermine the clear and simple messages that just happen to be needed for effective government.

12 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 152, 377–378.

Saved by the Market?

I have in effect been arguing that the search for knowledge is essentially anarchic. As a matter of principle, it cannot sacrifice the quest for knowledge and understanding to political or pragmatic considerations of any kind. Now if what I have been arguing here is even remotely correct, then the implications for our present topic would seem to be grim indeed: if it is true that the logic of power in fact prevails over the search for knowledge, then it is difficult to see why our contemporary society would see any interest in preserving or protecting esoteric libraries. By their very nature, they question the selective narratives that underwrite post-Enlightenment culture and its canon of acceptable truths; and especially in a climate of rapidly declining financial resources for “independent” research, it seems unrealistic to expect that the academy will suddenly change its tune and start sacrificing the logic of power in favor of knowledge for knowledge’s sake.

Yet, it is here that we come to another paradox. Precisely the current transformation of the “university of culture” into a radically market-driven “university of excellence,” destructive as it might be in many regards, perhaps provides us with a glimmer of hope. As pointed out by Bill Readings as early as 1996,¹³ the classic “university of culture” sought to instill the basic values of the nation state into its citizens by means of *Bildung*; but this understanding of the university’s mission is currently being rendered obsolete by the dynamics of globalization. One effect of this process is precisely that the university is no longer so effective in instilling the values of the dominant grand narratives, and is therefore becoming much more open towards alternative narratives that include the historical sources of “rejected knowledge.” The very emergence of “Western esotericism” as a flourishing field of research since the 1990s is one symptom of this process: its success since the early 1990s has much to do with the gradual breakdown of the modernist “grand narratives” and the new openness towards alternative narratives often associated with “postmodernity.”¹⁴ The emerging “university of excellence” no longer cares about creating good citizens by instilling cultural values or supporting societal norms concerning what is right or wrong, serious or nonsensical. It cares only about creating good consumers and competitors; and from that perspective, all that counts is whether a research project will be qualified as “excellent”¹⁵ and hence eligible for funding on the international aca-

13 Readings, *University in Ruins* (cf. footnote 5, above).

14 Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture,” in: Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz & Randi R. Warne (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion, vol. 1: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 489–519, here 509–511.

15 On the significance of this “empty qualifier,” which is pervasive in academic marketing nowadays, see Readings, *University in Ruins*, 21–43.

democratic marketplace. As a product of globalization, the “university of excellence” no longer supports the cultural and societal norms of this or that particular nation state, or even those of “the West” in general, but is open to all comers from around the globe. As a result, its ability to support post-Enlightenment Western norms and ideologies is dwindling. The business models that govern the global “economy of knowledge” are not concerned with the *contents* of that knowledge, only with the presumed “excellence” of research projects; and as a result, projects focused on “rejected knowledge” can expect to be funded just as easily as projects on more traditional topics.

Encouraging as this may sound, however, these “business opportunities” exist only on one condition: that the Humanities will manage to survive at all. Unfortunately, while the context of “neo-liberal” market economics may be surprisingly welcoming to the study of Western esotericism, its very dynamics tends to deligitimize the Humanities as a whole: see the rapid current decline of funding opportunities in this domain and, no less important, the phenomenon of top-down streamlining according to politically determined criteria such as “societal relevance” or “valorization” (determined, of course, by mainstream concerns). In short, the study of esotericism may continue to flourish as a new branch of interdisciplinary research in the Humanities, and in so far as this field is perceived as “new,” “hot,” and exciting, its chances might even be somewhat better than those of many more traditional fields of research. But obviously these opportunities will yield fruit if, and only if, the Humanities themselves survive in the first place.

The Emblematic Case of the Octagon Library

If the Humanities do survive, in one form or another, and the study of esotericism survives with them, then esoteric libraries and archives will remain essential. Many larger or smaller such collections exist in Europe and the United States, supported by private initiative and kept in existence through the sheer dedication of private collectors. Next to the special case of the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in Amsterdam, founded by Joost Ritman, the library created by Thomas Hakl in Graz is undoubtedly the most important and wide-ranging of them all. Over the years I have repeatedly traveled to Graz to consult this unique collection and enjoy the hospitality and generosity of its founder – but never without asking myself, at one point, how and under what conditions it will be possible for these treasures to be preserved for the benefit of future generations. Clearly, whatever Heumann might have thought of it, we cannot allow them to be sent *ad loca secretiora*. This unique library is a massive memory bank of rejected knowledge, with many materials that are simply impossible to find anywhere

else, and even today its potential remains largely untapped. If we do not want to forget who we are and where we have come from, then we have a responsibility for ensuring that it remains intact and accessible.



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