Some Remarks on the Meaning of Esotericism and Plato's Unpublished Doctrines

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Plato's work, which has always played a central role in the history of Western esotericism, has recently attracted the attention of the Tübingen-Milan School for the so-called "unwritten doctrines", to which an esoteric nature has been attributed. However, the scholars of esoteric Plato have not always been fully aware of the true meaning of esotericism in the past. In this essay, after a presentation of this theme in the light of the most up-to-date research, I have analysed the sense in which esotericism concerns Plato. I have argued that Platonic esotericism cannot be interpreted as a kind of protological doctrine of the first principles, but should be seen in a symbolic-anagogical way that in fact retrieves the experience of traditional mystery-cults, which in Plato is framed and governed within a philosophical discourse. Finally, I conclude that Plato is central to European culture because he linked together three fundamental aspects: the dialectical-argumentative dimension, thereby establishing the Western canon of philosophy; the allegorical-narrative aspect, expressed in the narrative of the myth in the popular dimension of religiosity; and finally the esoteric-initiatory one, found in the oral teaching of the unwritten doctrines and which is typical of Gnosis, aiming at a spiritual elevation and contemplation of the True, understood as absolutely ineffable.

Keywords: Plato, Esotericism, Gnosis, Unwritten doctrines

Plato's work has always played a central role among the practitioners of western esotericism, to the point that there are those who have stated that «esoteric ontology and anthropology would hardly exist without Platonic philosophy» (Von Stuckrad 2005: 13). Even in the academic world and among the scholars of philosophical thought, attention has long been drawn to the esoteric aspects of his thought, particularly in relation to the so-called "unwritten doctrines" (Richard 2008: 23-53). However, in order to better understand the sense of this interest and provide a more accurate assessment of the subject, it is necessary

to make some preliminary clarifications on the meaning of esotericism in general, especially in the light of the most recent studies that have removed it from the popular notions of the occult and superstition. In fact, Western esotericism has always been a very controversial and suspicious subject, which has only recently been seriously and scientifically accredited, freeing it from the mistrust due to the misuse that is often made of it. We refer, in particular, to the period beginning with Frances Yates's pioneering study on Giordano Bruno (1964). However, it was decades before the breakthrough in the field of esoteric studies occurred, which began to produce results with Antoine Faivre (1994) and other high-ranking scholars and finally reached substantial scientific and conceptual maturity at the Amsterdam School (Hanegraaff & Pijnenburg 2009; Faivre 2009), the founder of which was Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2012; 2012b). Thanks to them, the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Hanegraaff 2006) was produced, written by illustrious specialists of the subject and currently one of the most reliable and complete sources for everything related to the themes of esotericism. This collection of works, together with those of many other scholars in a literature that has grown exponentially over the last twenty years, has led many to say that a new paradigm has been introduced in the study of Western esotericism, especially concerning contributions provided by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Kucko von Stuckrad and Christopher Partridge (Asprem & Granholm 2013: 23-24; Granholm 2014: 26-30). In this context, we believe it is useful to rethink the subject of "Esoteric Plato", and in particular to give an assessment of what has been produced by the so-called Tübingen-Milan School. This should avoid a general and often inexact conception of esotericism, which frequently ends up focusing its attention mainly on the character of secrecy of its doctrines without a clear notion of its fundamental meaning.

1. *The Sense of Esotericism. Some Short Remarks*

It is not easy to give a precise definition of esotericism, also because the substantive term (*esotericism*) is recent and has not been used historically by its followers to define themselves; rather, it has been used by scholars from time to time to iden-

tify its traits (Hanegraaff 2006b: 337). Indeed, there are very different characterizations among scholars, at least since it has become an academically accredited subject of study in the last 15-20 years and a specific area of the history of religions, to the point that an identity marker has been seen in it that takes on specific contents from time to time, and therefore it cannot be characterized by a stable and well-defined content over time and in different places (Bergunder 2010).

This is not the place to discuss this issue, which is still being debated. If we want to give a negative characterization, "by contrast" or by difference, and hence a minimal definition, we can also accept the proposal made by Hanegraaff in the introduction to the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, which picks up the one provided at the time, controversially, by James Webb, a pioneer in this field (1989: 13; 1990: 191-192): esotericism is all that belongs to the so-called "rejected knowledge" where «we store away everything we do not want to accept because it differs too much from our ideal image of ourselves and our cherished values.» (Hanegraaf 2012d: vii); we can also say, with Helmut Möller and Ellic Howe (1986), that it is part of the "Western undergrounds". In this way, we want to highlight how esotericism (and the disciplines related to it or that are part of it) is the historical product of a polemical narrative, the origins of which were identified by Hanegraaff (2005: 226 and *passim*) in the birth of monotheism, and which has served to build the identity of the West as we know it. As we shall see, this polemical discourse is not extraneous to Platonic intentions, and in our view must therefore date back to the constitution of philosophy as a discipline of the *logos*, to the origins of Greek thought.

However, if we do not want to limit ourselves to merely negative characterization, we can – according to the latest and accredited studies – share the point of view that a typical aspect of esotericism is its claim to absolute knowledge, that is, a total view of the truth that responds to all key issues of mankind and which escapes the possibility of empirical control, although it is open to the control of anyone who wants to go down this road (von Stuckrad 2006: 609). Esotericism is also generally associated with the attribute of secrecy which, as we shall see, may mean different things.

In the context of this "positive" sense, perhaps the most widespread way in which esotericism has been understood is

as a set of doctrines that has been part of a Tradition since time immemorial, and which has been differently presented in disparate places and eras by thinkers who have been placed in it in one way or another. This is the typical position of "perennialism", that is of the current of thought that claims that there has always been a "perennial philosophy" or "*prisca* theology" and therefore an independent and self-sufficient "esoteric tradition" with characteristics that have remained constant over time. These are symbolically expressed in different ways, and it is the task of the scholar to rebuild them in a unitary framework. This is an idea that has its origins in the Renaissance culture and has subsequently been revived by many authors in the context of Traditionalism (Yates 1964; Quinn 1997; Faivre 1999; 2010; Oldmeadow 2005; Holman 2008). Although it is not possible to identify perennialism (or Tradition) with esotericism *tout court*, since the former is a specification of the latter, nevertheless, this assimilation is significant as it serves to identify a widespread way of understanding esotericism, which we will call "substantive" (or "characterized by its contents"): those who believe in it support this or that organization of the world and the relationship between this and the "ultramondo", or between the mind incarnate in the body and the one independent of it and so on. There are some doctrines that, according to Antoine Faivre (1994: 10-15), recur in all esoteric currents and which can be summed up in four points:

1. The idea of the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm, according to which the various levels or classes of reality (minerals, plants, animals, humans and superhuman entities) as well as the visible and invisible components of the universe are linked together, i.e. they are "in correspondence", through a series of symbolic correspondences, so the universe is like a sort of hall of mirrors, where everything is reflected in something else and the changes in one part necessarily have their repercussions on another one.
2. The idea of a living nature, which conceives the universe as being endowed with a soul, permeated by a continuous stream of energy, in a pantheistic, monistic and holistic vision that would allow, among other things, the exercise of so-called *magia naturalis*, that was so well-developed in the Renaissance.

3. The idea that these connections and this living nature require a cognitive approach based on symbolism, which is mediated and allowed by spiritual authorities (angels, spiritual masters), and through which it is possible to decipher the "hieroglyph of Nature".
4. The idea that there is a parallelism between action on nature and inner action, so that esotericism allows the refinement and growth of the human being through operations and transmutations in the external world, as claimed by the esoteric alchemical currents, and that would reach its peak with the ultimate transformation achieved when absolute knowledge is reached through enlightenment.

Corollaries of these fundamental principles are the theses, often but not always present in esoteric traditions, according to which (a) there is a substantial concordance between the various teachings insofar as their meaning can be penetrated beyond the forms they assume because of the historical contingencies in which they are placed; (b) that initiation should be transmitted through the teachings of masters endowed with spiritual authority as they have already achieved perfection and gained absolute knowledge.

However, as von Stuckrad rightly warns, esotericism is a complex and multilayered system in which a core of traditional teachings, or those considered such, comprises several "fields of discourse" dependent on historical-cultural contexts. Therefore, there are different discursive regimes articulated on the basis of a core of teachings that can transmigrate from one current to another, and from one thinker to another, assuming different nuances of meanings depending on the context, and contributing to constituting the various religious and esoteric identities (and differences) that have evolved over time. Some examples of these discourse fields are the doctrine of the Great Astral Conjunction, the concept of meditation, the idea of the spiritual master, the conception of relationships between body and soul, and so on (von Stuckrad 2005: 6-11). This gives rise to a vision of many layers of esotericism in which the different "fields of discourse" are intertwined in different ways and transmigrate from one tradition to another as if they were memes (Dawkins 2006: 189-210). This line of thought was then revived and further developed by

Kennet Granholm (2013; 2014: 36-39); on the basis of a series of cultural suggestions from sociological and psychological constructivism, he proposed the "discourse analytical approach" which analyses esoteric currents as "discursive complexes", or as "collections of distinct discourses in specific combinations". In this way, attention is focused on the importance of individual discourses, which are aggregated to form such "discursive complexes", typically defined, which in turn enter into reciprocal interaction, modifying each other and generating new ones over the course of history. In a certain way inspired by the same need, Egil Asprem (2015) also believes that esotericism belongs to the kind of complex cultural concepts for which a deconstructive analysis is necessary to identify the "building blocks", according to the proposal put forward by Ann Taves (2011).

The latter approach is interesting because, by making use of the most up-to-date studies of academic historiography on esotericism, and using the most advanced encyclopaedic instrument currently available on the subject – the aforementioned *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* – Asprem made an important discovery. Thanks to a careful analysis of the way in which the most recent scholars have understood esotericism, he managed to identify one of its most important and recurrent constitutive blocks, namely that «'esotericism' concerns special kinds of knowledge, and the social formations, material means, practices, and experiences through which this knowledge is developed, taught, implemented, and transmitted» (Asprem 2015: 12 – author's italics). This "speciality" of esoteric knowledge can be identified in some of its typical characteristics, which have been defined in the literature in various ways: the fact that it is a secret or hidden form of knowledge, held in the margins of official knowledge and refused by it, having an absolute character, higher than that considered profane, justified in reference to a particular and peculiar experience and so on (Asprem 2015: 14).

However, in my opinion, all these "speciality" markers are centred around a way of understanding esotericism not as being characterized by its contents, by the stories narrated, but more clearly symbolic. In this way, we want to emphasize not the *material substance* (or contents) of the statements made in the various currents representing it, taken in their *descriptive* way, but the *function* they have taken on in the overall economy of human thought and for the total personality of man, understood in a *ho-*

listic way and therefore without neglecting either his rational or emotional aspect. In this case, the fundamental problem when studying esotericism is not so much to identify the object in a unique way (i.e its specific "doctrines") but to understand *the way* in which it is thought, no matter how it is identified - its "form of thought" or "way of thinking" (Asprem 2015: 14), thereby developing the original Faivre approach, which placed the contents of esotericism within a particular "form of thought". In this way, we may avoid the limit of the content classification that he made, which reflects – as he himself warns – modern esotericism, especially the Renaissance one, excluding non-Western traditions and also ancient and medieval ones. Moreover, it is even easier to explain, thanks to a typological analysis, how it may happen that very similar esoteric motifs and currents have developed without mutual contact, or that they could have merged with each other, albeit coming from historical contexts with nothing in common (Granholm 2014: 37-38). From this point of view, the fact that Hanegraaff (2008), inspired by Gilles Quispel's studies on Gnosis, drew attention to three distinct ways of gaining knowledge in the culture of the West – which can typically be indicated as claims to knowledge based on reason, faith and gnosis – leads us in a direction that is close to the object of our study, that is, the nature of Platonic esotericism and the meaning of its unwritten doctrines.

Indeed, as Pierre Riffard (1998: 3) argues, it is important to ask the question: «Un ésotériste pense-t-il comme un théologien, un scientifique, un philosophe ou un poète? Je ne me demande pas s'il pense le meme objet, mais s'il pense de la même manière». This is a question that leads one to question the 'logic' of esoteric thinking, without letting oneself be captured by esoteric doctrines, or by the objects one thinks one has discovered and knows. In short, it is about understanding esotericism – or rather the various doctrines that are part of it – only for their anagogical function, for the objective they aim to attain. This can only consist of a path of elevation to Self and Totality, thus reaching «fullness, perfection, and complete harmony with the cosmos» (Bonvecchio 2007: 211). From this point of view, it makes little sense to talk about doctrines that, for example, draw from a "primordial source of knowledge", to a "Tradition", understood as a corpus of knowledge of a 'positive' type, which have their value for what they say, and that from time to time different authors imagine with the most fantastic entities and the most diverse re-

lationships between them, with the world, and with mankind[1]. Only in this way is it possible to avoid seeing esotericism as «the academy's dustbin of rejected knowledge» (Hanegraaff 2012c: 127), in which all the superstitions and the ideas that mankind has produced over the course of the long journey towards rational enlightenment are thrown. In order to do this, we must grasp the most authentic sense of esotericism as it is understood by one of its accredited interpreters, René Guénon, when, regarding the so-called "initiatic secret", he argues that it is not so much a list of doctrines and theses of a philosophical or historical nature, but «is itself such by the very nature of things and consequently could never be betrayed in any way since it is of a purely interior order and [...] lies strictly in the "incommunicable"». In fact, «this secret is of such a nature that words cannot express it» (Guénon 1946: 83, 85).

It is in this overall picture that the so-called 'secrecy' of esotericism should be framed. It refers to a concealed, hidden truth, which only a few can access, as opposed to the knowledge available to everyone that does not require any initiatory itinerary or any special spiritual Master to be known, but only the application of normal and 'profane' human reason. This contrast has been strongly emphasized by those who saw in it one of the fundamental differences between the magical-hermetic knowledge that was widespread in the Renaissance, and modern science that in the meantime arose from its ashes, with Galileo and its other protagonists (Rossi 2006). If, however, it is true what we have said regarding the meaning of esotericism, then it follows that the "initiatic secret", representing the highest level of knowledge, must be understood as the place where one accesses that Truth which cannot be disputed, since «the initiatic reticence does not refer to a doctrinal content that can be communicated or untold» (Muscato 1996: 17). All the various doctrines that comprise – in a myriad kaleidoscopic variety – the different schools and esoteric currents, have a relative, contingent value: they only indicate "footholds" with the only function of facilitating the adept to walk along a path. The same symbolism, which is the basis of esoteric knowledge, has

[1] A rich anthology of such fantasies is contained in the novel *Foucault's pendulum* by Umberto Eco, who however misses the deepest meaning of this extraordinary efflorescence of theories, entities, demons, angels, and so on.

no value because it identifies figures, phenomena and entities as uniquely and exclusively indicating a certain metaphysical or initiatic content, conveyed exclusively by them. Indeed, to quote Guénon again, «every event or phenomenon, however insignificant it may be, can always be taken as a symbol of a higher reality of which it is as it were a sensible expression by the very fact that it derives from it as a consequence derives from its principle; and in this respect, however lacking in value and interest it may be in itself, the event or phenomenon can have a profound significance for one who is able to see beyond immediate appearances» (Guénon 1946: 167)[2]. Therefore, the paths of symbolism are many, although the aim is unique nevertheless.

This point of view is quite clear to the Hindu spirituality that in the six traditional *Darshana* of the Brahamanic schools, derived from the Vedas, sees only different ways that allow us to reach liberation and therefore enlightenment, meaning that these are not closed, definitive "doctrines", but only "points of view", "visual angles", each of which helps us to see some aspect of the truth (Guénon 1992: 16; Radhakrishnan 1948, II: 18; Stevenson 2000: 79). This is also reflected in the conception of the supreme being, understood by some Hindus as transcendent and by others assimilated in nature, but in any case having the awareness that it can be revered "in many forms" (like a young man, like a king, etc.): «The transcendent is mediated through temple icons, through natural phenomena, or through saints and living masters. Hinduism is often considered a polytheism, [....] [and] many Hindus consider these divinities as the different aspects or manifestations of the same sacred power» (Flood 2006: 12). The Vedic universe, populated by a multitude of supernatural, benevolent and malevolent types and beings – in many ways similar to those in Greek mythology – is reinterpreted from the subsequent philosophy of the Upanishad as a manifestation of a single force (Flood 2006: 57-8). This is also the position, well expressed by Senator Simmaco, in the twilight of the pagan world: in 384 AD, taking inspiration from the neo-platonic conception of religion,

[2] Obviously, this does not exclude the fact that there are phenomena or material entities (or signs) that, by their nature, can better acquire a symbolically superior character than others. So, the sun indicates the light more easily than a piece of coal, hence the knowledge and the enlightenment which the initiate enters at the climax of his spiritual itinerary.

he made the following address to the Emperor Valentinian, in defense of paganism and in favor of the relocation of the altar of the goddess Victoria in the Senate of Rome: «Eadem spectamus astra, commune coelum est, idem nos mundus involvit; quid interest qua quisque prudentia verum requirat? Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum»[3]. However, the characteristic of the multiple faces and thousand names of the divinities that manifest a single, identical divinity is also evident in the initiation of Apuleius and Lucius into the cult of Isis. The believer can turn to the goddess «by invoking her with the name most familiar to him, without however losing the universalistic vocation of this feminine dimension [in reference to Isis] of the divine» (Filoramo 2011: 39). Therefore, it was quite natural to admit the existence of a plurality of cults, because – as the pagan Temistio argued in addressing the emperor Valens when urging him to repeal the edicts against the Christians – «God himself plainly shows that he wishes various forms of worship; there are many roads by which one can reach him» (quoted in Bury 1913: 55; see also Filoramo 2011: 256). This vision, which is typical of the neoplatonic approach, can also be found expressed in a philosophically articulated way by a thinker strongly influenced by it: Nicholas Cusanus. He gives the example of a portrait of a face whose eyes follow the viewer from all angles, so he or she always feels as if someone is looking at them. As stated by Cassirer (2012: 35), the contemporary discoverer of Cusanus as philosopher, «[...] even the diversity of rites no longer constitutes an obstacle, for all institutions and all customs are merely sensible signs for the truth of faith; and whereas the signs are subject to change and to modification, what they signify is not. There is no form of faith so low, so abominable, that it cannot find its relative justification from this point of view. Even polytheism is not excluded. For wherever gods are honored, the thought, the idea of the divine must be presupposed. It is evident that for Cusanus the cosmos of religions is equally near and far from God, and that it shows the same inviolable identity and the same inevitable

[3] See Filoramo 2011: 278-280 regarding this episode and the figure of Sant'Ambrogio who was a supporter of the opposite conception based on the only Truth univocally transmitted in the sacred texts. To demonstrate how time changes even the most consolidated traditions, this episode is reported, in support of tolerance, also by Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) (2003: 185).

otherness, the same unity and the same particularization that we encountered earlier in the depiction of the physical cosmos» (Cusanus 1944: 30-31). In the context of the three mosaic religions, this is an attitude that is not foreign to Islam: after praying on Mt Zion in 1961 for peace in the world with a Catholic priest and a rabbi, the Muslim Amadau Hampâté Bâ said: «There is just one summit on top of a mountain, but the paths to reach it may be different. I regard Christianity, Judaism and Islam as three brothers of a polygamous family, where there is only one father, but where each mother has raised her child according to her own customs. Every wife speaks of her husband and child according to her own conception» (quoted in Aime 2006: 50).

We could make many more examples, but what has been said is enough to underline the fact that, in this way of conceiving the divine, a clear cognitive relativism is associated with the absolutism and uniqueness of the True, which is reached only at the end of the journey: relativism resides in the different doctrines that, insofar as they are expressed through human discourses, are subject to the many variations and declinations typical of the argumentation and of the different human situations, of the social and historical condition of those who support them; absolutism is what is obtained at the end of the spiritual elevation itinerary, in which man achieves "vision" (the ἐπόπτεια, to use the term of ancient Greek mysteries), or "illumination".

Moreover, while in the world of theory, of philosophical systems or of esoteric doctrines, to the extent that they are assumed in their substantive value, there is conflict, oppression, orthodoxy, and hence heresy, the *darshana* or "points of view" cannot be in conflict with each other or be contradictory – as Guénon (1965: 199, 205) clearly explained – because they represent, despite their rich diversity (King 1999: 46), only different ways of approaching the Absolute, ways that each person can follow according to his or her personal disposition, character, and the culture and tradition in which he or she was born and raised. The syncretic and tolerant character of this approach is then clear: to the extent that each perspective provides a particular "glimpse" of reality, the different "visions" are considered complementary to each other, and not only can each person choose one of the many means of achieving the Absolute, but he or she also profits from the others offered by different perspectives; likewise, heresy becomes impossible because no belief or doctrine can be regarded as being

absolutely true or absolutely false (Koller 1982: 8-9). The same goes for the different esoteric schools if you follow a proper way of understanding them, as claimed by a contemporary scholar, Gerhard Wehr (2002: 22): «The symbol is the "clay" vessel, so to speak, (2Cor 4, 7), which ultimately contains something that cannot be expressed, i.e. a certain content of inner experience. If one stops at the clay jar only, taking literally what is said, as the fundamentalists do, one falls into error.». A similar discourse applies to the Mysteries of Classical Greece: we can respond to the fact that many scholars are amazed that the secrets of Eleusis have been so well preserved by stating that nothing has been revealed because there was nothing objectively to reveal: «In other words, the real secret was a subjective mystical experience that not only would not have found credit but also no way to communicate to others. This experience remained valid, as a secret to be preserved, as long as people believed in it» (Sabbatucci 1965: 143). For this reason, it can be said that esotericism constitutes the outer casing, covered with symbols and figurative objects, of a pure intellectual vision in which there is complete transparency, the perfect fit between knowledgeable subject and known object, and in which the One Truth concerning the eternal and immutable "first principles" is manifested. This is the "metaphysics" understood not as a rational and discursive discipline in the Aristotelian sense, but as access to a truth that is achievable by way of a pure and superhuman Intellect, in which man only participates[4]. It is the *sophia*, or even *gnosis*, envisaged by the ancient sages, and provides not knowledge so much, but *sapientia* (Schuon 1983)[5]. As such, metaphysics is indefinable «car définir, c'est toujours lim-

[4] «L'intellect transcendant, pour saisir directement les principes universels, doit être lui-même d'ordre universel; ce n'est plus une faculté individuelle, et le considérer comme tel serait contradictoire, car il ne peut être dans les possibilités de l'individu de dépasser ses propres limites, de sortir des conditions qui le définissent en tant qu'individu. La raison est une faculté proprement et spécifiquement humaine; mais ce qui est au-delà de la raison est véritablement "non-humain"; c'est ce qui rend possible la connaissance métaphysique, et celle-ci, il faut le redire encore, n'est pas une connaissance humaine» (Guénon 1993: 11).

[5] It has been stated that the corpus of Schuon's metaphysical writings «ranks among the most clear, profound, and gifted ones produced by any similar author in the 20th century» (Quinn 2006: 1043). Regarding this meaning of metaphysics, see also Guénon's point of view, which is one of the most important sources of inspiration for Schuon (Di Vona 1993: 114-116, 129-130 and *passim*).

iter, et ce dont il s'agit est, en soi, véritablement et absolument illimité, donc ne saurait se laisser enfermer dans aucune formule ni dans aucun système» (Guénon 1993: 10).

However, further clarification is needed here, which will help us better understand Plato's specific position. It is appropriate to distinguish esotericism from mysticism (Godwin 2002: Rousse-Lacordaire 2006): the former deals with initiatory practice (Guénon 1996: 18-19, 31-32, 149-150) which presupposes a path, often long and tedious, in which the single individual, without the support of a grace from a providential divinity, but only with his own means and with the help of a Master, through the hard work of refinement and purification of the self, acquires intellectual intuition, that is, the transparent and immediate vision of the True, without any discourse mediation, and in some cases fighting argumentative and propositional reason, even by using paradoxical arguments.

In the case of mysticism, however, it is often a feeling or a strong emotion that leads to the sudden break of normal consciousness, and mostly to the beatific vision of Divinity; in this case, no initiatic itinerary or Master is required, but merely a strong individual meditative commitment and an attitude of passivity, of openness, usually waiting for God's grace (and this is precisely what is considered in Catholicism to be the seal of a true and "orthodox" mysticism) or the manifestation of the Absolute, which bursts and overwhelms the mind of the mystic[6]. Thus, in the case of esotericism we have a "lay" approach, where a personal deity is not always assumed (as is typically the case with Buddhist, Vedantic, or Taoist esotericism) and in addition, the self-sufficiency of those who undertake the path is stressed – so that the Gnostic component is very important; instead, in mysticism the presence of a deity and its support is usually important, so that illumination can occur at any time, unexpectedly and suddenly, even during the course of a daily activity. However – and here is the reason why there are those who see mysticism embodied within esotericism, even if this has a wider domain,

[6] This is the reason for the condemnation of the Catholic Church against the New Age (contained in the document of the Pontifical Council for Culture and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, titled "Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian reflection on the New Age"), which is opposed to the authentic sense of Christian mysticism.

including Magic (Versluis 2007: pos. 61-98), the final moment at which both the esoteric and the mystic arrive has common features of immediacy, true certainty, self-transparency and sense of fullness and realization. So, while the esoteric reaches a mystical vision at the end of the hard path, the mystic, however, does not come to it through an esoteric initiatic itinerary. As we shall see, it is precisely in terms of esotericism that we can speak of Plato, especially in reference to unwritten doctrines.

This also allows us to grasp the meaning with which the "secrecy" of esoteric thought is to be understood. In fact, esotericism can be distinguished – according to the suggestion of Leo Strauss (Lampert 2009) – in what I would call an *esotericism of necessity* and an *esotericism of impossibility*. The former is imposed by the conditions of the historical period (censorship, persecution, repression, and misunderstanding on the part of "profane"), especially with the advent of Christianity which – based on the transmission of a Holy Text and the concept of faith – barely tolerated the typical Gnostic attitude present in every esoteric tradition. So, for example, since it came from the Arab world centuries ago, alchemy has served as a sort of connection point of all western esoteric traditions under whose inoffensive umbrella (the search for gold, perhaps in favor of the poor) presented a path of transformation and elevation of the human spirit and therefore had to try to conceal its purposes with a symbolic-cryptic language and through an oral transmission of its teachings (Godwin 2002: 1416). The esotericism of Dante and his poet friends belonging to the *stilnovo* movement would also have been of this kind; they concealed their strong anti-papal spirit (even within Christianity) with «an encrypted, allegorical and anagogical language that could be understood by the affiliates but not by the inquisitors» (Ciavolella 2010: 230-231). However, there is – besides this and far more importantly – an "esotericism of impossibility", that is, the one linked to the ineffability of Truth that comes at the end of an itinerary of spiritual elevation. It is precisely what we first talked about as the Absolute which comes through a *darshana* and is found in every process of spiritual elevation. To this end, a support may be served by myths and symbols that, by means of fitting narratives or images, suggest a content which is impossible to express in words and that then goes right out of the field of investigation of rational thought and becomes the subject of an "intellectual intuition". It is not by chance that esoteric thinkers

have always underlined a clear opposition between philosophy, which is confined to purely human discourse and is therefore purely rational, and «the immense superiority of symbolism», typical of the initiatic journey (Guénon 1946: 126-127).

The Truth to which we come is similar to that which Dante reaches at the end of his initiatic itinerary of the Comedy, when in the last Canto of Paradise he states (XXXIII, vv. 55-63):

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che' parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.
Qual è colüi che sognando vede,
che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l'altro a la mente non riede,
cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa
mia visïone, e ancor mi distilla
nel core il dolce che nacque da essa[7].

It is not by chance that Dante compares his condition to that of those who want to find the squaring of the circle – that is, they want to reach through rationality a reasoned and proven solution of a geometric problem – and he realizes that it is not possible to understand the Divine Trinity in this way (Purg., III, verses 34-36):

Matto è chi spera che nostra ragion
Possa trascorrer la infinita via
Che tiene una sustanza in tre persone[8].

Consequently, this also applies to the conjunction between human nature and divine nature: only a mystical, ineffable intuition allows us to reach its "vision" (Parad., XXXIII, verses 139-141):

[7] «From that time forward [after the prayer of St. Bernard to give him the grace of contemplation of God] what I saw was greater / Than our discourse, that to such vision yields, / And yields the memory unto such excess. / Even as he is who seeth in a dream, / And after dreaming the imprinted passion / Remains, and to his mind the rest returns not, / Even such am I, for almost utterly / Ceases my vision, and distilleth yet / Within my heart the sweetness born of it» (Transl. by H.W. Longfellow).

[8] «Insane is he who hopeth that our reason Can traverse the illimitable way, Which the one Substance in three Persons follows!» (Transl. by H.W. Longfellow).

ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne[9].

2. *Plato and the Places of Esotericism in Greece*

After these essential clarifications, let us return to our main topic, that is, to Plato. To appreciate the way in which esotericism was understood among its followers, one can refer to a famous popular work by Edouard Schuré (1921). In it, Plato's esotericism is understood as a particular way of interpreting an ancient form of wisdom (the *prisca theologia*), revealed in the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Hermes Trismegistus, which in the Renaissance (when the rediscovery took place) was deemed to be older than the birth of philosophy. This wisdom had been kept alive by "great initiates", such as Zoroaster, Orpheus and Pythagoras, from whom Plato would have drawn – as maintained by Platonic and Neopitagoric Numenio of Apamea (Guthrie 1917: 64-66) – his fundamental teachings and the backbone of his philosophical conception, giving a dialectical and argued vulgarization of what is contained in the doctrines of a "great initiate" like Pythagoras[10]. However, a pact of secrecy – signed when Plato met the Pythagoreans of southern Italy, where he bought a manuscript of the Master with gold coins – and the fear of incomprehension would have prevented Plato from teaching the doctrine of Pythagoras in an explicit and open form. Thus, in his dialogues he presents the Pythagorean esoteric doctrine, «mais dissimulée, mitigée, chargée d'une dialectique raisonneuse comme d'un bagage étranger, travestie elle-même en légende, en mythe, en parabole» (Schuré 1921: 416). In this approach – also linked to the widespread opin-

[9] «But my own wings were not enough for this [that is, to obtain such an understanding], Had it not been that then my mind there smote A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish [that is, it realized its desire to understand the dual nature of Christ, human and divine]» (Transl. by H.W. Longfellow).

[10] Pythagoras is a central figure for all schools and followers of esotericism, and constitutes, along with Orpheus, the cornerstone for understanding the Greek culture and Plato himself. See e.g. Mallinger 1999; Jacquemard 2004; Kingsley 2007; Barresi 2014; Godwin 2016, etc. In turn, Pythagoras would have borrowed his views from the shamanic figure of the hyperboreal Abaris (Kingsley 2010).

ion in ancient sources, which narrate in a mythical way Plato's life, and his initiatory journeys in Egypt[11] to meet other philosophers and wise men of Eastern origin – esotericism is conceived as a set of substantial doctrines (the stars and the cosmos understood as living beings, the existence of symbolic correspondences in the universe, and the doctrine of the soul that survives the body and is understood as the authentic center of man, which was to have so much influence on the subsequent thought, both profane and otherwise, and so on) (von Stuckrad 2005: 13-4), usually underlined by all aficionados of esoteric thought when referring to the great Greek philosopher, particularly highlighting some of his works (such as the *Timaeus* or the *Phaedo*).

To these quite general theses, cultivated in the esoteric context, the more specific ones of the supporters of the existence of "unwritten doctrines" in Plato were added, the content of which, diffused only within the Platonic Academy, would radically differ from what is contained in the Dialogues. This point of view, proposed at the beginning of the century by J. Burnet, A.E. Taylor and L. Robin, was resumed at the end of the 1950s by those who thought it could be supported thanks to the implicit indications and references in the Dialogues and indirect sources on Plato's teaching, consisting mostly of passages of Aristotle and then of Theophrastus, Hermes, Speusippo and Senocrates, all belonging to the ancient Academy (see Richard 2008: 275-463). We refer in this case to well-grounded and well-qualified philological scholars such as those of the School of Tübingen (Krämer 1990; Gaiser 1994; Szlezák 1988) and, in Italy, those of the School of Milan led by Giovanni Reale (1998; 2010) and his disciples (including M. Migliori and G. Movia). Also in this case, the term "esotericism" is used, but it has little to do with what we have outlined in the previous paragraph; in fact, the "esotericism" consists essentially of the fact that the doctrines related to it were intended for oral teaching, reserved for the more "internal" disciples of the Academy. These scholars thus shared in essence Hegel's criticism of esotericism,

[11] Let us not forget that for the followers of esoteric thought, Egypt occupies a special place, inasmuch as «pendant un laps de plus de cinq mille ans, the Egypte fut la forteresse des pures et hautes doctrines, dont the ensemble constitue la science des princes et qu'on pourrait appeler the orthodoxie ésotérique de l'antiquité» (Schuré 1921: 114). It follows that both the monotheistic religions (with Moses and then with Christ) and the polytheistic religions of Greece (with Orpheus) derive their last sources from the Egyptian mysteries.

that he understood as «a doctrine destined to remain covered by a mysterious secrecy, almost like a sort of metaphilosophy for initiates» (Reale 2010: 132). This orality is eventually explained – in the development of this hypothesis – on the basis of historical circumstances and not as being intrinsically necessary from the theoretical point of view. In fact, it is believed that "esoteric" teaching consists – from a substantive point of view – in a sort of protology based on the One and the Dyad and on a twofold movement of reduction to them and of deduction from them of the real, which results in a «mixture of unity and multiplicity» (Trabattoni 2005: 12-13). It is clear that in this reconstruction, the thought of Plato is influenced by the image filtered by the subsequent late Ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonism with its need to bridge the gap between the sensible world and ideal forms through a series of intermediations (Brisson 1993: 492-493) and consequently it is, also in this case, actually brought back to that of Pythagoras. So, in the end, the distinction among the scholars between the esoteric and the anti-esoteric interpreters of Plato is due to attributing the doctrine of the principles of Plato directly to his oral teaching (as done by Tübingen School) or instead to an interpretation elaborated in the Ancient Academy, strongly steeped in Pythagoreanism, to which the few passages of Aristotle do refer (Brisson 1993: 495; Isnardi Parente 1984; 1989, on which, see Fronterotta 2014).

The negative consequence that can generally be attributed to the esoteric approach is to make Plato not a protagonist of philosophy, or rather its founder in the sense that was then transmitted to all Western thought, but a minor episode of a universal esoteric teaching, whose doctrines are, at most, better expounded or maintained by Pythagoras or by subsequent esotericists (Late Anti-Neoplatonic, *Corpus Hermeticum*, Renaissance platonists, etc.): all the works of Plato transmitted to us would have no other function than to allude to and indicate a teaching that not many can know; they thus are weakened in the theses and in the knowledge brought and inherited from the philosophical culture.

Plato's esotericism thus interpreted is characterized by the "substantive" modality previously referred to as one of the ways in which it is possible to understand esotericism: there is an unwritten doctrine in it that goes beyond what is contained in the known works and handed down to us; this doctrine consists of a series of theses that can be reconstructed in a discursive form (as done with undoubted hermeneutic expertise by the scholars

indicated above) and then set out as true "first metaphysics". Furthermore, the doctrines contained in public and exoteric works, to the extent that they are written, have a value that goes beyond their literal meaning and which is grasped authentically only by people who have been introduced into doctrines transmitted merely orally. And these doctrines, in keeping with what was previously said in general about esotericism, are kept secret and are not made known outside the narrowest circle of the disciples; this is not due to an aristocratic, exclusive or sectarian will, or for profit or power, but only because they can only be accessed by people who have an interior predisposition and are willing to undertake an initiatory itinerary in which the "Master" has a central role: he is the dispenser of knowledge and the administrator of the journey who gradually leads the adept to the full understanding of these doctrines. The centrality of the figure of the "Master" is a constant of all the initiation practices, both Western and Eastern, which aim at liberation through a gnostic type of illumination (Pasqualotto 2003: 73-98).

To appreciate this point, it is necessary to make clear that when I use the locution "doctrinal content" I refer to the typically Greek "specialty" of knowledge that has taken the forms of science or philosophy, as opposed to wisdom and myth, from which they are believed to have been liberated like a butterfly from its cocoon. This is the standard image of Greek philosophy and culture, synthesized in a march "from mythos to logos" – as exemplarily indicated by the title of Wilhelm Nestle's work (1940)[12] – from

[12] Along the same lines as Nestle, there is much of historiography that has had its major representatives in great figures of scholars of ancient Greek culture and philosophy. Just to provide an example, for the more strictly philosophical sector, let me mention the names of B. Snell, W.K.C. Guthrie, G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, M. Frede, and J. Barnes. More recently, the passage from myth to logos is explicitly recalled in the work of Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 2011, in which, while admitting multiple forms of rationality, they nevertheless «s'inscrivent toutes dans un même champ d'épistémè, avec ses lignes de force et ses limites» (p. 9). However, we could also mention other scholars who have been interested in more specific areas, such as historiography, medicine, zoology and so on. For a brief review see Buxton (1999: 1-14). Finally, let me point out – I cannot expand on this question here – that the same rhetorical movement is repeated when we speak, for the modern age, of the passage «from magic to science» and underline the magical and apocalyptic interests of Newton, the esoteric influences on Copernicus, the cultivation of magic in Bruno and so on (see Rossi 2006: 31-3).

manía to reason, so that the logos ends up triumphing after having "gradually disintegrated" the myth, so that it can be affirmed that: «the fact that the evolution of Greek thought, from its most remote origins to the sophistic movement, could be defined as a gradual transition from myth to logos can be now considered a clear achievement» (Unterstainer 1972: 8-9); or it is even believed that rational thought arose suddenly with the naturalistic philosophy of the Ionians (the so-called "Greek miracle")[13] and that it has thus passed from the pre-logical stage to a completely rational one, from the "narrative" explanation of natural facts and actions/events that occur in human affairs to a naturalistic and rational framework that characterizes them as natural phenomena with purely earthly etiologies. This new cognitive way would be the fruit of the logos, of that reason discovered and theorized for the first time in classical Greece and which was embodied in philosophical rationality as canonized in crystalline form by Aristotle in his *Organon*. This is the new path that shaped Western civilization and was the inspiring principle of all its rational achievements, until the advent of the modern science of nature.

This is an image of knowledge characterized above all by a concept of truth inscribed and perimetrated within a discourse, a propositional apparatus, which is proposed to other subjects as a device acting through the intersubjectivity implied by the practice of the discussion, during which one thesis or position can legitimately prevail over another. There are men who argue with each other and who use their own discourse to support different theses; and they try to make their point of view prevail not by punching the interlocutor or by laying claim to an authority deriving from a privileged access to the True – as happens in Greek culture with initiates, mystics or seers with a charismatic personality and a particular familiarity with the divine, often due to a family tradition (Flower 2008: 70-71) – but rather in the conviction that one's own speech (*logos*), made of words, phrases and their concatenations, is able to show one's greater "goodness" compared to that of others, that one is "stronger", i.e. in possession of a logical necessity that cannot be taken away. Moreover, this also means believing that the thesis does not stand up for itself by the mere fact of having been pronounced, nor for the

[13] The first to criticize this perspective was Cornford (2002: 49-54), whose fundamental theses were also taken up in id. (1952).

"quality" of the person who says it, but it needs a support which only an argument can provide. There is no doubt, therefore, that «the Western concept of objective and rational truth emerged historically from Greek thought» and that philosophical thought «became organized around a central concept [...] that concept was Alētheia, or "truth"» (Detienne 1996: 36).

Yet an image of Greek thought that encloses it in such a frame would be incomplete. It is now quite clear that in classical Greece «in reality, myth and logos are intertwined throughout the history of this culture, like reason and madness» (Guidorizzi 2010: 16), so that, as has been effectively claimed, «What we tend to separate, ancient thought – be it mythical or philosophical – tends to see as a whole» (Seaford 2006: 119); «In Greece, what we now would call "mythic" and "scientific" outlooks were not always as far apart as they are today» (Iles Johnston 2008: 57). It is then a matter of formulating the sense of this interweaving of *logos* and anti-*logos* – let us call it so, for the moment – to understand its specific plot, to grasp what it is an expression of, and whether it illuminates us or indicates a way to better understand human reality and history as a whole[14]. We owe to Eric R. Dodds' masterpiece *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1962), a clear first indication in this direction. Taking up and expanding on what Francis M. Cornford has already done, he makes us further aware of how the manifestations of the anti-*logos* are not confined to the peripheral areas of Greek culture, mostly linked to the forms of manifestation of popular religiosity, to collective behaviors or even attributed to the pathology of people who are sick in the mind and soul, according to the opinion that came to be consolidated with the emergence of Greek rationalism and the new secular knowledge, such as scientific Hippocratic medicine (Guidorizzi 2010: 21-31); nor are these manifestations of anti-*logos* only represented in the literary forms of high culture, such as tragedy, lyric or epic, and thus at a safe distance from the citadel of rationality represented by philosophy. Instead, these manifestations are embedded in its body, of which they represent not residual waste, from which we have not succeeded in freeing ourselves, but rather a functionally important aspect, sometimes even prevalent, without which we cannot understand the thought of many philos-

[14] I have given a more general picture of this issue, including it in the context of a general interpretation of man and his evolutionary history, in Coniglione (2017).

ophers. The "champions of the logos" are also possessed, prey to enthusiasm – which means etymologically "being in God", being possessed by the divine – and so «l'hypothèse qu'une certaine folie philosophique accompagne le déploiement de la pensée rationnelle, tout en lui conférant dynamisme et enthousiasme, étant entendu que la froide raison analytique n'est pas de nature à en susciter énormément» (Périllié 2006: 4) is not excessive. Besides, the Ionic thought of Thales and Anaximander, usually seen as the affirmation of the naturalist paradigm in the knowledge of nature, highlights a substratum that is not at all – as claimed by Aristotle – «la cause matérielle, qui ne pouvait être conçue abstraitement à cette époque, mais serait bien plutôt une *vision mystique de la nature* [...] Cela veut dire que la philosophie naissante se présente à la fois comme l'apparition d'un premier discours scientifique, et comme *célébration* de la puissance vitale de la nature, fondamentalement théologique [...]. L'avènement de la philosophie ne s'apprécie donc pas seulement d'après la seule causalité matérielle et structurale obéissant à la temporalité selon le mode de l'avant et de l'après: comme elle est élan, dynamisme, vision enthousiaste, elle se comprend autant, sinon plus, par l'après (par ce qu'elle annonce) qu'elle ne s'explique par l'avant (ce qui la détermine)» (Périllié 2006: 16-17).

Therefore, the intellectual and cultural history of Greece is not just about *logos*: in the same period in which the *logos* was constructed, in the Greek spiritual world the alter-ego of this *logos* can also be found - that which could be defined as its permanent enemy, the adversary against which it has always had to fight and from which it has had to continuously and periodically distinguish itself. This anti-*logos* has taken on different names in the course of history and assumed unusual and often unexpected guises, but in the dawn of the birth of European knowledge it was basically *mythos*, traditional religiosity, initiatic vision, panic transport, *manìa*, *ekstasis*, *mystèria*, incubation or divination through dreaming, and magic, and most often required priestly mediation. These are the conditions of "exceptionality" in which those aspects of human life are condensed, which are often generally attributed to the dimension of the "holy", as opposed to the "profane". It is a residue that seems to escape reason, even if it can be obliquely bound to its deployment: if the *logoi* cannot grasp the blind spot where intuition and the ineffable dwell, they may nevertheless possess

an allusive value, the character of a reference to something that transcends them and which cannot fully be revealed in them: indeed, they have an anagogical value.

This is the space in Plato's work that is occupied by the myth: despite the fact that the Platonic myths have been recovered many times from pre-existing traditional material – as with the myth of the "two earths" contained in the final part of the *Phaedo*, derived from orphic-pythagoric sources (Kingsley 1995: 96-111) – they are often modified in their contents, stripped of "scandalous" references to traditional divinities, but nevertheless still retain their powerful analogical and persuasive function at the service of philosophical truth, so that Vernant could write that in Plato «la pensée mythique se perpétue autant qu'elle se transforme» (Vernant 2007: 358). However, due to their content and function in the context of the thought of the dialogues, his unwritten doctrines are even more representative than the myth of non-discursive, a-logical wisdom.

This is the "wisdom" – not the "knowledge", as is well-known to all the supporters of esoteric thought – which in the Greek world was accessed through an alternative path both to that of the *logoi*, and to that of the traditional myth, in which the official and institutional religiosity of the polis was presented. The ancient sages refer to this "wisdom" as a dimension of being that cannot be reduced to rationality, and indeed with the latter in antithesis, at least to the extent that *ratio* is judged as the power to articulate *logoi*. Plato refers to it in *Phaedo* (79d)[15] when he argues that as long as the soul remains in the state in which it enters when it comes into contact with the Forms, then its intense experience (πάθημα) can be called "wisdom" (φρόνησις) (Bussanich 2005: 12-13; 2013: 276; Kazanas 2014: 22)[16]. Moreover, it is also from the madness, «given as a gift of the god» (*Phaedrus* 244a), that the best things come to us. However, the "divine frenzy" – warns the Socrates "philosopher" already steeped in the logical mechanism of Platonic rational dialectics and no longer the "sapient" rooted

[15] Unless otherwise indicated, all Plato's textual quotations are taken from Plato (1997).

[16] Note the association between πάθημα and φρόνησις, where the first term stands for the strong affection that one experiences or suffers when one has the direct vision of the True and therefore it does not indicate a generic "condition" or "state", while φρόνησις does not generically indicate "intelligence" or "understanding", but exactly "wisdom".

in the oral and religious tradition of the Mysteries – is only a moment that needs to be overcome in order to reach a higher form of dialectical rationality, because «there is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse» (*Phaedo* 89d), becoming misologues, believing that one's own incapacity and lack of skill is attributable to reasoning as such and that therefore rational activity, which is articulated in the *logoi*, is in itself defective and insuperably limited (*Phaedo* 90e). Otherwise, if we want to be wary at all costs of our argumentative capacities and our ability to reach the True by their means, we can only hope to «sail upon some firmer vessel, some divine revelation [λόγου θείου τινός], and make that voyage more safely and securely» (*Phaedo* 85d; Author's translation).

3. *The Sense of Esotericism in Plato*

It is at this point that Plato's philosophical reflection begins. This is done first of all by the role he assigned to the myth and to the unwritten doctrines, which are representative of that non-discursive and alogical "wisdom" in which his thought is firmly rooted.

In fact, Plato has a clear awareness of the contrast between philosophy and wisdom. This is unequivocally witnessed by a passage from the *Phaedrus* (278d-e), in which the "wise man", who already knows because he has the truth written directly in his soul and is therefore similar to a god, is opposed to the one who instead is only a "lover of wisdom", a philosopher in its etymological meaning. There must be no confusion between the "real vision" [ἀγνοεῖν ὕπαρ] (which belongs to those who have arrived at the contemplation of ideas and therefore of discourse that only germinates in the soul, and cannot be transmitted through writings) and the "dream-image" [ὄναρ] of those who wander among the shadows that are generated by written works (*Phaedrus* 277d). This "vision" is precisely that modality of access to the true of which Plato speaks in the famous *Letter VII* (341-342): «this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself»; so the difference be-

tween knowledge that can be communicated to everyone and knowledge that must be kept "hidden" is made. These two texts (*Phaedro* and *Letter VII*) essentially constitute Plato's "self-testimonies", used by the supporters of unwritten doctrines and the esoteric interpretation of the Athenian thinker (Krämer 1990: 55-62; Reale 2008: 263-277, 295-303; Hanegraaff 2015: 64). So, also those who place themselves at the forefront of anti-esotericism acknowledge that «il faut bien admettre que Platon croyait en l'existence de vérités définitives, mais qu'il était convaincu que de telles vérités n'étaient pas à la portée de l'être humain en général et à la sienne en particulier» (Brisson 1998: 9).

However, it is important to underline that Plato, in referring to this type of knowledge, that is to the "visions" of those possessed by God, maintained that this was possible on some conditions: that the initiate is not "master of his thoughts", nor does he linger on reflection; or on condition that «his power of understanding is impeded by sleep or sickness» (*Timaeus* 71e), so that it cannot interfere with what comes from above, from God, from whom the individual is possessed, filled like a "vase" (such is the sense of the term "enthusiasm": ἐνθουσιασμός) (Perillié 2006: 3). With the mouth of the Pythias, it was Apollo himself who spoke and gave orders on the most varied subjects. This was a condition that – again according to Plato – was highly regarded among the ancients, who did not consider it an object of blame or shame (*Phaedrus*, 244b), unlike what would eventually happen.

The later Neoplatonic Iamblichus (about 250-330 AD), taking up in essence this line of thought and inserting it in his particular predilection for magic and theurgy, would say that the "divine madness" «sends forth words, but not with the understanding of the speakers; on the contrary, it is said that they utter them with a "frenzied mouth" while wholly serving and surrendering to the unique activity of the one controlling them» (Iamblichus 2003: 137). "Excellence" is not the fruit of the effort of reason, which proceeds slowly and with an uncertain pace, topic after topic. There is therefore a contrast between rationality and excellence; and only those who dismiss reason succeed in "grasping the sign", in the same way as only those who do not need to learn and to memorize the rules through their verbal explanation really know how to play a "linguistic game", according to Wittgenstein.

But even the final moment when the philosopher gains ac-

cess to the truth is characterized, according to Plato, by that "vision" of the soul which is properly configured as "*theoria*", literally as a "seeing" that is analogous to the experience of one who goes to another polis as official representative of his polis to "see" the religious festivals celebrated there, or as many visitors who came to Athens to attend the great Panhellenic religious festivals. Similarly, the philosophical vision reached through a long process of preparation that passes through purely intellectual disciplines – such as numerical computation, geometry, astronomy and finally dialectics (here lies the difference from the poet or the "possessed") – must not only rely on the narrative forms typical of myth (the path leading to the contemplation of sunlight is illustrated by Plato through the myth represented in the Allegory of the Cave), leaving unexplained the true nature of the "forms", and in particular of the Good which is reached, but – as pointed out by Andrea W. Nightingale – this "vision" emerges from the discursive activity of dialectics, which was also the vehicle that led to it.

Even if the philosopher comes to a partial view of the Forms, because of the imperfection of his soul they are not produced or constructed by the subject during his cognitive process. Besides, this "vision" is basically nothing more than the theory which the itinerant faithful enjoy when attending religious festivals, and is therefore in its essence a kind of contemplation that has the typical features of those forms of "vision" of the Sacred of archaic religiosity: «[...] we must acknowledge that, for Plato, the activity of *theoria* takes as its model a cultural practice that was essentially religious, i.e. *theoria* at religious sanctuaries and festivals. Plato could have focused on the third, more secular, kind of *theoria*, in which the traveler goes abroad to see the world. However, while this kind of *theoria* does inform Plato's account of philosophic theorizing, it is the *theoria* at religious festivals that plays the leading role in his discussions of philosophical contemplation. The "sacralized visuality" that characterized *theoria* at religious sanctuaries offered the most direct model for the philosophic vision of "divine" realities» (Nightingale 2004: 112-113). In an even more decisive way, one could argue according to the Allegory of the Cave, that the final moment of the spiritual vision of forms is merely the transposition, on the narrative plane of myth, of the mystery traditions «in which the initiates were known as *epoptes*: those who have seen» (Versluis 2007: 15).

This vision is closely linked to poetry and prophecy, and it characterizes the "seer", regardless of the availability of a functioning organ of sight: the blind poet – for example Homer, as he was depicted in tradition, along with many others – sees with the "eyes of the mind" in the same way as the shaman sees with mystic eyes and in analogy with the Pythia and the Sybil, who are represented with their heads veiled (Seppilli 1971: 194-198). The all-human blindness attributed to prophets and poets, the blindness of the physical eyes, is the condition to open the eyes of the inner mind, which can reach the contemplation of the Absolute only when it is no longer distracted by the vision of sensible things. The poet thus, inasmuch as he enjoys the privilege of "seeing" *Aletheia*, is a "master of truth" (Detienne 1996: 50-52) and the language of the poetry he composes is that of the gods: in all the great traditional cultures – in Mesopotamia as in Egypt, in India as among the Jewish prophets – the gods speak to man in verse (Jaynes 2000: 361-364; Book III, chapter III); and the poet – in all archaic societies and also in documented historical times, for long periods – not only composes evocative aesthetic works destined to move the feelings, but is also a prophet, a seer and with his art aims to act on the world: *póiesis* is action, enchantment, ritual drama, and magical operation that puts people in touch with a supra-reality (Seppilli 1971: 10-1, 347-348; Guénon 1946: 117).

This is precisely the reality indicated by Plato: «You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. [...]. For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. [...] You see, it's not mastery that enables them to speak those verses, but a divine power [...]. That's why the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners, so that we who hear should know that they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us» (*Ion*, 533e-534d). This poetic ability allows access to a dimension other than *episteme*, that is to an exclusive *sophia* not available to other

common mortals. In fact, in addressing Ion, who practices poetic art, Plato points out: «Surely you are the wise men [σοφόι], you rhapsodes and actors, you and the poets whose work you sing. As for me, I say nothing but the truth, as you'd expect from an ordinary man [ἰδιώτην ἄνθρωπον]» (*Ion*, 532d-e).

There are therefore two types of access to the *Aletheia*: the first is carried out by poets and by those who are inspired by the god; they are the true wise men, who come to the "vision" (ἐπόπτεια) allowed only to the members' narrow circles, of mystery communities and based on oral transmission, of which the "esoteric Socrates" (Périllié 2016) is the exponent; the second one is pursued through humble and laborious rational investigation, carried out by the rationalist and dialectical Socrates in the course of his long, tortuous, sometimes exhausting dialogues, at the end of which we reach a modest, simple truth, which can also be reached by the profane, the common man, even the slave, that is he does not have the gift or the possibility of entering the sacred space, where he can come into contact with the Divine.

This vision is the object of unwritten doctrines; but it is a vision in which the discourse is silent and the adept finally reaches the absoluteness of that truth, otherwise always concealed and alluded to in all human discourses of the profane sciences. This nature of the True justifies the fact that in the VI book of the *Republic* (509c-511e) there is not a fifth section of the line, higher than the νόησις, that is dialectical reason, since the line as a whole concerns knowledge and this can only be propositional, that is, it can only have the form of philosophy: in the third section of the line it uses a deductive-consequentialist method (which is typically the mathematical one) (διάνοια) and the dialectic one in the fourth (νόησις); neither of these methods corresponds to a distinction based on the respective ontological furniture (respectively the objects of mathematics and ideas) (Chen 1992: 99-111), but on the type of knowledge specific to them (Fronterotta 2001: 105). The idea that noetic-philosophical knowledge can be considered as a holistic, intuitive, synthetic vision, equated to a "vision", to an experience that we have had by contact with the Truth, brings together characterizations that are in radical contrast. As mentioned above, philosophical knowledge arises and unfolds in its power – even with Plato – precisely to the extent that it is discursive and therefore propositional knowledge. Everything that does not have such features cannot be con-

sidered philosophy, just as it is quite clear for those who have a minimum familiarity with the history of esoteric thought, which has indeed made the contraposition between philosophy and esotericism a key element of its identity. As Ferrari (2006: 428-429) argues, the distinction between διάνοια and νόησις can be assimilated to the difference between mediated-discursive thought and intuitive-immediate knowledge (as claimed by Fronterotta 2001: 102-107, in interpreting the theory of the line). In short, «the two forms of knowledge active in the intelligible sphere [διάνοια and νόησις] are not distinguished because the first is discursive, while the second is intuitive; each of them expresses a methodical, relational and propositional knowledge in its essence. [...] Dialectical and noetic knowledge is therefore inscribed within the space of discursive reason, of which the rational accounting, conceptual separation and refutation constitute the fundamental theoretical dimension» (Ferrari 2006: 433-435).

Nevertheless, the fact that in the last part of the line we reach a first Principle that is no longer hypothetical, in the form of the Good, which represents the most fundamental principle, which cannot – on pain of regressing to infinity – be further justified dialectically, leads to the conclusion that this section leads to a "vision" that has no propositional character and that is essential to guarantee the discursive and propositional knowledge of both the third section (thanks to its ability to support the hypotheses before only admitted or accepted on the basis of their explicative but unfounded capacity) and the fourth section, which is lacking in the sensible support. It is this "vision" therefore that guarantees, in the last instance, the explanation of all the forms subordinated to it (Fine 2004: 113-114; Bussanich 2016: 98-99). And yet it does not properly belong – insofar as it is not discursive – to the fourth section, and therefore strictly speaking it is not a section of the line, nor is it a fifth section, but rather a dimensionless point, i.e. the act of vision, the terminal moment, which becomes part of the journey only to the extent that it is paradoxically out of it; this is the place, as we have said before, of the mystery view. In short, the entire path that leads to knowledge is subjected to the regime of propositional argumentation, and the subject that carries out the entire dialectical process is the *logos*, except for the final point in which we come to grasp the first Principle that represents the keystone that can guarantee all the knowledge. Plato has thus rationalized what

in mystery practices was given to rituality and to all forms of purification of a religious nature, but has left intact the final moment of the Vision, which therefore possesses the same nature of ἐπόπτεια, even if its object is laically represented by the Good, not of course by a deity appearing to the adept.

Plato's contempt for knowledge without rational justification is understandable, precisely because it cannot be knowledge, that is, it cannot be put on the same level as that which forms part of the "line". Both in the case in which we are satisfied by a form of knowledge understood as "true justified belief" (ἀληθὴς δόξα μετὰ λόγου) (Trabattoni 2012) – as is defined by the contemporary handbooks of epistemology and whose first formulation dates back to Plato (*Teeteto*, 208b ss) – and in the case in which it is possible to reach a real ἐπιστήμη, i.e. a dialectical knowledge of the ideas (νόησις) to which the philosopher can access, and which is characterized by its infallibility, certainty and irrefutability (Ferrari 2013b: 411-414), in any case, argumentation is indispensable, that is the ability to link together opinions or ideas, and to justify them by means of a discourse. What goes beyond argumentation and justification, claiming to be able to dispense with them, is not knowledge, but falls within the anti-*logos* or in a kind of approach to the real which, in order to be possible, must get rid of knowledge.

In essence, this is the basic idea not only of the esoteric tradition, but also of influential sectors of Western thought – like the aforementioned Cusano, but also many others, such as Wittgenstein (Coniglione 2002) – and Eastern Wisdom. In this perspective, *philosophia* is not *sophia*, that is "wisdom", but can only be useful as a preparation for the latter, allowing us to approach it (Guénon 1999: 159n.); it takes us to the edge of an abyss in which we must have the courage to jump in, without any further assistance: and as this is done, we can see that hitherto invisible bridge that leads us to the other side. This is represented by a poignant scene in the film "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade", significantly called "the leap of faith": the protagonist steps forward on the abyss and discovers that he is supported by a bridge, previously invisible and that he can now see. When he gets to the other side, he sprinkles the final part of the bridge with dust so that it is also visible to those who follow him. Thus, Indiana Jones makes his own initiatory journey in search of the Holy Grail (another typical traditional symbol of

esoteric enlightenment), the discovery of which is all the more valid as it cannot be communicated. And in fact, those who try to possess the sacred chalice for profane purposes perish, while Indiana returns without it, having understood that the purpose of the risky, life-endangering journey is not to bring home something material, like a chalice, to use for profane purposes (the immortality of the body), but to have achieved that spiritual perfection which was the true purpose of his journey: possession of the material chalice is only the tangible symbol of the enlightenment. It is not possible to take the chalice back, as it is not possible for the initiate who has attained enlightenment to take back what he has seen, and therefore tell people about it, because at this point speech is silent and the silence is filled by absolute contemplation.

However, unlike what the school of Tubinga and Giovanni Reale claimed (2010: viii-ix and *passim*), these "unwritten doctrines" are not really "doctrines", in the plural, because the plural presupposes the possibility of a discursive articulation which takes place in time and space, while the wisdom to which Plato alludes is out of time and space. The "unwritten doctrine" is not exactly a "doctrine," precisely because it does not have the typical structure of the *logos*, but stands on the level of the anti-*logos*, of what is absolutely beyond it. It is not a form of knowledge that can be systematically exposed, in the form of a "Protology", as this would fall back into the Babel of discourses, and esotericism would end up being understood in its most superficial and insignificant form, i.e. as a requirement of secrecy and of non-disclosure to spiritually unsuitable and unprepared men. In short, in the "unwritten doctrines" Plato did not want to propose a form of metaphysics that is superior and of higher quality than that presented in the dialogues, a knowledge of first principles that could be articulated in a system of statements. The truth which we reach in this way does not reside in the place of origin of the *logos*, where the *logos* still does not inhabit, and therefore there is nothing that can be falsified (Trabattoni 2004: 136-138); the truth – in my opinion – resides precisely in that non-place which is reached by the mysteric vision of the initiates, and which lies not *before* the *logos*, but at its peak, to which we arrive thanks to philosophy and dialectics, according to Plato, and thanks to the initiatic rites and practices of a symbolic nature, according to esotericism. It

is nevertheless true that this place represents an inexhaustible reservoir from which it is always possible to draw new *logoi*: all those who have practiced this path know this well, as we have illustrated in delineating some of the characteristics of esotericism. With Pierre Hadot, we could say that rather than a body of doctrines, in the Platonic academy it was about learning to live philosophically, to transform one's own soul through the contemplation of *Forms*, so gaining the true meaning of philosophizing: «True philosophy is neither an oral discourse nor a written discourse, but a way of being: philosophizing does not consist in speaking or writing, but in being; it is necessary to transform oneself completely into one's own soul in order to contemplate the Idea of Good. And here the limits of language are reached» (Hadot 2008: 15; see also Brisson 1993: 480).

However, can we say that the reconstruction of the content of unwritten doctrines, as exposed by Reale (2010, Part Four), is totally unfounded? Not at all. Nevertheless, the complex articulation of the protology he proposed – with the supreme genres of the real (limitless, limit, mixture, and demiurgical intelligence) the indefinite Dyad, the One, the geometrical structure of the soul, the deductive connection, etc. – by no means constitutes a sort of systematic metaphysics (current or to be developed), with the consequences that derive from it (Ferrari 2012: 371-376), but it realizes that form of symbolic, allusive presentation, well known to all esoteric teachings, which is different from both rational and mythical-religious discourse. From this also follows the lack of relevance of the decision about the monism or dualism of the nature of the theory of principles contained in the unwritten doctrines. In effect, the different solutions, with the multiplicity of metaphysical options that can derive from them, confirm how the descent from the plane of ineffability to that of human discourses entails that multiplicity and relativity of possible interpretations, admitted in esoteric doctrines only as different symbolic ways that can and must lead to the same result (which is certainly not the uniqueness of a philosophical-metaphysical system). The unwritten doctrine, therefore, should not be assumed in a substantive way – as we made clear at the beginning – that is, it must not be fetishized, ending up by mistaking for real entities, or for authentic descriptions of a superior reality, what instead are simple symbols, points of support, help or means for a spiritual elevation that leads to

that vision, the achievement of which can no longer be the object of any doctrine. To this regard, we can share what Hadot said about the *Timaeus* (one of the pivotal works to enter the Platonic protology): «In the case of the *Timaeus*, it is a credible fable that imitates the event of the birth of the God-World. And Plato repeatedly emphasizes the fact that we must not take this game too seriously» (Hadot 2008: 18). In short, what is important to understand is that the esoteric interpretation of Plato can only be made by placing him within the tradition linked to the Mysteries, and so we cannot at the same time hold together and reconcile two radically distinct plans: unwritten tradition and esotericism on the one hand, and the exposition of a protology with entities (the One, the Dyad, etc.) that takes on a discursive course, on the other. To mix these two categorically different plans is, in my opinion, a fatal error not only in the interpretation of Plato, but for human knowledge in general. Plato's "reuse" of the tradition channeled by Mysteries – called by Dodds (1962: 207-224) the Platonic reform of the "Inherited Conglomerate" – does not lead to its complete removal, but rather to its confinement within a mode of access to the Truth, which is clearly different from the truth which is reached with philosophical knowledge, founded in its autonomy and guaranteed by the fact that the contents of the Soul's knowledge do not have a purely subjective value, but possess an objective consistency provided by the World of Ideas (Ferrari 2013: 27). In short, with his work Plato wanted to place a barrier to the "pervasiveness" of traditional knowledge; for this purpose, it was necessary to "kill Parmenides" and his idea of a truth which is reached through a guaranteed itinerary allowed by the Goddess; for without this murder, «the West as we know it would never have existed» (Kingsley 1999: 45). It was therefore essential to enclose this modality of access to the Truth in a small space, concerning only particular and special moments of human life to which only the elect, the initiated, could access thanks to oral teaching only. Alongside it, and for the rest of mankind, the supremacy of discourse, of the *logos*, was valid, which reached authentic knowledge through the dialectics, guaranteed by the World of Ideas and therefore worthy to found the human community and the polis. As Ferrari (2013: 37) states regarding a typical esoteric theme – that of the immortality of the soul to be achieved through rigorous initiation

and personal asceticism – «It is difficult not to see in all this the presence of a precise design, consisting in the transformation of immortality from mythic-religious practice into a philosophical strategy: the (ἀπο)ἀθανατίζειν ceases to be a question of priests and shamans, as happened with Zalmoxis and his followers, to become a profane and a purely philosophical subject». However, this neutralization, this «strategy aimed at establishing a continuity between the archaic tradition and the new philosophic knowledge» (Ferrari 2013: 38n.), concerns only the process that leads to the vision of Truth, which is ultimately only the object of a ἐπόπτεια, about which it is not possible to speak, and which is indicated by what has usually been called "unwritten doctrines". In fact, those who want to underline the continuity between Plato and Pythagoreanism (and between the latter and the Egyptian wisdom), do not fail to note how in the *Symposium* the priestess Diotima describes man's ascent to the contemplation of ideas, led by Eros, «in terms borrowed from the Eleusinian mysteries, because essentially it is the same ascent, consistent with all religious experience. It is a gradual elevation and illumination comparable to the stages of an initiation where the culminating revelation or the final vision (*epopteia*) transcends discursive thought and reason altogether» (Uždavinys 2004: 68).

This leads to further comments on the characteristics of the unwritten doctrines. First, they are not linked to a particular phase of Plato's philosophical reflection, the late maturity (Szlezák 1999: 47-48) (in this way it would be possible to identify the moment of their birth or "elaboration"), since they transcend his own person and have their roots in a tradition and in an experiential mode pre-existing Platonic theorization. Nor should such doctrines be understood as a complement, a further and superior justification of the Theory of Ideas provided by the supposed "First Principles", which would thus be on the same level as the philosophical argumentation underlying the doctrine of Ideas. Moreover, the unwritten doctrines do not serve at all to better understand the philosophical thought of Plato, overcoming the otherwise partial formulation of the dialogues (Reale 2008: 10-11, 20), for the simple fact that they are placed on a different plane from the philosophical one, a plane that presupposes precisely the cessation of the latter, which is instead perfectly autonomous in its scope (Schleiermacher's opinion is

correct in this aspect) and entirely intelligible discursively, in spite of its unavoidable and insurmountable shortcomings and aporias[17]. Furthermore, the "secrecy" mentioned in the school of Tübingen-Milan must be understood both as being aimed at the fear of misunderstanding, and as the firm belief of accessing the dimension of ineffability, thus explaining the oscillation that has been detected in this perspective (Ferrari 2012: 369). It is in the esoteric tradition that these two moments (together with the third, the one defined as "secrecy of necessity", which is however the most superficial and contingent) have always been joined: the necessary symbolic representation of esoteric knowledge can easily lead those who are not appropriately guided by a "Master" to understand images and metaphors in a purely material sense, that is as the description of metaphysically existing entities, endowed with an ontological consistency, not only as means or instruments, to reach the "vision" or "enlightenment", thus, for example, exchanging alchemical gold for the base metal with economic value.

Finally, the fact that it was possible for Plato to hypothesize a particular phase of spiritual maturation through meditation on the unwritten doctrines indicates his conception of the itinerary that leads to the non-propositional Truth not as the sudden illumination that can be reached by emotional impulse (in the manner of the Bacchae and of many manifestations of Greek mysticism in his time), but rather as an initiatory path, which is the typical expression – as we have seen before – of the esoteric thought inherited by his successors. For this reason, it would be a mistake to speak of Platonic mysticism as it is done in the context of its intuitionistic interpretation where it is interpreted according to the exclusive perspective of the "noetic intelligence" or even of the "eidetic intuition" in a phenomenological style, but rather of "esotericism", understood in the terms that we tried to specify earlier.

[17] For this reason, however paradoxical it may seem, I share the positions of those who, like Luc Brisson (1993: 486), oppose an esoteric reading of Plato, such as that sustained by the school of Tübingen and Milan, at least insofar as it is claimed that this reading is not a necessary (or even useful) condition for the "authentic" interpretation of the Platonic dialogues.

At the heart of Plato's pure philosophical theory, therefore, lies a mode of representation of knowledge that is rooted in the anti-*logos*, in the doctrines of theologians and mysteries. So, the followers of Eleusis ask for katharsis, the 'inner death' by which the soul needs to free itself from the encrustations deriving from its permanence in the body and in the world of matter (Rohde 1925: 468-72). This allows us to better understand the undying success of Plato's thought, deriving from having been able to hold together three different levels of "knowledge": the dialectical-argumentative one, in the context of which philosophy takes on an autonomous form of discipline, thus beginning its fortune along the course of European thought, and is defined the ideal of knowledge and truth that has become part of the Western Canon; the allegorical-narrative one, which has its admirable expression in the great myths contained in Plato's dialogues and which constitutes the firm base on which the official Greek religiosity is built and which would be common to the religions of all times, in whose narrative and exemplary procedure spiritual teaching and popular accessibility merge and find a synthesis; and finally, the esoteric-initiatory one, found in the oral teaching of the unwritten doctrines, which unfolds through a symbolic path (that of esotericism) to finally result in the ineffable, in a vision that cannot be communicated through the everyday language of reason and argumentation: this is the basis of both the mystical experience and the esoteric disciplines that have passed through the culture and the Western religious approaches as a subterranean and alternative karst current. These are essentially the three dimensions detected by Quispel and valorized by Hanegraaff (2008), but they are also present in Frithjof Schuon (1997: 9-14), a contemporary esotericist who makes a distinction between philosophy, religion and esoteric knowledge (that he refers to as "metaphysics"). It is easy to see how the dialectic-argumentative plane corresponds to science (or philosophy, that is, to the purely rational dimension), the allegorical-narrative one to faith (even if this term was not yet used by Plato and we must wait for the final phase of Neoplatonism and the advent of Christianity) and the esoteric-initiatory one to gnosis[18].

[18] As Hanegraaff writes (2008: 133), «Quispel's grand thesis was that – in ad-

Only for the last two aspects – which have an eminently symbolic nature, even if in different forms – is it true, in my opinion, what Hadot states (2008b: 121-2) about the function of Plato's dialogues, namely that they aim more to *form* than to *inform*; it would be indeed reductive to think that in Plato there was not an adequate cognitive tension for "how things are", for a universal and permanent definition of the fundamental values and laws that govern the human community (good, virtue, right state and so on). It is not a correct approach to define philosophy in Plato in a narrow sense, that is totally aiming at self-realization and to a contemplative dimension pointing at the divinization of man, with the consequence of arguing that «philosophy has little to do with science» (Kazanas 2014: 21). Of course, it is true that in Plato knowledge also implies a transformation of the self into a process of liberation and purification from ignorance and from the bonds with the body, which has many similarities to the analogous path indicated in Yoga (Gold 1996; Bussanich 2016), as can be seen in certain behaviors of his Master Socrates (Muscato 2014). However, it cannot be denied that in any case knowledge has its own autonomy, subsequently enhanced by making philosophy and science the most significant activities of mankind; instead, knowledge as a practice of spiritual exercises – which in the Neoplatonic tradition would take the form of mental concentration or contemplation of nature and the order of the cosmos, with a parallel process of ascent and renunciation of mundane reality (Hadot 1987: 47) – regards more properly the last aspect of the Platonic teaching, which represents, to use the words of Quispel (2008: 39), «the third component of the Western cultural tradition»[19], which was not by chance subse-

dition to the established churches and theologies with their emphasis on faith, and the philosophical and scientific traditions based on rationality, or reason – there had always been a third component of the European cultural tradition [...] grounded in gnosis. This tradition of gnosis, or so he argued, had always been suppressed and marginalized by the representatives of reason and faith, including modern historians, who had sorely neglected the role played by gnosis in the history of Western culture or had presented it in a very negative light».

[19] «Gnosis is, in fact, the third component of European culture. There has always been faith, which goes back to Sinai and Golgotha. There has always been rationalism, which can be traced back to Athens and Ionia. There have always been people who had inner experiences and expressed themselves in imaginative thinking. [...] Gnosis originated in Egyptian Alexandria at the beginning of our era. Three cities, therefore, Alexandria, together with Jerusalem and Athens, determined the history of the West.» (Quispel 2008: 143).

quently developed in Neoplatonism[20] and Gnosticism; yet it also belongs to every esoteric and initiatic tradition, both internal and external to the institutionalized forms of religion.

Finally, if we wanted to dare to make an intercultural comparison[21], we could say that Plato's philosophical work – analogous to an Indian "philosopher" – consisted in giving a rational formulation and a discursive paraphrase to the Truth gained through a direct, immediate and incommunicable experience (Cognetti 2015: 128-9). The originality of Plato consists in the aforementioned triple articulation of his message, which allowed him to found not only the very notion of "philosophy" in its discursive aspect, as we know it in the West, but also to be the inspirer of the Western esoteric tradition, as would be witnessed by the subsequent vicissitudes of Neoplatonism (not to mention its influence on Christianity). It is no coincidence that Plato's thought would always be the breeding ground from which esotericism would later find expression, so that its scholars would sooner or later come across the Platonism which inspired the original and founding text of modern Western esoteric tradition, i.e. the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Regarding this, it is surely true that «The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato» (Whitehead 1979: 39).

[20] So, we find in Porphyre both the poetic vein that reuses and reinterprets classical mythology, the philosopher who develops the Platonic metaphysics giving it an *epoptic* outlet, and finally the hierophant, follower of the mystery cults, theurgist and interpreter of the role that magical practices have within the esoteric character of the initiatic path (Girgenti 2011: xviii-xix). However, these three components, still in equilibrium in Plato, in Porphyre receive a decisive and clear twist in the mystical-esoteric-mysteric sense, so that even philosophy is seen exclusively as preparation for the final and conclusive moment, in which the *epopteia* is realized and accomplished.

[21] Obviously, this theme cannot even be touched upon here, as it concerns the much-debated question of the supposed oriental influences on archaic Greek thought, which extend to the evaluation of possible analogies, in a comparative point of view, between Plato and some aspects of Indian philosophy (Upanishad, Yoga and Vedanta). This theme is little practiced in the field of Italian antiquities studies, but has known the remarkable work of Thomas McEvilley (2002), on which several scholars have intervened in n. 9 of 2005 of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, as J. Bussanich, N.J. Allen, N.P. Sil, G. Thompson. Other key points of reference for this problematic horizon are the previous works of West 1971 and above all Burkert 1995 and, more recently, Kingsley 2010. See also in Italian the essays by Kazanas (2014), Gold (1996) and Muscato (2014).

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