



Esotericism and the first Three Degrees of Freemasonry.

'For those who see Masonic "science" as nothing but ceremonial and social pleasantries tempered with elementary ethics, my interpretations will be discredited as fanciful. For such, however, they are not written. They are meant for the happily increasing number of Brethren who realise the Craft to be a custodian of the "knowledge of oneself" and to enshrine profound truths of spiritual science beneath its veil of allegory.'

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst
The Meaning of Masonry

To define the initiatic pathway of Freemasonry as 'esoteric' is for the Brethren of this Obedience, somewhat pleonastic, although use of this axiom is frequently the object of considerable debate. It is even more concerning that this occurs not only in the multitude of recurrently confused libels published with regard to Freemasonry, but also in major studies of *Esotericism*, in which the purported lack of esoteric content is underlined by referring *essentially* to the first 3 Degrees.

The term *Esotericism* is a relatively new one (it was first used by Jacques Matter in his *Historie critique du gnosticisme* in 1828), and for many years has been seen as a synonym of a secret, occult manifestation, in the most negative sense of the word. Indeed, in the same way as *Gnosticism* and *Hermeticism* which, having in the past been the focus of authoritative studies, came subsequently to be viewed with suspicion or, worse still, total indifference.

Fortunately, in recent decades the situation has changed radically, and the study of *Esotericism* has found its rightful place in academia. However, it was only in the post Second-world war years that religious historians started to investigate the various contexts of the previously scorned western esoteric traditions.

The actual turning point was undoubtedly achieved by the publication of the writings of the Renaissance historian Frances A. Yates, particularly of her work *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). In this study, Yates carried out a thorough revision of the historiography verging on an overt ‘revolutionization’, no longer representing the Nolan philosopher as a martyr of scientific progress, but rather as a full-blown hermetic ‘magician’. The effects of this volume, together with others by the same author (*The Rosicrucian Enlightenment, The Art of Memory, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, and Astrea*); have succeeded in securing the inclusion of studies into the hermetic traditions of the Renaissance into the realms of academic research.

However, in spite of the progress made, the term *Esotericism* is still today frequently misinterpreted and likened to phenomena such as *New Age* or others. Indeed, as stated by an expert in the field, the Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff, this may suggest that although *Hermeticism* and *Esotericism* are both part of the same field of investigation, the possibility of the latter acquiring a vestige of credibility in Academia will only come about if the scholars concerned apply “politically correct” or socially acceptable terms, with the aim of avoiding conflict with their colleagues: the term “hermetic” is acceptable, whilst “occult” and “esoteric” are not!¹

To solve this issue Hanegraaff proposes that the so-called ‘Yates paradigm, according to which the hermetic tradition constituted a significant factor in the development of scientific progress, be overlooked. He maintains therefore that the studies of *Hermeticism* and similar phenomena, including *Esotericism*, do not need to be legitimized, often through a sheer act of force, by associating them with a *progress* they were purported to have heralded. The Dutch historian opined that it was not necessary to present *Tradition* as ‘progressive’ in order to be worthy of scientific acclaim.

Subsequently, Hanegraaf criticized the presentation of a ‘hermetic tradition’ as a *unitarian*, self-sufficient phenomenon, implying that the

¹ Wouter Hanegraaff, *The birth of a discipline*, in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, Selected Papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City 1995, page XI.

study of traditional phenomena according to a ‘post-Yates paradigm’, may emphasize an increased *complexity* rather than conveying an artificial sense of uniformity. Studies focusing on Western esoteric traditions (including post-Renaissance developments, some of which were not strictly of a ‘hermetic’ nature) would subsequently be called upon to free themselves of the idea of *Esotericism* seen as a “counter-tradition” and of the obsession with justifying *Esotericism* in terms of a modernistic narration of secular progress.²

In addition to Yates, numerous other scholars of various disciplines have contributed towards furthering the knowledge of and re-evaluating Western Esotericism. The most widely renowned of these scholars included Gershom Scholem, who provided an important contribution to the study of the Jewish Kabbalah, François Secret, who studied the Christian Kabbalah, Alexandre Koyré focusing on Mysticism and German theosophy, Charles Puech for and Manichaeism, and Mircea Eliade and Carl Gustav Jung for their contribution to alchemy.

This renewed enthusiasm led to the birth of an independent discipline focused on the study of *Esotericism* as a *historic, social and religious* phenomenon with its own singular identity.

In 1964, François Secret was appointed to the Chair of “*History of Christian Esotericism*” at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) in Paris.

Secret was succeeded in 1979 by Antoine Faivre, under whose directorship the Chair changed name, taking on the title of “*History of esoteric and mystical currents in modern and contemporary Europe*”. In 2002, following the arrival of Jean-Pierre Brach at EPHE, the term “mystical” was removed, with esotericism continuing as the sole focus of studies.

The potency of this scientific investigation was subsequently confirmed by the creation of numerous Chairs in other countries: in 1980 the *Hermetic Academy* was established in the USA, a study group investigating the esoteric traditions linked to the American Academy of Religion, in the context of which in 1986 first the “*Esotericism and Perennialism Group*” (from 1993 “*Theosophy and Theosophical Thought Seminar*”) and more recently the “*Western Esotericism Group*” were set up. In 1999 *Amsterdam University* witnessed the creation of a specific department (directed by the abovementioned Wouter J. Hanegraaff) devoted to the history of modern Western esoteric currents under the title of “*History of*

² Wouter Hanegraaff, *Ibidem*, pages XIV-XV.

Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents". Subsequently, in 2005 the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism* was founded, and lastly, in 2006 at the University of Exeter in the UK the *Centre for the Study of Esotericism* directed by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke was established.

These institutional initiatives were supported by the creation of interesting specialist journals in the field, including *ARIES*, published in four languages, founded in 1985 by Faivre and Edighoffer, becoming in 2001 *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* edited by the renowned university publishers Brill, in addition to the *Theosophical History* in the USA, founded by Leslie Price in 1985 and directed since 1990 by James A. Santucci.

Having concluded an overview on the origins of this new discipline, with regard to the meaning and content of the term *Esotericism*, the classification provided by the Frenchman Pierre A. Riffard, professor of pedagogy and philosophy and renowned expert in the field, is indicative of the ideal types of *Esotericism*:

- a) *Ecstatic Esotericism*. This induces brief, intense, heavy states of consciousness in which exaltation is the predominant factor; in this type of esotericism possession and mediunity play a key role, the initiate is no longer himself, he succumbs to *mania*, dragging the other with him. To this regard, Riffard cites the well-known tragedy of Euripides, the *Bacchae*, which illustrate the practices of the faithful who worship Dionysius, known as the Bacchae, and the Maenads. A tradition linked to ecstatic esotericism which has not yet been studied, but is highly original, is that of the Maori high priests.
- b) *Metaphysical Esotericism*. In this form of esotericism is mediated by a tool, presenting not as a spiritual but as a material, or rather, materialized esotericism. This type of esotericism may also assume doctrinarian, philosophical, speculative, and theoretical forms, being based substantially on knowledge and, consequently, the initiatic pathway coincides with gnosis. In the contemporary world Rudolf Steiner represents the ideal type of metaphysical esotericist. In Hinduism, *Vedanta* represents the form of metaphysical esotericism par excellence.
- c) *Operative Esotericism*. This type is not essentially practical, but operates in the context of practices which are not conditional to initiation, but which rather conditions the initiate accepts. This

condition is constituted by efforts, activity ... Here man becomes a total man, his lead turns to gold, meaning that he fully realizes his nature. *Operative Esotericism* therefore stems from the notion whereby the world needs to be completed, man needs to perfect himself, and the Principle needs to be gained as it leads to achievements that are esotericism in their own right: works of art, the martial arts, social institutions, physical practices, and craftsmanship.

d) *Symbolic Esotericism*. Essentially recalling the imaginary world which is neither entirely spiritual nor wholly material, but a combination of the two. This ideal type is based on two principle trends: the first of a “pantheistic” nature, and the second a “pancosmic” nature. The former seeks for the divine in nature, surprises the prodigal, reveals the archangels, and sacralises events: the most typical figure is Paracelsus. The latter form seeks for nature in the divine, invests God with cosmic attributes (GAOTU), and justifies its spiritual nature using data from nature: the most characteristic figure of this type of esotericism is Jakob Bohme. Gnosticism is not a ‘*Metaphysical*’, but rather a ‘*Symbolic*’ form of *Esotericism*, the progressive descent of the eons, the encounters with Christ narrated in the Gnostic Gospels are images, not ideas or facts.³

In order to ‘recognize’ *Esotericism*, Antoine Faivre proposes the presence of six fundamental characteristics, or components (contrary to Riffard who decrees the presence of only four), distributed to a varying degree according to the historic context in which it occurs:

- 1) *Correspondences*. Real and symbolic correspondences exist between all parts of the visible and invisible Universe, the ancient notion of the *microcosm and the macrocosm*...two types of correspondence can be identified; firstly those existing between visible and invisible nature, for example between the seven metals and the seven planets, between the planets and parts of the human body or character (or society), thus forming the basis for astrology; secondly, those observed between the natural world and the invisible regions of the celestial and supercelestial worlds.
- 2) *Living Nature*. The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical – as shown previously when referring to correspondences. Nature therefore occupies a strategic position. Stratified, full of all nature of potential revelations, it should be read as a book.

³ Pierre Riffard, *L'Esoterismo*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1996, pages 325-342

- 3) *Imagination and mediation.* The two concepts are interlinked, complementary. The notion of correspondence conveys a form of imagination prone to identifying and adopting mediations of all types, including rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits... According to Faivre, it was probably above all this notion of mediation to suggest a distinction between the mystical and the esoteric. To simplify, we may affirm that the mystical – in the traditional sense of the word – strives for the abolition of images and intermediaries, constituting, as they do, a hindrance in his union with God. On the contrary, an esotericist is more interested in the intermediaries who present themselves to the inner vision of his creative imagination than in seeking a union with the divine; he prefers to stand on Jacob's Ladder along which the angels (and possibly other entities as well) climb and descend rather than progressing further. This distinction possesses an exquisitely practical value; indeed, it may occur that there is an abundance of esotericism in the mystics (Saint Hildegard), and likewise a tendency towards mysticism can be observed in many esotericists (Louis-Claude de Saint Martin). Imagination allows these intermediaries, these symbols, these images to be used for the purpose of gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphics of Nature.
- 4) *The experience of Transmutation.* If we did not view the experience of transmutation as an essential component, the notions referred to herein would not surpass the limits of a form of speculative spirituality. The importance of the initiatic element in what is, even on a familiar level, associated with terms such as esotericism, gnosis, and alchemy is widely acknowledged. "Transmutation", in the present context, a term borrowed from alchemy, would seem to be more appropriate and could even be interpreted as a "metamorphosis". The aim is to not divide knowledge (gnosis) and inner experience, or intellectual activity and active imagination, if you want lead to turn to silver or silver to turn to gold. The state referred to as gnosis by the modern Western currents of esotericism is, in the general and modern-day sense of the word, enlightened knowledge that enhances a "second birth" – a capital concept in this context, particularly in theosophy. A major part of the alchemistic *corpus*, particularly from the beginning of the XVII century, seemed to aim less at describing laboratory experiments than at figuratively presenting a series of steps

involved in transmutation: Nigredo (death, decapitation of the raw material or of the old self), Albedo (whiteness), Rubedo (redness, philosopher's stone). A comparison has been suggested with the three stages of traditional mysticism: purgation, enlightenment, unification. In these contexts it is frequently implied that transmutation may either involve a particle in Nature or the experimenter himself.

- 5) *The practice of concordance*. This concept is not reserved solely to Western esotericism, but rather marks the start of the modern Era (in line with the *Philosophia Perennis*), to emerge at the end of the last century in a changed and more forceful form. A trend is displayed that underlines the need to establish a common denominator between two or more, or even between all traditions, in the hope of achieving enlightenment, a higher gnosis....It expresses a wish to not only remove all differences or reveal harmonies between the different religious traditions, but particularly to achieve the gnosis that would both enlighten and unite a series of traditions to reveal to the inquisitive man – rather in the photographic sense of the term – an image of the concealed living trunk of which specific traditions represent merely the visible branches.
- 6) *Transmission*. By placing emphasis on transmission it is implied that esoteric teachings can and should be transmitted by the Master to the disciple following a previously forged pathway. This is the price to pay for a “second birth”. Two specific notions are associated with this occurrence: a) the validity of the knowledge transmitted through filiation, the “regularity” or authenticity of which is undeniable (association with a tradition viewed as an organic set the integrity of which should be left intact); b) initiation, generally undertaken between Master and disciple (self-initiation cannot be performed, an initiator or guru is required). The importance of these conditions in the genesis and development of initiatic, secret or occult societies in the West is widely acknowledged.⁴

Personally, I maintain that this exposure of components is *indicative* of the somewhat artificial form of *Esotericism* proposed by Faivre, particularly in view of the difficulty of interpretation and collocation of the phenomenon concerned. This is clearly highlighted when Faivre, attempting to apply this design to Freemasonry, states that: ”*Moreover, only some aspects of*

⁴ Antoine Faivre, *L'Esoterismo, storia e significati*, Sugarco, Carnago (Varese), 1992, pages 26-44.

specific institutions, such as Freemasonry can be construed as belonging to esotericism (some forms of Freemasonry are devoid of these aspects) ”⁵. In my opinion, some Masonic Obediences may possess some, all or none of the peculiarities highlighted by Faivre, but the essence of Freemasonry, interpreted as the ‘Form’ or ‘Aspect’ of Tradition, will inevitably always be an ‘esoteric movement’ which is hard to ‘classify’ according to the rigid categories proposed by Riffard.

Although studies on *Esotericism* have finally gained the collocation they deserve in Western history, it is of interest to note how still today this subject is at times viewed in negative terms. An essay by the priest Don Curzio Nitoglia, entitled ‘*Esotericism*’ states that: “*Esoterism (or exoterism) is a doctrine in which the teachings are open to all, it is a public concern, conversely to esotericism which is confined to a small group of initiates or the adept. In the majority of cases, the latter are misfits or unbalanced persons who strive to compensate their own limits through recourse to a mythical “super-man”, i.e. an initiate who is persuaded he is a “God”, if not something more, or a... poor megalomaniac..... Religion is free for all, whilst esotericism is accessible only to the few, and naturally these few will maintain they are the true master and initiate. He truly believes he is “someone”, whilst the others have not risen to the same heights”* ⁶. With regard to the purposes of *Esotericism* Nitoglia affirms that: “*The false mystic gnostic-esotericist who strives at all costs to become “deified” or towards self-divinification by means of gnosis or knowledge aimed at salvation, is prouder and more foolish than the attempts made by Lucifer, who merely wanted to resemble God, whilst Gnostics strive to achieve equality with God, or even to surpass him. This, regrettably, is a path that leads not to union with God, but rather to complete, absolute and eternal separation from Him, in the eternal fires of hell...*” ⁷ *Esotericism scorns the Catholic dogma of salvation or eternal damnation, asserting how these have been invented by Man to keep the people in awe of authority. Esotericism does not strive to save souls, but rather strives towards deification. A deep, obscure and dark illusion that leads to a final impenitence, to a sin committed against the Holy Spirit which can never be forgiven, as man does not want to seek*

⁵ Antoine Faivre, *Ibidem*, page 40.

⁶ Curzio Nitoglia, *L'Esoterismo*, Centro Librario Solidatum, Verrua Savoia, 2002, pages.12-

⁷ Curzio Nitoglia, *Ibidem*, pages 32-33.

forgiveness”⁸; to finally conclude by reassuring the reader who is likely worried by the decidedly aggressive tones: “*My intention in writing about esotericism is not merely to raise a controversy. I want to warn those who are attracted by mystery, the occult, secrecy which catch our eye and raise our at times morbid curiosity, - they are at risk of embarking on the road to final impenitence – the true goal of esotericism ... Esotericism, gnosis or initiation are thus pure satanism, a desire to be deified, but whilst Lucifer was an Angel, and therefore highly intelligent, and did not attempt to achieve a total resemblance with God, the esotericists strive to achieve a total resemblance, or even surpass the superiority of God... In its insane pretence towards self-divinization, esotericism is a contradiction of terms that leads man into a doctrinal error, towards moral depravation and, on persisting until the end of the mythological fable, into sin against the Holy Spirit and eternal damnation*”⁹. Amen, I would suggest – the problem being that these writings are of public domain and anyone purchasing a copy would form a preoccupying, and totally deviant view of *Esotericism*.

Returning once more to the initial issue of the ‘esoteric’ connotations of the first Three Degrees, the previously cited Faivre and Riffard, two of the most eminent representatives of studies on *Esotericism*, on referring to *Masonic Esotericism*, in my opinion commit a grave error of evaluation. Indeed, the writings of the two French scholars, are characterised by an evident and unexplainable *underestimation* of the ‘esoteric’ component of the first Three Degrees of Anglosaxon Freemasonry, frequently referred to as the “Blue” or “Symbolic” Degrees of Freemasonry. Indeed, the two scholars maintain that the esoteric components contained in the Masonic ritual are only present in the additional Degrees, the so-called “Higher Degrees”. I am in complete disagreement with this view, namely because, in my opinion, the mortification of the first Three Degrees of Anglo Saxon Freemasonry is a serious mistake both from an historic and an initiatic point of view.

To commence with the Frenchman Pierre Riffard, in the words of whom: “*The esotericism of the XVIII century largely coincides with a mystic form of Freemasonry...from an esoteric point of view, the crucial date is not the year 1717, although that same year the Grand Lodge of London was formed, the break occurred in 1736. This gave rise to the occult form of*

⁸ Curzio Nitoglia, *Ibidem*, page 46.

⁹ Curzio Nitoglia, *Ibidem*, pages 47-49.

*esoteric Freemasonry. The Knight of Ramsay cites “the necessary qualities” to become a member of the “highly noble and illustrious Order of Masons”...The order claimed to date back to the Knights Templar. Thus, Freemasonry was viewed as a “Universal Dictionary of liberal Arts and useful Sciences” which however did not include theology and politics. From this date onwards a period of splendid developments followed. The great names of Freemasonry are: A. Court de Gobelin, L.C. de Saint Martin, J.-B. Willermoz, N.A. Kirchberg, Joseph de Maistre, F. Tienman; the most important organisms are the Strict Templar Observance (S.T.O., 1753), the Order of Knight-Masons Elect Priests of the Universe (1738), the Hermetic Rite (1770), the Holy Order of Knights Beneficent of the Holy City (H.O.K.B.H.C, 1778). The enlightened Freemasonry of the XVIII century is a global form of esoterism. Through the creation of those known as the high degrees, which were conferred subsequent to those commonly used in ancient Freemasonry (apprentice, fellow craft, master mason), the thinkers were in possession of the ritual tool to be applied in a detailed speculation into the symbols used in Solomon’s Temple and in construction”.*¹⁰

To continue in the analysis, Antoine Faivre in his *Esotericism* writes: “As we have had occasion to observe, it is particularly the high degrees in Freemasonry in which esoteric tendencies are expressed”¹¹, subsequently reiterating his beliefs by maintaining that: “Naturally, the high degree Rites are those suffused with esoteric content. For this reason, the Anglo Saxon Freemasonry is virtually devoid of such aspects”¹², concepts which were likewise supported in other writings published by the French author: “Undoubtedly, it (Freemasonry) is not by its very nature “esoteric” in the sense implied by this term herein. Although for the first three degrees (blue) that form the basis, there is a link to symbolic and initiatic aspects, this is not sufficient to define esotericism. We have however seen that in the high degrees of certain Masonic systems there exists a level of esotericism, together with an esotericism-like nature of Masonic literature”¹³.

To this regard, another renowned scholar of esotericism, Jean-Paul Corsetti wrote: “The English Freemasonry is scarcely esoteric, only becoming so from the Third Degree of Master Mason, which was included

¹⁰ Pierre Riffard, op. cit., pages 71-172.

¹¹ Antoine Faivre, op. cit., page 123.

¹² Antoine Faivre, op. cit., page 100.

¹³ Antoine Faivre *Esoterismo e Tradizione*, Elledici, Turin, 1999, pages 72-73.

in 1730 and was not known to Anderson”.¹⁴

Where does this mistaken perception of Anglo Saxon Freemasonry derive from? Which authors have the scholars addressed in forming their opinions? The issue is not easy to solve, particularly because both Faivre and Riffard in their writings refer to major esotericists such as René Guénon and Oswald Wirth who however, with regard to this same issue, have expressed views in open contrast to those reported above.

The opinion conveyed by the renowned French esotericist Guénon on the High degrees could not be clearer:

“Masonic initiation comprises three successive phases, and there can thus be only three grades, representing these three phases; from this it would seem to follow that the system of high grades are completely useless, at least in theory, since in their entirety the rituals of the three symbolic grades describe the complete cycle of initiation. However, since Masonic initiation is in fact symbolic, it produces Masons who are only symbols of true Masons, simply outlining for them the course of the steps they must take in order to arrive at real initiation. It is this goal that, at least originally, was the aim of the various systems of high grades, which seem to have been instituted precisely in order to realize in practice the Great Work that symbolic Masonry teaches in theory.

It must be recognized, however, that very few of these systems actually achieve their proposed goal; in most cases, one meets with points of incoherence, lacunae, and superfluities, and the initiatic value of certain rituals appears quite meager, especially when compared to that of the symbolic grades. These failings are all the more conspicuous the greater number of degrees the system contains; and if such is already the case with the Scottish Rites of 25 and 33 degrees, what of those Rites having 90, 97 or even 120 degrees? This multiplicity of degrees is all the more useless in that one is obliged to confer them successively”.¹⁵

It is however the Swiss Oswald Wirth who states the clearest view, and one I personally share. In addition to possessing a highly ‘esoteric’ view of Freemasonry, with regard to the differences between the first Three Degrees and the High Degrees, Wirth wrote: *“The goal of Masonic initiation is to enlighten men, that they might be taught to work usefully, in full conformity with the very purpose of their existence. Now in order to enlighten men, it is first necessary to rid them of all that might keep them*

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Storia dell’Esoterismo e delle Scienze Occulte*, Gremese Editore, Rome, 2003, page 276.

¹⁵ René Guénon, *Gli Alti Gradi Massonici*, in *La Gnose*, May 1910.

from seeing the Light. They are therefore submitted to certain purifications intended to eliminate heterogeneous residues, themselves the causes of the opacity of the layers that serve as so many protective shells for the spiritual kernel of man. As soon as they are made clear, their complete transparence allows the rays of outward Light to penetrate to the conscious center of the initiate. Then his entire being is progressively saturated by Light until he is enlightened in the highest sense of the word; he is thereafter known also as an adept, himself transformed into a radiant focus of Light.

Masonic initiation is thus made up of three distinct phases, consecrated successively to the discovery, assimilation, and propagation of Light. These phases are represented by the three grades of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master, corresponding to the triple mission of the Masons, which consists first in searching for, then possessing, and finally being able to spread the Light.

The number of these grades is absolute: there can be only three, no more, no less. The invention of various systems known as high grades rests solely on an equivocation, by which the initiatic grades, strictly limited in number to three, are confused with the degrees of initiation, the multitude of which is necessarily indefinite.

The initiatic grades correspond to the triple program pursued through Masonic initiation. They carry in their esotericism a solution to the three questions of the Sphinx's riddle: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? and they thereby correspond to all that can interest men. They are immutable in their fundamental character, and in their trinity they form a complete whole, to which nothing can either be added or taken away: Apprenticeship and Fellowship are the two pillars supporting Mastery.

As to the degrees of initiation, they allow the initiate to penetrate more or less deeply into the esotericism of each grade. From this there results an indefinite number of different ways of entering into possession of the three grades of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master.”¹⁶

It is almost unbelievable that careful scholars such as Faivre and Riffard failed to take into account the opinions of two of the most renowned experts in the field who were indeed cited, but almost certainly not read. Exception could be made that it was indeed often the Anglo Saxon Freemasons themselves to “quash” their Masonic views of the prevailingly

¹⁶ Oswald Wirth, *L'initiation Maconnique*, in *Initiation*, year 4, n.4, January 1891.

moralistic interpretation of the ritual. This fact had previously been underlined by the esotericist and Freemason Arturo Reghini, who referred to the excess of moralism as follows:

*“In the Anglo Saxon countries, in line with the prevalently moralistic trend adopted to date by Protestantism, better suited to being known as moralism, the exquisitely moral nature of the Masonic initiation, being the demise of vice and the birth of Masonic initiation, is underlined ... To take pride in this moralistic interpretation of the Masonic allegory invariably implies to sacrifice, misunderstand, or at the very least contort the esoteric, universal, non-sectarian character of the Order; it is unbelievable how much pleasure is taken in dressing Freemasonry in white dress for its First Communion and wallowing in morals up to one’s knees... The ancient Masonic tradition and the inspiration of rituals used in pagan ceremonies denote how the prevailing sense of the Masonic allegory is of a metaphysical nature, yielded by a true spiritual palingenesis.”*¹⁷

It is undeniable how Anglo Saxon countries have a tendency to interpret the Masonic ritual in a typically ‘moralistic’ manner, although it would be over-simplified and misleading to generalize. Indeed, numerous English scholars have represented the esoteric nature of Freemasonry, including the Americans Albert Machey and Albert Pike, the Englishman Walter Leslie Wilmshurst, and more recently, Kirk MacNulty, Julian Rees, Tobias Churton and Michael Baigent (for many years Editor of the journal *Freemasonry Today*, the official journal of the United Grand Lodge of England).

A clear example of the ‘esoteric’ view of the Masonic ritual is given by Albert Pike in his *Symbolism of the Blue Degree of Freemasonry*. In his introduction to the volume, Arturo de Hoyos emphasizes how Pike grasped the similarities between hermetic and Masonic symbolism, concluding that the progenitors of speculative Freemasonry displayed a considerable knowledge of esotericism: *“A voracious and omnivorous reader with a retentive memory, he (Pike) recognized a congruence between Hermetic and Masonic symbols. The square and compasses, the sun and moon, the three pillars, and other symbols were common to both. If not coincidental, what was the relationship? For Pike, the relationship was significant rather than incidental, as he concluded that the symbolism of Freemasonry lay in antiquity, and was either borrowed directly from Hermeticism or the*

¹⁷ Arturo Reghini, *Le Parole Sacre e di Passo*, Atanòr, Rome, 2008, pages 92-94.

two shared a common incest. Through his investigation of the earliest known Masonic catechism, exposures, and Old Charges (including the *Regius Manuscript* of c.1390), Pike concluded that the ancestors of speculative Freemasonry possessed esoteric knowledge, and that it was the possession of such that induced educated men like the antiquary Elias Ashmole to join the Fraternity, which he did in October 1646”¹⁸.

However, the Englishman Walter Leslie Wilmshurst represented the highest expression of an esoteric vision of Freemasonry.

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst was born in Chichester in 1867 and died in London in 1929. He worked as a solicitor in Huddersfield and was initiated into the *Huddersfield Lodge* n°290 of the *United Grande Lodge of England*. Wilmshurst subsequently became a member of the *Lodge of Harmony* n°275 and the *Lodge of Living Stone*; he was appointed Provincial Grand Registrar in 1913 and held the position of Past Provincial Senior Warden in 1926 and Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremony in 1929.

Wilmshurst was a true esotericist, and several of his articles were published on *The Occult Review*, a monthly journal that from 1905 to 1951 published interesting articles by a series of renowned esotericists and occultists of the time, among which Franz Hartmann, Arthur Edward Waite, Meredith Starr, and Aleister Crowley. He wrote, among other things, a considerable introduction to the volume ‘*Early Magnetism*’ by the English author Mary Ann South who wrote of hermeticism and alchemy.

Wilmshurst’s most renowned article ‘*The Meaning of Masonry*’, published in 1922, is one of the highest expressions of an ‘esoteric’ vision of Freemasonry, and the pages we propose here are a living example of an almost ‘mystical’ view which, at the same time, underline the perilous internal degeneration that was taking place. With regard to initiation, Wilmshurst, as cited below, affirms that this event is frequently seen as a mere formality, with membership in the Order in no way influencing the ‘reawakening’ of initiates who view it almost as a sort of social club. Conversely, initiation should be seen as a ‘new beginning’, a break with the old methods and order of life and admission into a new, profound, supernatural order of self-discovery and knowledge, it implies leaving the common scopes of the outside world behind – these are merely shadows and scarce imitations of the underlying eternal Reality that is hidden

¹⁸ Albert Pike, *Symbolism of the Blue Degrees of Freemasonry*, The Scottish Rite Research Society, Washington, 2005.

within each of us. ‘Initiation’ is characterised by the ‘reawakening’ of the hidden faculties of the soul, leading to Light and Awareness:

*“Their admission is quite a lottery; their initiation too often remains but a formality, not an actual awakening into an order and quality of life previously unexperienced; their membership, unless such an awakening eventually ensues from the careful study and faithful practice of the Order’s teaching, has little, if any, greater influence upon them than would ensue from their joining a purely social club. For “Initiation” – for which there are so many candidates little conscious of what is implied in that for which they ask – what does it really mean and intend? It means a new beginning (initium); a break-away from an old method and order of life and the entrance upon a new one of larger self-knowledge, deepened understanding and intensified virtue. It means a transit from merely natural state and standards of life towards a regenerate and super-natural state and standard. It means a turning away from the pursuit of the popular ideals of the outer world, in the conviction that those ideals are but shadows, images and temporal substitutions for the eternal Reality that underlies them, to the keen and undivertible quest of that Reality itself and the recovery of those genuine secrets of our being which lie buried and hidden at “the centre” or innermost part of our souls. It means the awakening of those hitherto dormant higher faculties of the soul which endue their possessor with “light” in the form of new enhanced consciousness and enlarged perceptive faculty”.*¹⁹

Wilmshurst opined that Freemasonry was focused on achieving self-knowledge, knowledge that is not acquired by passing from one Degree to the next, or through a sense of knowledge in general which, on the contrary, should be overlooked on the difficult and unique pathway that alone is capable of guaranteeing the achieving of the true aim:

*“And Masonry was designed to teach self-knowledge. But self-knowledge involves a knowledge much deeper, vaster and more difficult than is popularly conceived. It is not to be acquired by formal passage through three or four degrees in as many months; it is a knowledge impossible of full achievement until knowledge of every other kind has been laid aside and a difficult path of life long and strenuously pursued that alone fits and leads its followers to its attainment”.*²⁰

¹⁹ W.L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry*, Gramery Books, New York, 1980, pages 10-11.

²⁰ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, page 12.

The Author highlights the existence of a higher, more secret path of life compared to that usually undertaken, underlining how sooner or later, as the outside world fails to meet our innermost needs, we shall turn to ourselves and knock on the door of the inner world. This is the pathway that Freemasonry promises to illuminate, indicating the qualifications required and conditions necessary to proceed:

*“The fact that there exists a higher and more secret path of life than that which we normally tread, and that when the outer world and its pursuit and rewards lose their attractiveness for us and prove insufficient to our deeper needs, as sooner or later they will, we are compelled to turn back upon ourselves, to seek and knock at the door of a world within; and it is upon this inner world, and the path to and through it, that Masonry promises light, charts the way, and indicates the qualifications and conditions of progress. This is the sole aim and intention of Masonry”.*²¹

Wilmshurst underlines how this, the sole aim and intention of Freemasonry, should never be forsaken or overlooked in favour of other moralistic forms of expression. Wilmshurst continues by stating that Freemasonry, which for too many people and for too long a period failed to be deemed as such, has had its energy diverted along previously foreign social and philanthropic channels:

*“But because, for long and for many, Masonry has meant less than this, it has not as yet fulfilled its original purpose of being the efficient initiating instrument it was designed to be; its energies have been diverted from its true instructional purpose into social and philanthropic channels, excellent in their way, but foreign to and accretions upon the primal main intention.”*²²

The definition of Freemasonry as an ‘initiatic instrument’ leaves us in no doubt as to the ‘esoteric’ vision of Brother Wilmshurst, as mentioned previously, member of the United Grand Lodge of England.

It is however in the ‘mystical’ connotations attributed to the Third degree by Wilmshurst, and in particular to the Hiramic allegory that, in my opinion, he reaches the peak of his analytical capabilities, affirming in mentioning the death of the body referred to in the Third Degree, how this should be interpreted as the symbolic sign of rebirth or regeneration, particularly as through self-discipline and inner development, the candidate overcomes his shortcomings and attains an immortal

²¹ W. L. Wilmshurst, Ibidem, page13.

²² W. L. Wilmshurst, Ibidem, page14.

‘incorruptible body’’: “*Although distinct reference to the death of the body is made, yet such death is obviously intended to be merely symbolical of another kind of death, since the candidate is eventually restored to his former worldly circumstances and material comforts, and his earthly Masonic career is not represented as coming to a close at this stage. All that has happened in the third degree is that he has symbolically passed through a great and striking change: a re-birth, or re-generation of his whole nature. He has been “sown a corruptible body”; and in virtue of the self-discipline and self-development he has undergone, there has been raised in him “an incorruptible body”, and death has been swallowed up in the victory he has attained over himself*”²³.

This concept is once again emphasised towards the end of the essay when the Author resumes commenting on the purpose and outcome of Initiation, affirming that these are to stimulate and reawaken in candidates a sense of direct cognition, irrefutable demonstration of facts and truths he was previously unaware or only notionally informed of; to bring him into direct conscious contact with the Realities underlying the surface-images of things, so that, instead of holding merely beliefs or opinions about himself, the Universe and God, he is directly and convincingly confronted with Truth itself; and finally moves him to become the Good and the Truth revealed to him by identifying with the same:

*“The purpose of Initiation may be defined as follows: it is to stimulate and awaken the candidate to direct cognition and irrefutable demonstration of facts and truths of his own being about which previously he has been either wholly ignorant or only notionally informed; it is to bring him into direct conscious contact with the Realities underlying the surface-images of things, so that, instead of holding merely beliefs or opinions about himself, the Universe and God, he is directly and convincingly confronted with Truth itself; and finally it is to move him to become the Good and the Truth revealed to him by identifying with it”*²⁴.

Having then demonstrated the total groundlessness of statements made by Faivre whereby Anglo Saxon Freemasonry contained no elements of esotericism, Wilmshurst continues to comment on how the Three symbolic Degrees enclose all forms of esotericism without any additional notions or superfetations. In passing from one grade to the next the candidate is led

²³ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, page 42.

²⁴ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, page 106.

from an old to an entirely new quality of life; through disciple, he is transformed from a natural being into a perfect, regenerated human. To achieve this transmutation and metamorphosis the candidate is taught to purify and develop his mental nature, to finally, surrendering his old life, rise from the dead as a Master, a Perfect Man with vaster consciousness and faculties, an effective instrument in the hands of the Great Architect in his plan to rebuild the Temple of fallen Humanity, capable of initiating and advancing other men to take part in the same great work:

“To sum up the import of the teaching of the three degrees, it is clear, therefore, that from grade to grade the candidate is being led from an old to an entirely new quality of life. He begins his Masonic career as the natural man; he ends it by becoming through its discipline, a regenerated perfected man. To attain this transmutation, this metamorphosis of himself, he is taught first to purify and subdue his sensual nature; then to purify and develop his mental nature; and finally, by utter surrender of his old life and losing his soul to save it, he rises from the dead a Master, a just man made perfect, with larger consciousness and faculties, an efficient instrument for use by the Great Architect in His plan for rebuilding the Temple of fallen humanity, and capable of initiating and advancing other men to a participation in the same great work”.²⁵

However, we then wonder why two key scholars such as Faivre and Riffard would have made such a blatant mistake, assigning a lesser ‘esoteric’ connotation to the first Three Degrees of Freemasonry to that conveyed to the ‘Higher Degrees’, and maintaining how the English Freemasonry was essentially devoid of ‘esoteric’ content? There are two reasons for this in my opinion. The first is an *underestimation* of the issue, with Freemasonry frequently being dealt with in a rather ‘smug’ manner, using common stereotypes irrespective of whether or not these are based on fact or correspond to the actual situation. A careful examination of the Anglo Saxon Masonic ‘Rituals’ would undoubtedly have helped the authors to avoid taking up such an unforgiving stance. However, this is where another issue arises: the *interpretation* of rituals. Faivre and Riffard were the first to dichotomize and divide the *esoterologists* from the *esotericists*, the former who notably study esotericism and associated rituals, whilst the latter practice the same. For this reason, on addressing a ritual, the historic approach undertaken by an esoterologist is quite different from the ‘exegetic’ approach of the esotericist, the sole method

²⁵ W. L. Wilmschurst, *Ibidem*, pages 46-47.

capable of ‘revealing’ the hidden content of the ritual. The esotericist alone is capable of carrying out the ‘exegetic’ tasks required to achieve an esoteric interpretation of a ritual, of any type of ritual, not only Masonic rituals. Indeed, an esoterologist may read a ritual yet fail to grasp its esoteric content; regrettably, there is no solution to this problem.

With regard to the second point raised, scholars of Freemasonry have contributed largely with their studies to providing a misleading explanation and hampering understanding of the movement. As an example, Margaret Jacob wrote:

*“The constitutional and legislative environment was what attracted men on the Continent to the first lodges. Within their confines Brothers adjudicated new forms of personal power and they could imagine themselves involved in governance as well as opposition”*²; *“Masonic discourse, in whatever Western European language, although permitting the expression of local interests and circumstances, did so within the framework of a rhetoric that was British in origin as well as invariably civic, hence political, and most frequently progressive and reformist”*⁴; *“The central element of Masonic discourse was its intention of acting on a political level”*⁷; *“It is the contention of this book that the Masonic experience in every Western European context – from Edinburgh to Berlin, from the 1730s to the 1780s – was resolutely civil, and hence political”*⁸.

Similar utterances convey a completely distorted and unrealistic view of Freemasonry. These are theories purporting that the origins of Freemasonry are based on ‘political’ undertakings, and the mere possibility that Freemasonry may *also* represent an *Initiatic Order* does not even cross the mind of the North-American author. It is clear that throughout all the sentences quoted there is no reference to rituals, to their esoteric or initiatic content, nothing at all. Freemasonry is seen as nothing more than an association like numerous others, with Ms. Jacob emphasizing that:

“Certain characteristics of Masonic association differ not at all from the many other private societies that sprang up throughout Europe in the course of the eighteenth century. Members, proposed and chosen by other members, paid dues, attended meetings, voted and discussed, gave loyalty,

² Margaret C. Jacob, *Massoneria illuminata*, Einaudi, Turin, 1995, Pag.5. Original Title: *Living the Enlightenment*, Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe, Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁴ *Ibidem*, page 14.

⁷ *Ibidem*, page 26.

⁸ *Ibidem*, page 27.

and sought conviviality, if not self-improvement, from their association.”¹¹.

My efforts, with your help, are directed towards achieving a dignified recognition for Freemasonry and assigning it the historic, philosophical and esoteric position it so rightly deserves, having constituted over the last three centuries one of the most interesting esoteric movements in Western history.

The most daring part of this project however relates to the ‘fulfilment’ of the movement, by demonstrating that Freemasonry is a discernible and manifest ‘Initiatic School’ in fact as well as in theory.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, page 32.