CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION: LOCATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

For now the question is not about how to define words like ‘truth’ or ‘rationality’ or ‘philosophy,’ but about what self-image our society should have of itself. The ritual invocation of the ‘need to avoid relativism’ is most comprehensible as an expression of the need to preserve certain habits of contemporary European life. These are the habits nurtured by the Enlightenment, and justified by it in terms of an appeal of Reason, conceived as a transcultural human ability to correspond to reality, a faculty whose possession and use is demonstrated by obedience to explicit criteria.

Richard Rorty

The chapters of this book cover a wide range of topics and a long period of historical development and change. Rather than being arbitrary or eclectic, the reasons for me to choose the topics of the chapters were an attempt to exemplarily demonstrate a discursive structure that is operative in Western intellectual and cultural history. The study of esotericism is closely linked to these discursive structures. In fact, it is part of them.

Writing Histories, Narrating Pasts

Addressing discursive structures in historical perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of the past and the present. From such a perspective, historical imagination is the complex interplay of several dimensions and practices: from the innumerable traces that previous generations have left, historians select a few and call them ‘sources.’ The criteria for selecting data are sometimes apparent and easy to understand; often, however, historians are unaware of the episteme that determines the criteria of what can be regarded as approved knowledge, worthy of consideration. From another perspective, sociologists of science have argued that these criteria are actually influenced by social configurations and negotiations, rather than by the ‘truth’ of the facts.
Such a position, in turn, mirrors discussions in contemporary philosophy. If we consider, for instance, Richard Rorty’s post-analytical pragmatism, we can see the parallel development—or interferences—between historiography, sociology of science, and philosophy (we can add anthropology and the study of religion to this list). In opposition to realism Rorty suggests that we should leave behind our attempt to find objectivity in our models that would mirror the reality of the world. Rather, what we see at work is the attempt to establish solidarity among peer-groups. At stake is not the truth of our models but their power of conviction.

For the pragmatist […], “knowledge” is, like “truth,” simply a complement paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed. An inquiry into the nature of knowledge can, on his view, only be a sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe.¹

The power of conviction is the link to the Foucauldian episteme. The criteria of what is approved knowledge in a given peer-group or society is exactly what escapes the influence of an individual. Solidarity, in this sense, can simply mean an accommodation of power and an affirmation of the determining discourse.

The episteme also determines the scholarly vocabulary. The emergence of a research field of ‘Western esotericism’ can itself be interpreted as a discursive event that is linked to the change of episteme that influenced European discourses after the Second World War and the 1960s.² People were looking for alternative models for interpreting Western culture, models that seemed more fit to explain the plurality and ambiguity of European identities. The concept of esotericism is an attempt to come up with a new vocabulary. But then we are also confronted with the paradox that Rorty reminds us of:

On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of ‘intrinsic nature of reality.’ The trouble with argu-

¹ Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” 7. On Rorty’s pragmatism and its impact on the methodology of religious studies see von Stuckrad, Das Ringen um die Astrologie, 14–68.

² Michael Bergunder argues similarly and notes that in esotericism research “the question, how scholars come to construct a certain object of research in the first place, is mostly neglected” (Bergunder, “Was ist Esoterik,” 478). The present book is an attempt to reflect on these discursive events.