1. Introduction: Memory and Tradition

In a volume of collected articles published in 2000 Jan Assmann discussed the social construction of memory, pointing out that how we remember our own past is inextricably bound to acts of forgetting: ‘to remember something’, he writes, ‘means letting other things recede into the background, drawing distinctions, canceling out many things in order to highlight others’.¹ This observation can be easily applied to the concept of “tradition”: certain things are handed down from one generation to the next because it is believed they must be remembered, but in order for this to be possible, principles of selection, demarcation and suppression are necessary. No tradition can exist or stay alive without demarcating its own identity from something that is seen as representing its negative counterpart, its “other”; and as a result, this “other” necessarily accompanies any tradition, as the shadowy background or dark canvas which allows it to draw the contours of its own identity in the first place. The presence of this shadow can therefore never be forgotten; but in order to fulfill its role as a negative background, neither can it be brought into the full daylight of memory and recollection. In short, it must be selectively remembered and selectively forgotten.

In this article I hope to demonstrate this at the example of 18th-century Enlightenment historiography. The very tradition of critical historical research that has been handed down to us as scholars and academics since that period, and of which we are all the heirs, shaped

¹ Assmann, Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis, 13.
and defined its own identity decisively during the later 17th and the
18th century; and this happened by means of a complicated and often
painful process of deciding what, exactly, had to be rejected, and
on what basis such a rejection could be rationally legitimated and
explained. The final outcome, I will argue, was that Enlightenment his-
toriography created the popular image of a “counter-tradition” which
was seen as encompassing and representing everything the Enlight-
enment and its heirs rejected as wrong; and the cluster of historical
currents, ideas, personalities and ways of thinking that were associ-
ated with this counter-tradition turns out to consist precisely of what
is nowadays studied under the more recently-invented umbrella-term
of “Western esotericism”. The match is so exact that there can be no
doubt, in my opinion, that this is how our field was construed as a
category of scholarly research.2

In order to define its very identity, the Enlightenment needed to con-
strue the memory of pagan, occult, superstitious and irrational religion
and thought as an essentially unified tradition of unreason from which
the light of rationality and science had now finally managed to liberate
itself. But at the same time, this tradition had to be sharply excluded
from the true history of thought: henceforth the history of philosophy
should focus on the progress of reason, not on the tenacious persis-
tance and endless resurgence of unfounded beliefs. As a result of this
process of exclusion (which can really be described metaphorically as
one of expurgation, purification, even exorcism), enormous bodies of
traditional thought that—as will be seen—were still discussed seriously
and at great length by the early pioneers of the history of philoso-
phy during the 17th century, were increasingly marginalized by the
historiography of the 19th and eventually the 20th century. The final
result was a dramatic loss of historical memory, which we are now
only beginning to correct.3

2 I first presented this thesis in 2005 in an article in Aries (Hanegraaff, ‘Forbidden
Knowledge’) and developed it further two years later, in a contribution to a collective
volume on Western esotericism and polemics (Hanegraaff, ‘Trouble with Images’).
For a full development of the argument, see Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy
(forthcoming).

3 To call this process “dramatic” is no exaggeration. To give one small example:
over the last few years I have spoken with several Dutch students of philosophy, from
different universities, who had developed an interest in Marsilio Ficino but were told
by their professors that Ficino was not a real philosopher and therefore could not be
accepted as a topic for a paper or a thesis. And exclusions of this kind—which I do not
hesitate to call intellectually irresponsible—are by no means limited to the history of