INTRODUCTION:
THINGS WE DO NOT TALK ABOUT

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In recent years, the academic study of Western esotericism has been developing rapidly from a somewhat obscure specialty pursued by a few dedicated researchers into a burgeoning professional field of scholarly activity and international organization. Once a domain restricted to the relatively secluded circles of specialists and hence hidden from the sight of most academic and non-academic readers, it is now becoming an increasingly popular topic of public and critical discussion in the context of journals, monographs, conferences, and scholarly organizations.1 The book you now hold in your hands is the fruit, one of many, of this growing branch of knowledge.

That there are connections between Western esotericism and the domains of eros and sexuality (which extend far beyond what we normally mean by “sex”) has, of course, been recognized before, not least by practitioners, and the various contributions to this volume provide abundant illustration of that fundamental and indubitable fact. But

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1 For an overview of the field and its recent development, see Hanegraaff, “The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture,” in Antes, Geertz & Warne, eds., New Approaches to the Study of Religion. There are two international academic organizations: the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (http://www.esswe.org), with an associated journal Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism (see http://www.brill.nl/m_catalogue_sub6_id9470.htm) and an associated monograph series, the “Aries Book Series” (see http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=18&pid=24740); and the USA-based Association for the Study of Esotericism (http://www.aseweb.org), which publishes an electronic journal Esoterica (http://www.esoteric.msu.edu). Conferences on Western esotericism are organized each year, alternately by the ASE in the USA and the ESSWE in Europe; permanent sessions on Western esotericism have been organized at the quincentennial conferences of the International Association for the History of Religion since 1995, and at the annual conferences of the American Academy of Religion since 2005. The present volume is based upon papers presented at a conference that is part of an annual series organized at Esalen Institute, San Francisco. Further conferences in the domain of Western esotericism, with names of participants and titles of papers, are listed in each issue of Aries. Chairs and teaching programs on Western esotericism currently exist at the Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne) in Paris, at the University of Amsterdam, and the University of Exeter.
scholarly analyses of how and why the two domains of esotericism and eroticism are so intimately interwoven are difficult to find. Moreover, the closely related problem (or is it a promise?) of how the history of sexuality in the West might be related to the history of Western esotericism implies a range of further questions that still remains virtually untouched. In the absence of any such developed analysis, only a few tentative suggestions will be made here. In a historical field this new, this rich, and this provocative, all we can reasonably do is point to the heavy fruit hanging low on the branches, and then hope a sufficient number of readers will choose to begin plucking it. Our own general sense is that such fruit contains its own important truths, but these are, at best, difficult to grasp for a whole host of intellectual, linguistic, political, historical, and social reasons.

In different ways and for different reasons, or so we would suggest, the domains of Western esotericism, on the one hand, and that of eros and sexuality, on the other, have both tended to become the object of censorship, suppression, concealment, and a certain polite public silence. Both the esoteric and the erotic have, in effect, been repressed, made to hide, “made occult,” as it were. Rather like the Greek god of fertility, Pan, whose iconography was transformed into the cloven-footed and horned “Devil” within the repressions of the Christian imagination, that which is repressed always returns, but as something else, as something “dark” and “dirty,” even “demonic,” that is, as something we should not talk about. And so we don’t. It was one thing to speak of Pan. It is quite another to speak of the Devil.

If we ask ourselves how and why this has happened, it may be useful to distinguish between five categories of “things we do not talk about”: those that are concerned, respectively, with secrecy, taboo, concealment, intimacy, and ineffability. As each of these terms carries a different, if also related, semiotic range and its own set of connotations, it seems wise to discuss each in turn before we proceed to the essays. In the process, we hope to give some sense of the essays themselves—their content, their excitement, their own spoken secrets.

Secrets and Rumors

To begin, we might note that the term esotericism has often been understood as referring to “secrets reserved for an elite,” and hence to the concept of initiation into hidden wisdom in contexts such as mystery