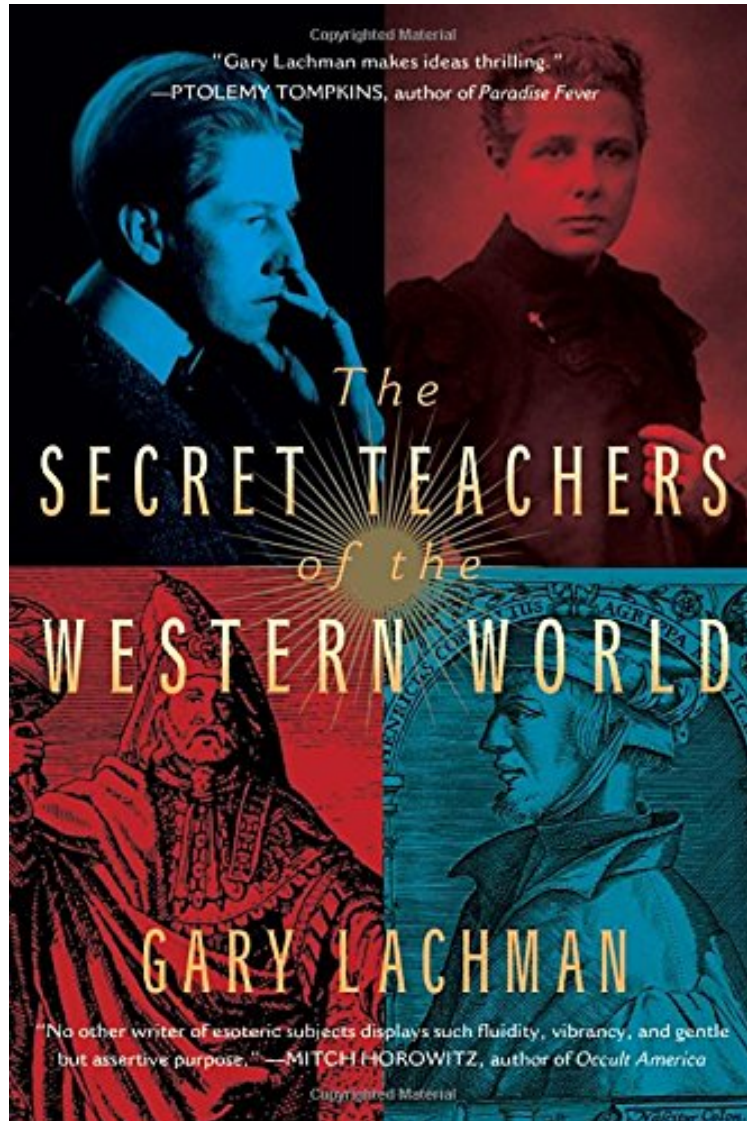


The Secret Teachers of the Western World

Gary Lachman

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#361402 in Books Lachman Gary 2015-12-08 2015-12-08 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x 1.30 x 6.00, 1.00 #File Name: 0399166807528 pages The Secret Teachers of the Western World | File size: 45.Mb

Gary Lachman : The Secret Teachers of the Western World before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Secret Teachers of the Western World:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Sages Afoot By N. C. Weeks II Although his fondness for right-left brain explanations was off-putting, the number and nobility of these bright souls he chose, more than makes up for that excursion. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. strikes a rare balance between historical breadth and depth By Kenneth Johnson More engaging and conversational than academic treatments of the subject, but more

reliable and thoroughly researched than other popular works, Lachman's books occupy a unique place in esoteric literature. His most recent study strikes a rare balance between historical breadth and depth, and exemplifies the left brain/right brain balance that is a recurrent theme throughout the book. 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Great Reading By R. L. Tarantolo Excellent book. Easy to read and full of information I did not know. I think it is a must read.

This epic study unveils the esoteric masters who have covertly impacted the intellectual development of the West, from Pythagoras and Zoroaster to the little-known modern icons Jean Gebser and Schwaller de Lubicz. Running alongside the mainstream of Western intellectual history there is another current which, in a very real sense, should take pride of place, but which for the last few centuries has occupied a shadowy, inferior position, somewhere underground. This "other" stream forms the subject of Gary Lachman's epic history and analysis, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*. In this clarifying, accessible, and fascinating study, the acclaimed historian explores the Western esoteric tradition a thought movement with ancient roots and modern expressions, which, in a broad sense, regards the cosmos as a living, spiritual, meaningful being and humankind as having a unique obligation and responsibility in it. The historical roots of our counter tradition, as Lachman explores, have their beginning in Alexandria around the time of Christ. It was then that we find the first written accounts of the ancient tradition, which had earlier been passed on orally. Here, in this remarkable city, filled with teachers, philosophers, and mystics from Egypt, Greece, Asia, and other parts of the world, in a multi-cultural, multi-faith, and pluralistic society, a synthesis took place, a creative blending of different ideas and visions, which gave the hidden tradition the eclectic character it retains today. The history of our esoteric tradition roughly forms three parts: Part One: After looking back at the earliest roots of the esoteric tradition in ancient Egypt and Greece, the historical narrative opens in Alexandria in the first centuries of the Christian era. Over the following centuries, it traces our other tradition through such agents as the Hermeticists; Kabbalists; Gnostics; Neoplatonists; and early Church fathers, among many others. We examine the reemergence of the lost Hermetic books in the Renaissance and their influence on the emerging modern mind. Part Two begins with the fall of Hermeticism in the late Renaissance and the beginning of the esoteric counterculture. In 1614, the same year that the Hermetic teachings fell from grace, a strange document appeared in Kassel, Germany announcing the existence of a mysterious fraternity: the Rosicrucians. Part two charts the impact of the Rosicrucians and the esoteric currents that followed, such as the Romance movement and the European occult revival of the late nineteenth century, including Madame Blavatsky and the opening of the western mind to the wisdom of the East, and the fin-de-siècle occultism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Part Three chronicles the rise of modern esotericism, as seen in the influence of Rudolf Steiner, Gurdjieff, Annie Besant, Krishnamurti, Aleister Crowley, R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, and many others. Central is the life and work of C.G. Jung, perhaps the most important figure in the development of modern spirituality. The book looks at the occult revival of the mystic sixties and our own New Age, and how this itself has given birth to a more critical, rigorous investigation of the ancient wisdom. With many detours and dead ends, we now seem to be slowly moving into a watershed. It has become clear that the dominant, left-brain, reductionist view, once so liberating and exciting, has run out of steam, and the promise of that much-sought-after paradigm change seems possible. We may be on the brink of a culminating moment of the esoteric intellectual tradition of the West.

"It is no mean feat to make good sense of the Arcana and to cast light on the occult, but Lachman has pulled it off with this most engaging book. *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* is a very ambitious undertaking most successfully completed." --William Irwin Thompson, author of *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light* "Gary Lachman makes ideas thrilling. . . Start reading and feel the world around you start to come to life." --Ptolemy Tompkins, author of *The Modern Book of the Dead* and collaborator with Eben Alexander, M.D., on *Proof of Heaven* Gary Lachman spoils his readers -- after encountering his prose you will find no other writing on esoteric and occult subjects that displays such fluidity, vibrancy, and gentle but assertive purpose. . . Gary has become the voice for our generation that Colin Wilson was before him. --Mitch Horowitz, author of *Occult America* and *One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life* Gary Lachman has become an increasingly prolific engine of literate, well-written, and clear-headed books about esoteric history and occulture. --Erik Davis, author of *TechGnosis* Thinking outside the box, Lachman challenges many contemporary theories by reinserting a sense of the spiritual back into the discussion. --Leonard Shlain, author of *Art Physics* and *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* Gary Lachman presents the Western esoteric tradition as a richly detailed parade of characters, seething with political ambitions, follies, even infamy. He teaches by example that to understand their psychology and historical contexts is far more useful than moralizing or partisan reactions. --Joscelyn Godwin, Colgate University, author of *The Theosophical Enlightenment* The invisible Rosicrucian brothers of the seventeenth century, the Unknown Superiors of high-grade Freemasons, French utopian occultists, and Traditionalists of the twentieth century trace a continuous tradition of esoteric idealism applied to political thinking. Gary Lachman offers a panoramic spectacle of occultists and millenarian visionaries who seek to translate an absolute gnosis into a radical program of regeneration. --Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, professor of Western

Esotericism, University of Exeter
About the Author
Gary Lachman is one of today's most respected writers on esoteric and occult themes. His many books -- including *Madame Blavatsky*, *Swedenborg*, *Jung the Mystic*, and *Rudolf Steiner* -- have received international acclaim. He has appeared on many television and radio programs and is an adjunct professor in the *Evolution of Consciousness* at the California Institute of Integral Studies. A founding member of the band *Blondie*, Lachman has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He lives in London.

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AN ANCIENT WISDOM

The western inner or esoteric tradition often speaks of an ancient wisdom. We find this in the Hermetic tradition, with the idea that its founder, the legendary *Hermes Trismegistus*, received a divine revelation at the dawn of time, which he subsequently passed on to his disciples. Today we know that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not written before the Flood, as some of its earliest readers believed, but is most likely a product of the religious and philosophical syncretism characteristic of Roman Alexandria. But in esoteric circles, the idea of an initiatic descent, a *Aurea Catena*, or Golden Chain of adepts, reaching back into the dim vaults of antiquity and beyond, persists. The Renaissance, which saw a powerful Hermetic revival, was of course informed by the retrieval of ancient philosophy, namely Plato, which was lost during the so-called Dark Ages. But it was precisely the belief that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written by *Hermes Trismegistus* in very ancient times indeed, well before Plato that made its rediscovery in 1463 so spectacular.¹ For the philosophers and scholars of the Renaissance, the older an idea or a teaching was, the better, and the very old was the best of all. This is in sharp contrast with much of our own sensibilities, which see the new, the novel, the breakthrough, and the cutting edge as more worthy of our attention. Scholars of the Renaissance believed that the ancient texts that had been lost for centuries were closer to the source of knowledge, and hence were more pure, much as a mountain stream is clearer nearer its source, unlike the muddy waters of the lowlands. Renaissance scholars were indeed excited by Plato. But the wisdom that Plato had to offer, so the story went, was given to him by earlier sages, who themselves received it from even earlier adepts, who, as Frances Yates writes, walked more closely with the gods.² As the historian Christopher McIntosh remarked, it was the fifteenth-century Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, who started the habit of talking in terms of a special wisdom handed down from sage to sage.³ This special wisdom was indeed very old, and Ficino himself heard about it from his patron, Cosimo de Medici, the great power broker of Florence. Cosimo himself had heard about this ancient wisdom from the Byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher George Gemistos Plethon. Suffice it to say here that it was Plethon's conversation with Cosimo about a primal theology, *prisca theologia*, received by the Persian mage Zoroaster and other adepts at the dawn of time, and which informed all the world's religions, that eventually led to the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and, through this, much of what we know as the Renaissance. Plethon's idea of an ancient wisdom, intermittently lost and rediscovered, has become a mainstay of esoteric thought. Practically every esoteric thinker has recourse to it. Some speak of it more than others, but in general all refer in some sense to a knowledge that was available to mankind in earlier times, but which has, over the centuries, become obscure, if not completely forgotten. In his sometimes unreliable but still very readable account of the philosophy of the occult, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, translated into English by the occultist A. E. Waite as *Transcendental Magic*, the nineteenth-century French magician Eliphas Levi presents a moving, if highly romantic, expression of the idea: Behind the veil of all the hieratic and mystical allegories of ancient doctrines, behind the darkness and strange ordeals of all initiations, under the seal of all sacred writings, in the ruins of old Nineveh or Thebes, on the crumbling stones of old temples and on the blackened visage of the Assyrian or Egyptian sphinx, in the monstrous or marvelous paintings which interpret to the faithful of India the inspired pages of the Vedas, in the cryptic emblems of our old books on alchemy, in the ceremonies practiced at reception by all secret societies, there are found indications of a doctrine which is everywhere the same and everywhere carefully concealed.⁴ That what is said in this passage is not strictly true does not take away from its romantic and imaginative power. It is clear to most critical students of esotericism that there is not a single doctrine shared by the various groups associated with the esoteric, nor is there the kind of historical continuity between different esoteric movements that less historically minded readers may imagine. (Although having said this, there is, I believe, what Arthur Versluis calls an ahistorical continuity, a continuity of shared ideas, some which we will encounter as we go along.)⁵ It is, in fact, a mistake to speak of esotericism as if it were a single, monolithic teaching, like communism or socialism. As I discovered while researching for this book, there are almost as many definitions of esotericism as there are esotericists or historians of esotericism writing about it.⁶ In fact, much of the academic esotericism of recent years is taken up with refining the definition of its subject applying, we might say, left-brain explicitness to a right-brain implicit understanding a common enough practice in academia, but which may be a stumbling block for the average reader. Esotericism is a wide umbrella term covering a variety of ideas, beliefs, and practices which, while not necessarily sharing a single common element, do seem to share what the philosopher Wittgenstein called a family resemblance.⁷ This is a collection of overlapping similarities, which link different members of a group together, but which can easily dissolve if we attempt to make their connection too explicit.⁸ It is, in a sense, more concerned with recognition, which is a right-brain affair, than definition, which is much more the business of the left.⁹ Even among professing esotericists, there are different ideas of what esotericism is. Gurdjieff's esotericism is not the same as, say, Rudolf Steiner's, and both of their ideas about it may differ significantly from that

of some other teachers. But unless we are sectarians, we would not say that Gurdjieff or Steiners ideas were not esoteric, even if we could not define the term in a way acceptable to academics. For our purposes here, I will follow Joscelyn Godwin, who writes that the word *esoteric* refers to the inner aspect of a religion or philosophy, of which the outer aspect is *exoteric*, and repeat what I said previously, that such inner teachings are fundamentally concerned with the transmutation of consciousness.¹⁰ In the esoteric tradition, this transmutation of consciousness is commonly known as *gnosis*, a Greek word meaning knowledge, but not knowledge in our everyday sense of the word, knowledge of facts or concepts. It is a kind of *experiential knowledge*, a knowledge that is also an experience. It is a kind of knowledge in italics. When you know something in the sense of *gnosis*, you really know it. In *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus*, I write at length about *gnosis*; here I will repeat my own definition of it: immediate, direct, non-discursive cognition of reality, a reality, that is, that includes the spiritual.¹¹ This is the knowledge of the hidden or invisible realms or aspects of existence.¹² I will hazard the statement that the essence of esotericism is the attainment of such knowledge, and that this is its central contrast with orthodox religions, which are based on faith and belief. Without such a focus, the study of esotericism, it seems to me, would be concerned solely with what is *exoteric*, that is nonessential, about it. It was passages like Eliphas Levis above that led Madame Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society and herself an important secret teacher, to title her first major work of esoteric philosophy, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877). Indeed, it was a lecture on *The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans* given to her earlier Miracle Club that led to the formation, in 1875, of the Theosophical Society itself, one of whose aims is the study of ancient religions, philosophies, and sciences.¹³ Some years later, Annie Besant, successor to Madame Blavatsky as head of the Theosophical Society, wrote a book called *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897). Even esotericists who have no truck with Blavatsky or the Theosophical Society still look to the ancient past as the source of their study. One of the major esoteric movements in the twentieth century, Traditionalism, takes as its central belief the existence of a primordial spiritual tradition, which was revealed by a divine source and flourished in the ancient past, but which has been subsequently lost. The founder of Traditionalism is generally considered to be the French metaphysician Ren Guenon, but other Traditionalists include the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, the philosopher Huston Smith, and the far-right Italian esotericist Julius Evola. All, in different ways, share the idea of *philosophia perennis*, a perennial philosophy, the belief that all religions shared a common origin in a single perennial (or primeval or primordial) religion that had subsequently taken on a variety of forms, an idea, we've seen, that it shares with Hermeticism.¹⁴ Gurdjieff is another target for the Traditionalists, who consider his Fourth Way teaching counter-initiatic, that is, a kind of esoteric black magic.¹⁵ Yet Gurdjieff, like the Traditionalists, also spoke of an ancient teaching, and his discovery of this, in the monastery of the Sarmoung Brotherhood in Central Asia, forms the climax to his spiritual adventure story *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.¹⁶ Mention of the Sarmoung Brotherhood brings us to another mainstay of esoteric thought: the belief that throughout history there have been schools informed with this ancient wisdom, secretly at work behind the scenes of civilization, helping humanity in its struggle to evolve. These secret schools, so the story goes, are the real agents of our development, and at crucial points in history, they inject esoteric ideas into the mainstream, in order to help mankind in its slow growth toward spiritual maturity. **THE OLD WORLD** We have seen that Iain McGilchrist believes that the right brain is older than its upstart emissary, the left, a belief he shares with Leonard Shlain and other split-brain theorists. This would suggest that the kind of consciousness associated with the right brain would also be older than that associated with the left.¹⁷ We have also seen that Jean Gebser believes that before the rise of the mental-rational consciousness structure which we have linked to the left brain, mankind lived in the mythic consciousness structure, one more attuned to images, feelings, and intuitions, all elements of right-brain consciousness. Our own consciousness is slanted more to the left than to the right. We see the world as something firmly outside us; there is a clear distinction between our inner world of thoughts, feelings, impressions, and the outer one of physical things. We see things in sharp detail and perceive them as separate, independent objects, and although we know that nature is alive in the sense of being organic, we do not believe that it, like ourselves, has an inside, and we certainly don't believe that inorganic things, like stars and stones, are alive in any way at all. There is good reason to suspect that our earlier form of consciousness saw things differently. In *A Secret History of Consciousness*, I look at a number of different philosophies of consciousness, some esoteric, some more mainstream. I try to show that all, in different ways, suggest that at an earlier time, human beings had a more participatory kind of consciousness, a kind of consciousness more in line with what we know about right-brain consciousness than the left; that is, a consciousness that was more permeable, less rigid in its distinction between inside and out. This is a kind of consciousness that, except in certain circumstances, we only experience now as children. For example, the philosopher of language, and great friend of C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, one of our secret teachers, believed that the history of language revealed what he called the evolution of consciousness, and he argued this point in his first book, *History in English Words*. Put briefly, Barfield believed that as we look back into the history of language, we see that it becomes more figurative, more metaphorical, more, in a sense, alive and poetic; our own age is, as the literary philosopher Erich Heller said, much more one of prose. This is because, Barfield believed, at an earlier time the world was more alive, had more, as we would say, soul, and that when earlier people and modern-day

poetssaid that the worldspoketo them, they were speaking the truth.¹⁸ To say that the world back then was more alive is another way of saying that our consciousness then perceived it as such; it was a kind of consciousness that, as Barfield says, could see the inside of things, rather than, as we do, only their surface. It was a kind of consciousness that participated in the world around it, rather than one, like our own, that only, as it were, bumps up against it. Barfield came to his insights independently, but when he became aware of the work of Rudolf Steiner, he saw that Steiner, on a larger scale, was saying the same thing. Steiner, one of our most important secret teachers, also believed in an evolution of consciousness, but his outline of it included not only human history, but that of the cosmos as well. In fact, for Steiner, the evolution of consciousness goes hand in hand with that of the cosmos because for him, fundamentally, our consciousness and the cosmos are two sides of the same thing. In other words, for Steiner, the kind of world we perceive depends on the kind of consciousness perceiving it, an insight he shares, in a different way, with McGilchrist.¹⁹ Steiners system is vast, like a huge cathedral, and in some aspects it shares much with that of Gebser.²⁰ In his reading of the evolution of consciousness, Steiner spoke of epochs rather than structures of consciousness, and he also spoke of earlier stages of our evolution that preceded our own Earth stage in the somewhat awkward terms of Old Saturn, Old Sun, and Old Moon. In the Old Moon stage before our current Earth stage, consciousness perceived things in terms of images; it was, as Steiner called it, a picture thinking, something more akin to our own experience of dreams.²¹ We would not then, he claimed, see a discreet, definite object and then have a concept or idea about it in our heads, but would respond to the picture as a symbol that would elicit the appropriate feeling. Steiners picture thinking seems very close to how Gebser describes the mythical structure of consciousness, a key part of which was thereflectionof the inner world in the outer. Gebser sees the myth of Narcissus, the youth who fell in love with his reflection in a pool, as emblematic of the mythic structure. Both Steiners picture thinking and Gebsters reflection strike me as in line with what we know of how the right brain interacts with the world. Both would be open to the kind of both/and approach associated with the right brain, as opposed to the left brains either/or. In his account of Steiners teaching, Stewart C. Easton remarks that In the age before autonomous thinkingthe age, that is, before the rise of the left brainmen perceived and interpreted... the world through their feeling. Thus to the ancient Egyptian there was no contradiction when his literature provided him with different stories of creation and assigned the deed to various gods. No contradiction was present to the Egyptians, Easton says, because contradiction belongs to thinking, not to the feelings.²² Contradiction, weve seen, is something troubling to the left brain, but not the right, which is open to metaphor and multiple meanings, as is the case in its appreciation of symbols.