From Experience Reports to Analysable Events: The PEER Protocol for Practice-Induced Esoteric Experience

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Abstract

Praxeological approaches have moved the study of esotericism from an emphasis on texts, doctrines and worldviews toward practices, embodiment and practice-induced experience. Bernd-Christian Otto's methodology gives this development a clear form by combining descriptions, prescriptions, experience reports and, where appropriate, reflexive scholar-practitionership. Once experience reports are admitted as serious sources, a further problem arises. Statements such as "a presence appeared," "the ritual worked" or "I fell into an ecstasy" carry historical and ethnographic significance while compressing experiential features, narrative reconstruction and appraisal into a single emic formula.

This article proposes the Practice-Induced Esoteric Experience Reporting Protocol (PEER) as a method for producing structured analytic descriptions from such reports. PEER treats the reported experiential event as its unit of analysis and organises it in five interlocking layers: practice context, event segmentation, phenomenal event profile, appraisal and relational context. The phenomenal profile comprises ten dimensions, from sensory modality to self-boundary, which are read as configurations. Particular emphasis falls on the relation between prescription, repeated training and changing experiential configurations, which operationalises what Otto calls the practice-practitioner-experience nexus.

PEER draws on Taves' distinction between phenomenological features and appraisals, event models of experience, microphenomenology, Descriptive Experience Sampling and Geertzian thick description, which it reworks as a two-stage process of experiential and contextual thickening. It can be used in first- and second-person research and in the coding of historical sources, where reported and inferred features are kept methodologically distinct. Two contrasting worked examples demonstrate its analytic utility: Aleister Crowley's near-contemporaneous record of the 19th Aethyr shows how the full protocol organises a phenomenologically dense magical record and separates its reported features from layered occult appraisal, while John of Morigny's *Liber visionum* shows how PEER makes the selective resolution and inferential limits of a sparse, retrospective historical report explicit. The article concludes by specifying what comparison can and cannot establish and by outlining an empirical research programme for the structured study of practice-induced esoteric experience.

Keywords

Esoteric practices; praxeology; experience reports; scholar-practitionership; event segmentation; comparison; PEER protocol.

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1 Introduction

The turn toward practice in the academic study of esotericism has widened the range of sources that scholars take seriously. Texts, doctrines and genealogies remain indispensable, yet esoteric practices are performed, embodied and experienced, and understanding them requires attention to what practitioners do and, where the sources permit, to what they report undergoing. Bernd-Christian Otto states the premise concisely: "Practices form a domain of their own, because they are practiced; that is, they are performed, embodied and experienced by practitioners. As a consequence, texts can only provide limited access to practices" (Otto 2026, 4–5). His praxeological methodology addresses this limitation by triangulating descriptions, prescriptions and experience reports, supplemented under explicit safeguards by the self-observation of the scholar-practitioner (Otto 2026, 5–22).

This article works within that framework and addresses a problem that follows from it. Once experience reports become legitimate sources, their experiential content does not thereby become analytically transparent. A practitioner may write that an angel appeared, a sigil activated, a presence entered the room or an ecstatic state arose. Such formulations combine three analytically distinguishable elements: something that appeared or changed in experience, a narrative reconstruction of what happened, and an appraisal that identifies and evaluates it. Comparison conducted at the level of these summary labels remains weak. Two reports may both speak of a "presence" while differing completely in sensory modality, spatial localisation, affect, bodily response, agency and temporal structure, and two experiences with closely similar configurations may receive very different religious or psychological interpretations.

Otto himself points toward the remedy. The scholar-practitioner, he argues, should replace a global statement such as "angels did appear and spoke to me!" with "honest, nuanced, fine-grained observation while focusing on small time units and carefully distinguishing between the various sensual components that constitute the overall experience" (Otto 2026, 19). He also observes that the relationship between practice, practitioner and experience remains close to *terra incognita*, because systematic data on which practices yield which experiences in which practitioners are largely absent (Otto 2026, 15). The Practice-Induced Esoteric Experience Reporting Protocol, PEER, develops these two observations into a method. It produces structured analytic descriptions of reported experiential events and preserves their relation to the practices that elicited them and to the training histories within which they develop.

Four distinctions organise the method: the experience report, which is the source material; the experiential event, which is the unit of analysis; the experiential description, which specifies how the event was reported to appear; and the appraisal, which identifies, explains or evaluates it. PEER then reconnects the event to practice through five layers: practice context, event segmentation, phenomenal event profile, appraisal and relational context. The protocol is implemented in two instruments: a prospective field form for first- and second-person use (PEER-P, Supplementary Material S1) and a retrospective coding form for historical and other existing sources (PEER-R, Supplementary Material S2), both provided in printable form as supplementary material. Its epistemic claim is deliberately bounded. In line with the radical agnosticism Otto adopts from Hanegraaff (Otto 2026, 18–19; Hanegraaff 2025, 260), PEER leaves the ontological status of spirits, forces, deities and other reported agencies undecided, and it works with reports of experience, whose relation to private inner states is discussed in Section 3.5. Within these bounds its aim is ambitious: to make the relation between practice, experience and interpretation examinable with a precision the field currently lacks.

2 Praxeology and the experiential source

Otto adopts a working definition of esoteric practices from the Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices (RENSEP), which locates practices on four spectra: controllability, individualisation, self-empowerment and experience (Otto 2026, 3; RENSEP n.d.). Following Engler and Gardiner (2024), he characterises this definition as elucidative, anti-realist and fluid, and treats its characteristics as spectra along which practices can be placed with nuance (Otto 2026, 4). For the present argument the experiential spectrum is decisive. Esoteric practices, in this definition, "stress the importance of personal experiences which may, over time, lead to the development of elaborate systems of experience-based praxis-knowledge" (Otto 2026, 3). Visions, voices, bodily sensations, inner lights, dreams, presences, symbolic forms and altered states may function as signs of contact, progress, efficacy or initiation, so that the quality of their description bears directly on how the practices themselves are understood.

Otto's four source types give different access to this experiential dimension. Descriptions record how practices were perceived or represented, often by hostile outsiders, as his example of Thomas Aquinas on the *Ars notoria* shows (Otto 2026, 5–7). Prescriptions specify what practitioners were instructed to do, yet they "only rarely provide information on the actual experiences that practitioners may (or may not) undergo" (Otto 2026, 9–10). Experience reports describe what practitioners say occurred and thus "touch upon the question of efficacy" (Otto 2026, 10). Scholar-practitionership adds methodologically reflexive first-person observation (Otto 2026, 16–22). Otto also aligns experience reports, prescriptions and descriptions with first-, second- and third-person perspectives respectively (Otto 2026, 14), a distinction that returns below in the modes of applying PEER. The contrast between prescription and report is central to what follows. A ritual manual can state that the practitioner is to visualise a figure, recite a name, assume a posture or draw a sigil. It cannot establish whether the prescribed image appeared, whether it changed or became autonomous, or what bodily, affective or attentional changes accompanied the session.

Modern esoteric traditions have generated large bodies of relevant material. Crowley required that "all experiments should be recorded in detail during, or immediately after, their performance," together with the physical and mental condition of the experimenter (Crowley 1909, quoted in Otto 2026, 15 n. 28), and comparable instructions exist in Wiccan and Chaos magical literature. Ritual diaries, magical journals, autobiographies, online accounts and interviews add to this documentation, and RENSEP has begun collecting experience reports for interpretation with the Inventory of Nonordinary Experiences (INOE) (Otto 2026, 15; Taves et al. 2023). The methodological problem is therefore less the absence of reports than their heterogeneous form. PEER offers a common analytic format while retaining each original report alongside its structured description.

3 Reports, events, descriptions and appraisals

3.1 Experience reports

An experience report is a statement or narrative in which a practitioner describes what they take to have occurred in relation to a practice: "I saw an angel," "the sigil activated," "a presence entered the room," "I fell into an ecstasy." Such formulations are valuable in their original form because they preserve emic vocabulary and narrative structure. They are also analytically compressed, and it is this compression that the following distinctions are designed to open up.

3.2 Experiential events

The experiential event is the unit to which PEER assigns a structured description. Following the event model developed by Taves and Asprem (2017), it is defined here as a temporally bounded change in the practitioner's experiential field, as reported or reconstructed from a report, that can provisionally be distinguished from surrounding experience through a change in one or more salient dimensions, such as sensory modality, spatial organisation, attention, agency, affect, bodily state, imaginal form, felt presence or self-boundary. The boundary of an event is analytic. Some events are sharply bounded, while others emerge gradually or overlap, and a long ritual session may contain several distinguishable events where the report speaks of a single altered state.

3.3 Experiential descriptions

An experiential description re-describes the reported event in a comparative analytic vocabulary. It asks how the event appeared, where it was localised, how it unfolded, what happened to attention and agency, which bodily and affective features were reported, what forms appeared and whether the practitioner's sense of self changed. The difference from the report lies less in the amount of detail than in the kind of vocabulary. A report typically uses emic terms in which description and appraisal are fused: "angel" names a visual form, a felt presence, an affective tone and a theological identification at once. The description separates these components and formulates the phenomenal ones in generic coordinates that can be applied across traditions. The practitioner's own vocabulary remains part of the data and is restored explicitly in the appraisal and contextual layers. This is the pragmatic gain of the procedure: generic coordinates make reports from different traditions comparable, while separately recorded appraisals preserve what each tradition made of its experiences.

3.4 Appraisals

An appraisal identifies, explains or evaluates the event. A luminous humanoid figure may be appraised as an angel, a spirit, an archetype, an autonomous imaginal figure or a hallucination; bodily vibration may be read as subtle energy or even Kundalini rising, autonomic arousal or initiation; a coincidence following a ritual may count as magical efficacy, synchronicity or chance. Appraisals belong to the religious and cultural significance of the event and are data in their own right. The methodological requirement is only that they remain identifiable as appraisals. The distinction presupposes no pristine experiential core prior to culture. Perception, expectation, memory, vocabulary and training are intertwined from the beginning, and Luhrmann's account of interpretive drift shows how practice and interpretive frameworks progressively reshape what practitioners notice and how they understand it (Luhrmann 1989, 307–15). This process need not be treated merely as a source of bias to be eliminated. Interpretive drift may also become part of the practice itself: by shaping expectation, directing attention and providing categories through which subtle or ambiguous events are recognised, it can prime subsequent ritual experience and potentially increase its vividness, coherence or salience. The analytic task is therefore to trace how interpretation feeds back into later practice, rather than attempting to remove interpretation from the experiential process altogether.

3.5 Reports and access

Scholars have no direct access to inner transformations, only to what people say and do, so what is needed is a semantics of experience reports. Sharf (1998) similarly criticised the tendency to treat

"religious experience" as a transparent, pre-discursive inner datum available to scholarly recovery. PEER accepts this for much of its application. When it codes historical sources or reports that cannot be supplemented, it operates entirely on what is said: the event is a unit reconstructed from a text, the features are reported features, and the protocol functions as a structured semantics of the report. Its name reflects this, since PEER is a reporting protocol and its claims concern the structure of reports. In first- and second-person research the situation differs in one respect. There reports are produced, and the method of their production affects their quality. Microphenomenological interviewing and Descriptive Experience Sampling were developed because casual introspective reports are unreliable, and both show that elicitation focused on a concrete occurrence yields more stable descriptions (Petitmengin 2006; Hurlburt and Akhter 2006). How far such reports can be trusted remains contested (Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel 2007). PEER needs only the modest premise that reports produced under explicit and repeatable conditions are better data than unsystematic recollection, and it therefore records those conditions for every event.

4 Event segmentation and report quality

Esoteric practices may unfold over minutes, hours, nights or longer periods, and a single narrative can compress several experiential transitions into one account. A report may describe a sequence of bodily vibration, narrowing attention, the appearance of a visual form, the development of a felt presence, verbal communication and a subsequent certainty that the ritual succeeded. Treating that sequence as one undifferentiated "vision" discards structure that may matter for analysis. PEER therefore makes segmentation an explicit step. Event boundaries are identified provisionally through reported changes in salient dimensions, and the protocol records onset and offset, boundary clarity, position within a sequence, and what preceded and followed each event.

Segmentation also exposes the problem of memory. Absorption, trance, dreamlike states and strong affect may produce incomplete or distorted recall; later interpretation may reorganise temporal sequence; and a ritual manual may itself supply an expected order into which memory is subsequently fitted. PEER cannot remove these distortions, but it records the conditions under which each report was produced: the interval between event and report, whether notes were made during practice, immediately afterwards or later, whether event boundaries were experienced as clear or reconstructed, confidence in recall, and whether later interpretation may have shaped the account. Reports of different evidential quality can then be weighted accordingly. A detailed note written immediately after practice and a recollection composed years later should not be pooled as equivalent, and for long altered-state sessions a small number of well-remembered events described in detail is usually more reliable than a forced reconstruction of the whole sequence.

5 Methodological foundations

5.1 Features and appraisals

The INOE, developed by Taves and colleagues, distinguishes phenomenological features from appraisals so that nonordinary experiences can be compared without reducing them to culture-specific interpretations (Taves et al. 2023). The distinction builds on Taves' earlier decomposition of religious experience into more elementary processes of ascription (Taves 2009). PEER adopts it as its architectural principle and applies it at a finer grain. Where the INOE asks which kinds of nonordinary experience a person reports, PEER describes the structure of one reported event within

a specified practice. The two are complementary, and since RENSEP intends to interpret its collected reports with the INOE (Otto 2026, 15), their combination is immediately practical.

5.2 Events and temporal structure

Taves and Asprem (2017) argue that experiences can be studied as temporally extended events whose boundaries are organised around perceived change. Microphenomenology adds a practical distinction between diachronic structure, the unfolding of an experience through time, and synchronic structure, the configuration of features at a given phase, and shows how analysis of many singular descriptions can reveal generic structures (Petitmengin et al. 2019). PEER uses both: event segmentation captures the diachronic structure and the phenomenal event profile the synchronic configuration.

5.3 Disciplined reporting

The distinction between first-, second- and third-person methodologies in consciousness research (Varela and Shear 1999) clarifies what kind of report PEER handles in each application. From Descriptive Experience Sampling it takes the principle that descriptions should concern a concrete occurrence and avoid generalisations about what "usually happens" (Hurlburt and Akhter 2006). This principle is especially relevant to esoteric literature, much of which describes the typical experiences of a stage or practice. From microphenomenology it takes the technique of guiding attention back to a specific moment while avoiding suggestive questions (Petitmengin 2006).

5.4 Thick description

For Geertz, thick description is interpretive from the outset: the difference between a twitch and a wink lies in the public code that makes the movement meaningful, and the elements of a thick description are understood through their interconnection within a system of significance (Geertz 1973, 6–7). PEER deliberately delays interpretation in its first step and therefore does not equate phenomenological detail with Geertzian thickness. It distinguishes two forms of thickening. Experiential thickening increases descriptive resolution: a report that "something touched my shoulder" is expanded into modality, location, duration, pressure, affective response, bodily reaction and felt agency. Contextual thickening reconnects the event to prescription, vocabulary, training history, social world and cultural interpretation, so that the question why the sensation was understood as an ancestor, an angel or ritual efficacy can be asked with the relevant context in view. The two are complementary, since experiential structure without context is thin and cultural meaning without experiential resolution leaves the event itself opaque. Geertz's holism enters the protocol at two further points: in the reading of the dimensions as a configuration (Section 7) and in the rules of inference for historical sources (Section 8.3).

6 The architecture of PEER

PEER consists of five interlocking layers, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The five layers of the PEER protocol.

Layer	Question	Principal content
A. Practice context	Within what practice and under what conditions did the event occur?	Practice, source, setting, training history, prescription, expectations

Layer	Question	Principal content
B. Event segmentation	Which event is being described, and how well is it bounded and remembered?	Onset, offset, sequence, recording conditions, recall interval, confidence
C. Phenomenal event profile	How did the event appear?	Ten dimensions from sensory modality to self-boundary
D. Appraisal	What was the event taken to be, and when?	Identity, cause, efficacy, evaluation, interpretive framework, timing
E. Relational context	How does the event relate to prescription and training?	Correspondence, departure, recurrence, control, change with training, re-appraisal

Layer A. Practice context. The first layer records the conditions under which the event occurred: the practice and its textual, oral or institutional source; tradition or lineage; setting; solitary or collective performance; duration; level of training and prior exposure; relevant bodily and mental state; prescribed words, images, postures or timing; and expected outcome. Prescription and expectation carry particular analytic weight. A luminous disc deliberately visualised for twenty minutes is a different datum from a luminous form that appears spontaneously during an unrelated exercise, and an autonomous figure arising at a first attempt differs from one that develops over years of training.

Layer B. Event segmentation. This layer identifies the event within the session and records onset and offset, boundary clarity, preceding and subsequent states, recurrence, position in a sequence, recording conditions, recall interval and confidence in recall, as set out in Section 4.

Layer C. Phenomenal event profile. The event is described across ten dimensions, summarised in Table 2. Each is worded so as to keep identification and evaluation out of the description, and the right-hand column indicates where this requires care.

Table 2. The ten dimensions of the phenomenal event profile.

Dimension	What it records	Boundary with appraisal
Sensory modality	Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, interoceptive, proprioceptive, vestibular, multimodal, or no identifiable modality	A "knowing" without sensory vehicle is recorded as such, not forced into a modality
Spatial localisation	Inner visual field, body, around the body, ritual space, object, landscape, dream or imaginal space, indeterminate	A voice "inside the head" and one "from the corner" are distinct features whatever they are later taken to be
Temporal dynamics	Onset, continuity, rhythm, intensification, peak and decline, transformation into another event	Describes the event's internal shape; segmentation bounds it from outside
Attentional mode	Focus, absorption, narrowing, widening, involuntary capture, lucidity, dreamlike drift, oscillation	Recorded as change in attention, not as "trance" or "vision"
Agency	Deliberate production, initiation followed by self-unfolding, automaticity, being addressed, resistance, being overwhelmed	Records the felt direction ("seemed to come from elsewhere"); the source's identity belongs to layer D
Affective tone	Awe, fear, dread, joy, serenity, reverence, grief, erotic charge, neutrality, mixed or changing affect	The practitioner's stance toward a presence is recorded here, its moral character in D
Somatic signature	Heat, cold, pressure, vibration, trembling, frisson, expansion, contraction, nausea, breathing, balance, tears, stillness, bodily boundary	"Energy" and "subtle body" are appraisals of such features

Dimension	What it records	Boundary with appraisal
Imaginal and symbolic form	Geometric forms, colour, light, figures, animals, text, sigils, architecture, landscape, formless fields; prescribed, anticipated, spontaneous or transformed	Figures are described by perceptible features (winged, radiant, robed); "angel" or "demon" belongs to D
Sense of presence	Absent or present; diffuse or localised; single or multiple; person-like or impersonal; entering, emerging, surrounding, already there; communicating	"Presence" is itself an elementary ascription and is flagged as appraisal-laden when used in the practitioner's words
Self-boundary	Stability, expansion, contraction, doubling, witness position, displacement, merging, temporary absence	Described as change in the felt self, not as "union" or "possession"

Some descriptors cannot be fully purified of ascription. To speak of "a presence" or of a voice "from outside" already involves an elementary act of interpretation. Where the practitioner's own words are indispensable, PEER records them in quotation and marks them as appraisal-laden, so that the analyst can see where interpretation enters the description.

Layer D. Appraisal. The fourth layer records identity attribution, causal attribution, efficacy attribution, evaluation, interpretive framework, degree of certainty and timing. An interpretation formed during the event differs methodologically from one reached immediately afterwards or imposed years later, and historical sources in particular may overlay earlier events with later theological or apologetic judgement.

Layer E. Relational context. The fifth layer is specifically praxeological, since it reconnects the event to the practice-practitioner-experience nexus. It asks whether the event was prescribed or expected, where it corresponded to or departed from the prescription, whether it recurred, whether its vividness, stability, controllability or structure changed with training, whether the practitioner learned to evoke, interrupt or modify it, and whether later experiences changed the appraisal of earlier ones. A single visionary episode may be striking yet methodologically limited. A recurring configuration that develops across repeated practice says much more about what a practice appears to do.

7 Why these dimensions, and how they cohere

The ten dimensions are provisional and non-exhaustive, and their selection rests on three grounds. First, each is treated as analytically significant in established research on nonordinary, contemplative and kataphatic experience. Otto includes the interoceptive, vestibular and proprioceptive senses in the scope of sense-oriented self-observation (Otto 2026, 19 n. 36). Luhrmann's work on inner sense cultivation and absorption addresses attention, sensory override and the moment at which imagined figures "come to feel more autonomous, more agentic, more given from without" (Luhrmann 2012, 58; Luhrmann and Morgain 2012; Luhrmann 2020). Asprem's theory of kataphatic practice concerns imaginal form (Asprem 2016; 2017); Taves addresses presence, agency and alterations in the sense of self (Taves 2017; 2020; Taves et al. 2023); and the Varieties of Contemplative Experience codebook, derived inductively from interviews with meditators, distinguishes perceptual, somatic, affective, conative, cognitive and self-related domains that closely parallel the present set (Lindahl et al. 2017). Second, the dimensions correspond to features that recur in esoteric reports themselves: visions, voices, luminosity, presences, trance, bodily energies, symbolic forms, apparent autonomy and altered self-experience. Third, in combination they provide

enough independent coordinates to separate phenomenal structure from appraisal while leaving both embedded in context.

The value of the dimensions lies in their configuration. They are aspects of a single event and typically change together. A shift in agency may transform a deliberately generated image into an apparently autonomous presence while the form itself remains. Absorption tends to accompany a narrowing of the perceptual field and a loosening of the self-boundary. Frisson with awe and widened attention differs from frisson with dread, involuntary capture and an urge to withdraw. Temporal dynamics organise the other dimensions, since one feature usually changes first and draws others after it. The logic that Engler and Gardiner (2024) propose for defining esotericism through property clusters can be applied here at the level of the single event: no individual feature defines a type of event, and types, where they exist, are recognisable as recurrent configurations. The dimensions are therefore privileged analytical coordinates with no claim to be an ontology of experience, and empirical application may show that some should be merged, subdivided or supplemented.

8 Three modes of application

8.1 First-person mode

In the first-person mode the scholar-practitioner documents their own practice. PEER here structures the move Otto describes from rough notes jotted down after an experience to a "more systematic, fully-fledged report" (Otto 2026, 19). Its value is greatest when recording takes place immediately after the session and when specific occurrences are described in place of typical states. Otto's safeguards apply without modification: first-person reports carry no privileged authority, and their value depends on precision, reflexivity and comparison with the reports of others (Otto 2026, 20). The PEER-P field form (Supplementary Material S1) is designed for this use: a session sheet records the practice context, and a separate event sheet is completed for each distinguishable event, beginning with a free description before the structured grid.

8.2 Second-person mode

In the second-person mode a researcher elicits reports from other practitioners. Follow-up questions can clarify modality, timing, location, agency or bodily change, and the same practitioner can be followed across sessions. Microphenomenological interviewing is particularly suited to this situation because it guides attention back to a concrete occurrence while attempting to avoid suggestive questioning (Petitmengin 2006). PEER supplies the dimensions and layers; the interviewing method determines how the material is elicited. The same PEER-P form serves here, with the report mode marked as elicited and the interviewer recorded.

8.3 Third-person and historical mode

Historical ego-documents, magical diaries, archival notebooks and existing online reports cannot be supplemented through questioning. PEER functions here as a coding framework, implemented in the PEER-R coding form (Supplementary Material S2), in which every dimension is coded R (reported), N (not reported) or I (inferred). An unreported feature is never coded as absent, since absence of information is a property of the source. Inference is where the holistic principle does its methodological work. An inferred feature requires an explicit licence from outside the isolated passage: the prescription the practitioner followed, the practitioner's other reports, the vocabulary and conventions of the genre and tradition, or the internal coherence of the report. Each inference

records its licence and a confidence level. The surrounding system of practice and meaning thus constrains interpretation in the way Geertz's holism suggests, while the constraint remains explicit and open to challenge. For aggregation and primary comparison, reported features form the evidential core; inferred features may guide interpretation but are kept separate. Applied in this way, PEER maps the limits of a source without filling them, and it allows scholars to compare the descriptive resolution of sources and to avoid mistaking the richness of a theological narrative for richness of experiential description.

9 Worked examples

The two examples span a range of source conditions. Both are coded in the third-person mode, since neither author can be questioned; the first- and second-person modes are served by the PEER-P form (Supplementary Material S1) and are taken up again in Section 11. The first example, Aleister Crowley's record of the 19th Aethyr, is a dense account produced close to the event and permits a full application of all five layers. The second returns to Otto's own central example, John of Morigny, and shows what the protocol achieves when a report is sparse, retrospective and theologically framed.

9.1 A dense, near-contemporaneous record: Crowley's 19th Aethyr

Practice context (*A*). *The Vision and the Voice* documents a series of operations in which Crowley recited the Enochian Call of the Thirty Aethyrs, inserting the name of each Aethyr in turn, and then scried in a shew-stone, recording what followed (Crowley 1911). The working on the 19th Aethyr, POP, took place at Bou-Saâda in Algeria on 30 November 1909, between 10 and 11:45 p.m., in the company of the poet Victor Neuburg. The prescription fixes the words of the Call and the name of the Aethyr. It does not specify the content of the vision, which the tradition expects but leaves open. The practitioner was highly trained, and the session was one in a sequence of workings on successive Aethyrs.

Segmentation (*B*). By Crowley's account, the visions were dictated as they occurred and written down by Neuburg, so the recall interval is minimal and the record is close to contemporaneous. The session is clearly bounded by the dated heading and by the closing words "I am back." Within it, reported changes of form, modality, scene, agency and self-experience allow twelve events to be distinguished (Table 3).

Table 3. Event segmentation of Crowley's 19th Aethyr (Crowley 1911).

#	Neutral label	Principal reported features	Boundary marker
1	Dark pattern on the stone	"a black web over the face of the stone"; "a ray of light pierces it"	onset of session
2	Crosses and writing	a black cross, "then a golden cross"; "writing in an arch"	change of form
3	Non-sensory reception	"without voice, without vision, without thought"	change of modality
4	Pain	the shew-stone "is pressed upon my forehead and causes intense pain"	somatic event
5	Door and old man	the golden cross "has become a little narrow door"; "an old man like the Hermit"; "It is not given to flesh and blood to unveil the mysteries"	transformation; verbal address
6	Guardian and battle	"a great green dragon"; the wall "suddenly fallen away"; "clash of steel and the neighing of the chargers"	abrupt change of scene

#	Neutral label	Principal reported features	Boundary marker
7	Tree	"a great tree"; the dead warriors are "the ripe fruits"; laughter and the words "This is the tree of life"	change of scene
8	Devouring figure	a crocodile-headed god "crunches up the whole tree"	new figure
9	Winged figure	a figure "with beautiful blue wings" who "kisses me on the mouth," followed by extended speech	tactile and verbal contact
10	Enlargement and fall	"I have grown greater, so that I am as great as the Angel"; "I fall backwards headlong"	self-boundary change
11	Shout	"Osiris was a black god!"	auditory climax
12	Return	"I am back."	end of session

Phenomenal profile (*C*). Table 4 codes the profile across the sequence, indicating the events on which each code rests.

Table 4. Phenomenal event profile of Crowley's 19th Aethyr (PEER-R coding). Licence: C = internal coherence.

Dimension	Evidence in the record	Code; licence and confidence
Sensory modality	Visual throughout events 1 to 10; verbal auditory content in 5, 7, 9 and 11; battle sounds in 6; tactile contact in 9. Event 3 is explicitly marked as reception without any sensory vehicle	R
Spatial localisation	Events 1 and 2 appear on the face of the stone; from event 5 onward a visionary environment of gate, wall and battlefield. The relation of that environment to the room is not stated	R (events 1–2, 5–9); relation to room N
Temporal dynamics	One form transforms into the next (the golden cross becomes a door); abrupt change in event 6; total session about one hour and forty-five minutes	R
Attentional mode	Not described	N
Agency	Deliberate induction through Call and stone; the figures act, speak, refuse entry, devour and kiss without any reported direction by the seer	Induction R; autonomous action R as reported; felt autonomy I, C, high
Affective tone	Not described in the record. A later footnote to event 11 states that it was "to the Seer at that time … a Revelation of the most appalling terror"	N in the record; R in the later annotation (see D)
Somatic signature	Intense pain from the stone (4); the kiss (9); the fall (10), whose locus, visionary or bodily, is not specified	R; locus of event 10 N
Imaginal and symbolic form	Web, light, crosses, writing, door, old man, dragon, battle, tree, crocodile-headed god, winged figure	R (figures by features; names in D)
Sense of presence	Figures are seen and heard; no felt presence is described apart from them	N
Self-boundary	"I have grown greater, so that I am as great as the Angel" (event 10)	R

Appraisal (*D*). Appraisal operates on three levels with different timings. Within the dictated record itself, several figures are already named or likened as they appear: an old man "like the Hermit," Sebek, "the Angel" of the Aethyr. These names and likenings are identifications made during the event and are coded as contemporaneous appraisal, separate from the perceptible features

recorded in Table 4. The footnotes of the published text add a second layer, identifying symbols and supplying significance, and the note on event 11 marks its own distance from the event with the words "to the Seer at that time." The encompassing Thelemic and Enochian framework forms a third level, through which the series as a whole was later understood.

Relational context (*E*). The session is one working in a series structured by a fixed prescription, the Call, and a variable parameter, the name of the Aethyr. Because the prescription leaves the content open, each record documents what the practice produced beyond what it prescribed. Coded across the whole series, the same fields would allow longitudinal questions to be asked: whether episodes of self-boundary change such as event 10 become more frequent or more intense in later Aethyrs, whether figures increasingly speak and act on their own, and how the relation between induction and autonomy develops over successive workings.

In this case PEER's work lies less in recovering descriptive structure than in organising it. Segmentation reveals an internal arc that the continuous narrative carries only implicitly: an opening phase of symbolic forms anchored in the stone, a phase that Crowley himself marks as non-sensory, a somatic interruption, a transition into an immersive environment populated by autonomous figures, and a culmination in self-boundary expansion and an auditory climax. Crowley's metacognitive remark in event 3 corresponds closely to the protocol's option of reception without identifiable modality, a category generated by a practitioner that the protocol can record without forcing it into a sensory channel. The coding also separates three appraisal layers that the published text presents together, and it makes the relation between deliberate induction and subsequent autonomy explicit enough to compare with other records. The limits remain clear: the record is culturally saturated throughout, and PEER uncovers no neutral core beneath the Enochian technique and Thelemic expectation. What it preserves is the distinction between reported features, the conditions under which they arose and the meanings assigned to them at different times.

9.2 A sparse, retrospective report: John of Morigny

John of Morigny, a Benedictine monk writing in the early fourteenth century, practised the *Ars notoria* for several years, came to suspect that it was demonic, and developed a structured programme of prayer and ritual devotion centred on the Virgin Mary, documented in the *Liber florum celestis doctrine*, whose *Liber visionum* prologue recounts this history (Watson and Fanger 2001; Otto 2026, 10). Otto uses the prologue as his central example of an experience report (Otto 2026, 10–14). One episode reads:

> "I said that prayer thrice, with tears, at a certain late hour. And when I was in my bed I fell into an ecstasy and heard a voice like the voice of many waters and like the voice of a trumpet saying to me, 'John, don't you know that gold is tried in a furnace? Why therefore did you seek this?' And I woke up immediately with the voice still ringing in my ears and I knew that it was not possible to avoid the tribulation, but that I had to bear it patiently, wherefore that prayer became very commendable to me." (Watson and Fanger 2001, 175–91, quoted in Otto 2026, 11)

Practice context (*A*). A prayer recited three times, with tears, late at night, followed by lying down in bed, by a practitioner with several years of experience. The source does not state what outcome was expected from this prayer.

Segmentation (*B*). The passage divides into five events, each bounded by a reported change: (1) the tearful triple recitation; (2) a transition into "ecstasy" after lying down; (3) an auditory event with verbal content; (4) abrupt waking, with the voice persisting; (5) a state of certainty about the coming tribulation. In contrast to Crowley's record, the recall interval is unknown but long, since the prologue was written retrospectively; Otto notes that its frankness and detail may indicate that John kept a journal during his years of practice (Otto 2026, 11), which cannot be established from the passage. Table 5 codes events 2 to 4 under the rules set out in Section 8.3.

Table 5. PEER coding of John of Morigny's voice episode (events 2–4). Licences: C = internal coherence; G = genre and tradition vocabulary.

Dimension	**Coding**	**Code; licence and confidence**
Sensory modality	Auditory, with verbal content; no visual content mentioned	R (visual: N)
Spatial localisation	Source of the voice not located; after waking the voice is "still ringing in my ears"	N for the event; R for the after-effect
Temporal dynamics	Onset after lying down ("fell into"); abrupt end ("woke up immediately"); auditory persistence across the boundary into waking	R; suddenness of onset I, C, moderate
Attentional mode	Not described	N
Agency	Addressed by name and questioned; dialogical in form, received in direction	Form R; direction I, C, high
Affective tone	Tears during the preparatory prayer; affect during the voice not described	R for event 1; N for event 3
Somatic signature	Tears (event 1); recumbent posture; auditory persistence "in my ears"	R
Imaginal and symbolic form	Acoustic similes: "many waters," "trumpet"; no visual form	R
Sense of presence	Speaker implied by the address; no presence described	I, C, low
Self-boundary	"Ecstasy" indicates altered-state vocabulary; structure not described	I, G, low

Appraisal (*D*). Appraisal operates at four moments. Within the event, the voice frames what is happening as a test in scriptural language ("gold is tried in a furnace"). On waking, John reports certainty that the tribulation is unavoidable, a felt certainty whose content is already interpretive. At the level of the practice, the episode yields an efficacy attribution, since the prayer becomes "very commendable" to him. At the time of writing, finally, the prologue as a whole is organised by John's later judgement on the *Ars notoria* ("I was deceived into believing that there was no evil in it"), which he connects to a revelation "by all the angelic spirits" that its prayers concealed an invocation of malign spirits (Otto 2026, 10–11). John faced ecclesiastical criticism from at least 1315, and the *Liber florum* was burned in Paris in 1323 (Otto 2026, 11), so the retrospective framing may also have been shaped by strategic considerations.

Relational context (*E*). Set beside the other passages Otto quotes, the episode reveals a recurrent configuration. In one, John recites prayers in the evening after fasting and, "in the night, placed as it were in an excess of mind," sees a vision; in another, he utters a prayer for intelligence, turns "onto my other side," and is "immediately as though in an ecstasy"; in a third, after the prayer

called *Signum Gracie*, he extinguishes the candle, gets into bed and, "when I was lying down I fell into an ecstasy" (Otto 2026, 10–11). The same sequence recurs: nocturnal prayer, a change into a recumbent posture, an abrupt onset of what John calls ecstasy, visual or auditory content, and sometimes waking. His own qualification, *quasi in extasi*, "as though in an ecstasy" (Otto 2026, 11), shows that he hesitated over how to classify the state. Otto's observation that the *Ars notoria* script neither prescribes nor outlines imaginative practices, although John's practice produced rich visions (Otto 2026, 13), marks the gap between prescription and experience that layer E is designed to record.

Where Crowley's record required organising, John's requires delimiting. The coding shows that the source is descriptively uneven: auditory features are richly specified, with two similes, verbal content, a mode of address and persistence into waking, while attention, affect during the event, presence and self-boundary remain almost entirely unreported. It brings to light a session structure that the narrative, organised around the moral trajectory from deception to purification, leaves in the background, and which can be compared with other historical reports, with contemporary *Ars notoria* practice or with sleep-onset phenomena; whether shared mechanisms such as those Otto discusses under predictive processing are involved (Otto 2026, 13–14) belongs to a later explanatory stage. And it separates four appraisals that a single reading would merge. PEER cannot recover John's experience itself, but it distinguishes what the text reports, what may be inferred under stated licences and what remains unavailable.

9.3 What the pair shows

Read together, the two cases trace a gradient of source conditions, from a dictated, dated and dense record to a retrospective narrative written years after the events under institutional pressure, and they show the protocol doing different work at each end: organising density in one case and delimiting sparse evidence in the other. They also permit a first, small comparison of configurations in the sense of Section 10. In both, a deliberately performed verbal practice is followed by content that the practitioner experiences as autonomous, including being addressed by a voice with evaluative force, and in both the prescription leaves the experiential content open, so that each record documents what the practice produced beyond its script. The cases differ in spatial organisation, with an immersive environment in Crowley and no reported environment in John, in the reporting of self-boundary change, and above all in the timing of appraisal, which is partly contemporaneous and partly editorial in Crowley and predominantly retrospective in John. Whether such similarities reflect shared features of verbal-ritual induction or merely the selection of two cases is precisely the kind of question a larger PEER-coded corpus could settle.

10 Comparison

Comparison in the study of religion has been criticised for removing phenomena from context and generating similarity through the scholar's choice of examples, and Jonathan Z. Smith's warning that comparison can function like a form of magic remains pertinent (Smith 1982). Freiberger's response is to make comparison explicit about its purpose, level and *tertium comparationis* (Freiberger 2019). PEER is designed accordingly: its dimensions supply explicit *tertia comparationis*, layers A, D and E keep context and appraisal attached to every compared item, and its primary comparative unit is the configuration.

This answers the question of what is gained when two practitioners both report goosebumps. On its own the shared feature tells us little. Goosebumps accompanied by fear, narrowed attention, an externalised presence, involuntary agency and withdrawal form a different configuration from

goosebumps accompanied by warmth, widened attention, devotional joy and a stable self-boundary; the shared feature becomes informative only when the surrounding configurations are compared. Such comparison can proceed within a single practitioner across sessions, within one practice across practitioners, within a tradition across practices, across traditions, and longitudinally across stages of training. Its potential is clearest where configuration and appraisal diverge. Two practitioners may describe similar sensory, bodily and agentive patterns while one interprets the event as an angelic visitation and the other as autonomous imagery, and two practitioners may both speak of an angel while describing markedly different configurations. PEER makes it possible to ask whether similarities and differences lie primarily in reported experience, cultural appraisal, practice structure, training history or some combination of these. Similar configurations establish neither common causes nor ontological equivalence; what they establish is a well-defined question for further analysis.

11 From comparison to the practice-practitioner-experience nexus

The longer-term value of PEER lies in its capacity to move from isolated experience reports toward structured relations between practices, practitioners and experiences. A mature corpus could ask which configurations recur after particular practices and how variable they are across practitioners; which features appear early in training and which emerge only after sustained practice; which prescribed experiences fail to occur and which unprescribed events recur reliably; whether greater training increases stability, vividness or voluntary control; at what point deliberately produced images begin to be experienced as autonomous; and whether appraisals change while the phenomenal configuration remains stable. These questions carry the protocol from description into praxeological research without turning it into an explanatory theory. Its central object becomes a relation: prescription, performance, event, appraisal, repetition and transformation.

This relation is especially important for esoteric training systems, whose claims about efficacy are typically longitudinal. A practice is said to cultivate a capacity, stabilise a perception, develop a faculty or transform the practitioner over time, and such claims cannot be examined through isolated anecdotes. Layer E is therefore the point at which PEER becomes a specifically praxeological instrument.

A contemporary example of the kind of material for which this framework is intended is a documented first-person Abraxas operation in which sigil construction, ritual preparation, an evocatory formula, the ensuing altered-state material and its subsequent interpretation were recorded as separate stages, with parts of the operation preserved in video form as primary documentation (Keppel Hesselink 2026). The case is methodologically useful because prescription, performance, reported event and appraisal can be reconstructed within a single sequence, where historical cases usually require inference from disconnected sources. Re-analysed through PEER, such material could be segmented into discrete events, coded across the phenomenal dimensions, and related to the practitioner's prior training and later repetitions. Its value here lies in its form as an example of the kind of longitudinal, multimodal practitioner corpus in which the practice-practitioner-experience nexus can be studied directly; it is not offered as evidential support for any particular esoteric claim. Assembled from historical ego-documents, the extensive corpus of modern ritual diaries and contemporary collections such as RENSEP's, a PEER-coded corpus would allow such training claims to be examined systematically for the first time.

12 What PEER supports

PEER prepares material for several forms of analysis without itself explaining practice-induced experience. Structural analysis examines a single event as a configuration. Sequential analysis studies the order of events within a session, for instance whether bodily change regularly precedes a sense of presence, and whether appraisal arises during the event or only afterwards. Longitudinal analysis follows change across repeated practice. Comparative analysis examines recurring and divergent configurations across practitioners and traditions. Source-critical analysis compares the descriptive resolution of reports and the relation between prescription, experience and later appraisal, as in the case of John of Morigny. Explanatory approaches may then operate on this material: cognitive work on absorption, imagery or predictive processing; anthropological work on cultural acquisition and social reinforcement; historical reconstruction of practices and vocabularies; and psychological study of memory, agency, dissociation or individual differences. PEER occupies the intermediate level between report and explanation, and its contribution is to improve the evidence on which explanation depends.

13 Limitations

The method has clear limitations. Most reports are retrospective and therefore vulnerable to omission, compression and reinterpretation, and altered states may further impair temporal reconstruction. Introspective skill varies, and training may improve discrimination while simultaneously imposing tradition-specific categories. The protocol itself may shape reporting by drawing attention to agency, bodily sensation, presence or self-boundary. Expectation is difficult to separate from perception, because esoteric practices frequently instruct practitioners what to anticipate. Historical sources are constrained by genre, transmission, retrospective editing and strategic self-presentation (Martin 2016). Dimensional coding can flatten ambiguity, which is why PEER retains the original wording and free-text description alongside its structured fields. Comparison remains limited by differences in context, as noted above. Finally, PEER has not yet been applied to a sufficiently large corpus: inter-coder reliability, the adequacy of event segmentation and the stability of the ten dimensions remain empirical questions. These limitations define the next stage of the project.

14 Conclusion

Praxeology has established experience reports as legitimate sources for the study of esoteric practices. PEER addresses the question that follows: what must be done with such reports before they are compared or explained? The protocol treats the reported experiential event as its unit of analysis. It locates the event within practice, identifies its temporal boundaries and the conditions of its recall, describes it across ten interrelated phenomenal dimensions, records its appraisals separately and with their timing, and reconnects it to prescription, recurrence and training. Its distinctive contribution lies in that final reconnection, which turns a catalogue of unusual experiences into a means of investigating how specific practices, performed repeatedly by particular practitioners, relate to recurring and changing experiential configurations.

The two worked examples show the procedure at work under contrasting source conditions: organising the density of Crowley's near-contemporaneous record and delimiting the sparse, retrospective evidence of John of Morigny, in both cases without treating the report as transparent access to private experience.

The next step is empirical. PEER should be applied to larger historical and contemporary corpora, including ritual diaries, practitioner reports and the material collected by RENSEP, to determine which dimensions prove robust, how reliably events can be segmented and coded, how consistently independent analysts distinguish reported from inferred features and appraisal, and which forms of comparison generate new knowledge. Longitudinal application will be especially important for testing whether recurrent configurations change with training and whether shifts in agency, vividness, stability or voluntary control can be related to specific forms of practice. If that programme succeeds, PEER can help move the study of practice-induced esoteric experience from striking anecdote toward a structured and critically analysable evidence base.

Statement on the use of AI tools

In revising this article, the author used large language models, ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic), as editorial and drafting assistants for revising prose and checking internal consistency. The conceptual argument, methodological decisions, source selection and interpretation are the author's own. All quotations and bibliographical references have been verified by the author against the original sources, and the author takes full responsibility for the content.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary Material S1. PEER-P Prospective Field Form (PDF).

Supplementary Material S2. PEER-R Retrospective/Historical Coding Form (PDF).