

The Theosophical Imagination

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Abstract

It is well known that the worldviews of modern Theosophy are based largely on authoritative claims of superior clairvoyance. But what did clairvoyance really mean for Theosophists in the decades before and after 1900? How did it work? And where did the practice come from? I will be arguing that the specific type of clairvoyance claimed by Theosophists should not be confused – as is usually done in the literature – with its Spiritualist counterpart: while Spiritualists relied on somnambulist trance states induced by Mesmeric techniques, Theosophists relied on the human faculty of the imagination, understood as a superior cognitive power operating in a fully conscious state. As will be seen, this Theosophical understanding of the clairvoyant imagination can be traced very precisely to a forgotten nineteenth-century author, Joseph Rodes Buchanan, whose work was subsequently popularized by William and Elizabeth Denton. Buchanan's theory and practice of "psychometry" is fundamental to the clairvoyant claims of all the major Theosophists, from Helena P. Blavatsky herself to later authors such as Annie Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater and Rudolf Steiner.

Keywords

Theosophy; Imagination; Clairvoyance; Somnambulism; Psychometry; Helena P. Blavatsky; Joseph Rodes Buchanan; William Denton; Elizabeth Denton; Charles Webster Leadbeater

1. Blavatsky's Clairvoyant Practice

In an undated letter to her younger sister Vera, written probably around 1876, Helena P. Blavatsky described how the goddess Isis herself inspired her first book. Because the passage is of great importance to what will follow, it must be quoted here at some length.

Well, Vera, whether you believe me or not, something miraculous is happening to me. You cannot imagine in what a charmed world of pictures and visions I live. I am writing *Isis*; not writing, rather copying out and drawing that which She personally shows to me. Upon my word, sometimes it seems to me that the ancient Goddess of Beauty in person leads me through all the countries of past centuries which I have to describe. I sit with my eyes open and to all appearances see and hear everything real and actual around me, and yet at the same time I see and hear that which I write. I feel short of breath; I am afraid to make the slightest movement for fear the spell might be broken. Slowly century after century, image after image, float out of the distance and pass before me as if in a magic panorama; and meanwhile I put them together in my mind, fitting in epochs and dates, and know *for sure* that there can be *no mistake*. Races and nations, countries and cities, which have for long disappeared in the darkness of the prehistoric past, emerge and then vanish, giving place to others; and then I am told the consecutive dates. Hoary antiquity makes way for historical periods; myths are explained to me with events and people who have really existed, and every event which is at all remarkable, every newly-turned page of this many-colored book of life, impresses itself on my brain with photographic exactitude.¹

Of course, the letter was written in Russian, and we happen to have no less than three different English translations.² The most correct one, printed above, was made by Blavatsky's niece Vera V. Johnston and published in the periodical *The Path* in 1895. Boris de Zirkoff's translation (in the long introduction to his corrected version of *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1972) is somewhat different but quite accurate as well.³ Interestingly, however, the earliest and most frequently quoted version also turns out to be the least reliable. This one appeared in Alfred P. Sinnett's biography *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky* (1886) and

¹ Anonymous, "Letters of H.P. Blavatsky, II," *The Path* 9, no.10 (January 1895): 300. The Russian original appeared in *Russkoye Obozreniye* 6 (November 1891): 274.

² I am grateful to Kateryna Zorya for preparing a meticulous line-by-line comparison between the three translations and the Russian original.

³ Boris de Zirkov, "Introductory: How 'Isis Unveiled' Was Written," in H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. I: *Science*, 1–61 (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1972), 21.

was copied by Olcott in his *Old Diary Leaves* of 1895.⁴ It is somewhat more poetic and takes many liberties with the original, but most importantly it adds some lines (highlighted below) that are clearly inspired by doctrinal concerns:

Johnston 1895	Sinnett 1886
<p>... whether you believe me or not, something miraculous is happening to me. You cannot imagine in what a charmed world of pictures and visions I live. I am writing <i>Isis</i>; not writing, rather copying out and drawing that which She personally shows to me. Upon my word, sometimes it seems to me that the ancient Goddess of Beauty in person leads me through all the countries of past centuries which I have to describe. I sit with my eyes open and to all appearances see and hear everything real and actual around me, and yet at the same time I see and hear that which I write. I feel short of breath; I am afraid to make the slightest movement for fear the spell might be broken.</p>	<p>You may disbelieve me, but I tell you that in saying this I speak the truth; I am solely occupied, not with writing “<i>Isis</i>,” but with <i>Isis</i> herself. I live in a kind of permanent enchantment, a life of visions and sights <u>with open eyes, and no trance whatever to deceive my senses!</u> I sit and watch the fair goddess constantly. And as <u>she displays before me the secret meaning of her long-lost secrets, and the veil becoming with every hour thinner and more transparent, gradually falls off before my eyes,</u> I hold my breath and can hardly trust to my senses!</p>

It is not so difficult to explain these additions. The first one means that Blavatsky is not to be seen as an ordinary trance medium but as a superior clairvoyant who remains perfectly conscious and in control of her will. This was a crucial point in the doctrinal battles between Theosophists and Spiritualists, and I will return to its significance below. As for the second addition, the original letter made no reference to either the “long lost secrets” or “the veil” (of Isis) mentioned in Sinnett’s version.⁵ Here it is instructive to compare Blavatsky’s

⁴ A.P. Sinnett, *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky, Author of “Isis Unveiled,” Compiled from Information Supplied by her Relatives and Friends* (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1886), 207–08; Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78: The True Story of the Theosophical Society* (1895; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 214–15.

⁵ Note that the title of Blavatsky’s first book, *Isis Unveiled*, was decided upon only after May 8, 1877, when Blavatsky’s publisher J.W. Bouton pointed out to her that a book titled *The Veil of Isis* was already on the market (letter by Bouton printed in De Zirkov, “Introductory,” 43; cf. Alexander Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ Was Written,” *The Word* 7 (1908): 82, about

own description of how she wrote *Isis Unveiled* with the reports we have from other witnesses. In a famous passage, Henry Steel Olcott tells us that often, in the midst of her rapid writing, Blavatsky “would suddenly stop, look out into space with the vacant eye of the clairvoyant seer, shorten her vision as though to look at something held invisibly in the air before her, and begin copying on her paper what she saw.”⁶ He explained that

while writing she was always half on this plane of consciousness, half on the other; and that she read her quotations clairvoyantly in the *Astral Light* and used them as they came à propos....[I]f ever anyone lived in two worlds habitually, it was she. Often – as above stated – I have seen her in the very act of copying extracts out of phantom books, invisible to my senses, yet most undeniably visible to her.⁷

Olcott’s memories closely match those of Professor Hiram Corson, in whose house Blavatsky wrote parts of *Isis*. Discussing her numerous quotations from other books, he commented:

She herself told me that she wrote them down as they appeared in her eyes on another plane of objective existence, that she clearly saw the page of the book, and the quotation she needed, and simply translated what she saw into English.... The hundreds of books she quoted were certainly not in my library, many of them not in America, some of them very rare and difficult to get in Europe, and if her quotations were from memory, then it was an even more startling feat than writing them from the ether.⁸

It is obvious that such reports had the effect of bestowing great authority on Blavatsky, and no less obvious that she knew what to do to impress those around her. As noted by the journalist Hannah Wolff (who had met her a year earlier, in 1874, before she was famous, and seems to have gotten to know her rather well), Blavatsky “delighted in gaining any kind of intellectual ascendancy over those about her, and particularly in dominating men of known strong

the inappropriateness of the “Isis” reference). In her letter to Vera, Blavatsky writes “I am writing *Isis*,” which could refer to either of those two variants and shows that by this time she had abandoned the strange original title “A Skeleton Key to Mysterious Gates” (see Vsevolod Sergyevich Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess of Isis* (London: Longmans, Green, 1895), 257).

⁶ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–1878*, 208–09.

⁷ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–1878*, 226.

⁸ Charles Lazenby, “‘Isis Unveiled’: Anecdotes about H.P. Blavatsky,” *The Path* 1, no. 1 (July 1910): 4, here quoted according to Michael Gomes, *The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), 114–15 (see also *ibid.*, 112–13).

mental calibre. She would go any length to dupe them and scorn and mentally deride them when duped.”⁹

Corson’s wife seems to have been less credulous than her husband and those other “men of strong mental calibre.” She certainly found Blavatsky very impressive: “That she writes as she does is a perfect mystery. The amount of work she accomplishes is perfectly marvelous. She never tires, and says that we two are awfully lazy.”¹⁰ However, Mrs Corson did not take Blavatsky’s claims of clairvoyance at face value: “Her active imagination is at work at all times, and breaks into the most serious occupations. She will stop to listen to its illusions and believes them to be facts.”¹¹

In sum, Olcott and Corson saw Blavatsky as a powerful clairvoyant who could read “phantom books” invisible to others, while Corson’s wife saw those feats as mere figments of her imagination. Still, had they been confronted with such scepticism, Olcott and Corson would no doubt have responded, “But what then about all those books she was quoting, even though she did not have access to them?” To clear the way for further discussion of Blavatsky’s use of the imagination, this objection must be dealt with first.

2. Blavatsky’s Sources

Isis Unveiled contains references to ca. 1400 titles, so Blavatsky’s erudition might seem impressive at first sight. However, we know that the book relied to a very great extent on largely unacknowledged borrowings and quotations that can be traced to just about one hundred nineteenth-century books and articles about religion and the occult. This fact was demonstrated conclusively by the researches of William Emmette Coleman, who notoriously accused Blavatsky of plagiarism in his much-noted article “The Sources of Madame Blavatsky’s Writings,” published in 1895 as an appendix to Vsevolod

⁹ Hannah M. Wolff, “Madame Blavatsky,” *The Better Way* 9, no. 19 (7 November 1891): 2; and idem, *The Religio-Philosophical Journal*, New Series, 2, no. 32 (2 January 1892): 501–02. See also the substantially abbreviated version published one month after the original version: Wolff, “Madame Blavatsky,” *The Two Worlds* 4, no. 213 (11 December 1891): 671–72. Finally, see Sara E. Hervey, “Madame Blavatsky,” *The Better Way* 9, no. 25 (19 December 1891): 6 (“I knew her at the same time as did Mrs. Wolff, and all she has said about her is strictly true”), and John Patrick Deveney, “Ozymandias,” in *Keeping the Link Unbroken: Theosophical Studies Presented to Ted G. Davy on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Gomes, 1–21 (n.p.: TRM, 2004), 14–15n3.

¹⁰ Letter of Mrs. C. Corson to her son Eugene, 20 September 1875 (Corson Papers, Dept. of MSS, Cornell University Library; as quoted in Gomes, *Dawning*, 113).

¹¹ Letter of Corson to Eugene, 20 September 1875.

Sergyeevich Solovyoff's *A Modern Priestess of Isis*.¹² While this appendix is well known, scholars of Theosophy seem to have neglected the meticulous analyses on which the article was founded. These can be found in a series of articles by Coleman titled "The Unveiling of 'Isis Unveiled': A Literary Revelation," published in an obscure spiritualist journal titled *The Golden Way* in 1891.¹³

There is no doubt that Coleman was a far from impartial researcher.¹⁴ He was a convinced Spiritualist who hoped to destroy the credibility of the occultist competition at a time when the Theosophical Society was on the ascendant while Spiritualism was in decline, and he was a member of the Society for Psychical Research, which had already denounced Blavatsky as a fraud in its so-called *Hodgson Report* ten years before, in 1885. However, while Coleman's polemical intentions are obvious, there can be no doubt that his analysis was essentially correct. As recently demonstrated by Jake Winchester, his analyses were meticulous and his evidence was conclusive. One therefore misses the true significance of Coleman's achievement if one sees nothing else in it than an exercise in debunking Blavatsky as a plagiarizer. From a scholarly point of view, much more important than such moral condemnations is the fact that he created the groundwork for a scholarly project that should have been very high on the agenda of modern scholars of Theosophy but still has not seen the light of day, that is to say, a professionally annotated critical edition of *Isis Unveiled* (as well as, perhaps even more importantly, of *The Secret Doctrine*). Such an edition should not limit itself to merely listing all those ca. 1400 sources that happen to be mentioned by Blavatsky.¹⁵ Rather, it should take the next step of distinguishing critically between first-hand and second-hand (or, for that matter, third- or fourth-hand) quotations so as to trace the actual processes of borrowing, attribution and interpretation. Of course, from an orthodox Theosophical perspective such work is irrelevant and misguided because no such

¹² William Emmette Coleman, "Appendix C: The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings," in Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, 353–66.

¹³ Ibid., "The Unveiling of 'Isis Unveiled': A Literary Revelation," *The Golden Way* 1, no. 2 (April 1891): 65–75; 1, no. 3 (May 1891): 151–63; 1, no. 4 (June 1891): 207–21; 1, no. 5 (July 1891): 273–78; 1, no. 6 (August 1891): 335–41; 1, no. 7 (September 1891): 410–16; 1, no. 8 (October 1891): 470–79. For Coleman's summary conclusions, see the part in *Golden Way* 1, no. 8 (1891): 470.

¹⁴ On Coleman and his critique of Blavatsky, see the detailed analysis in Jake B. Winchester's unpublished M.A. thesis "Roots of the Oriental Gnosis: W.E. Coleman, H.P. Blavatsky, S.F. Dunlap," (University of Amsterdam, 2015), 3–30.

¹⁵ Such an overview has been provided by Tim Rudbøg in his unpublished PhD dissertation "H.P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in Context: The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism" (University of Exeter, 2013).

mundane editorial processes are supposed to have taken place at all. However, in sharp contrast with Corson’s statement quoted above, in fact we know how easy it was for Blavatsky to access her sources directly or indirectly. Alexander Wilder has described the working space in her study, which was referred to as her “den”: it was “a spot fenced off on three sides by temporary partitions, writing desk and shelves for books. She had it as convenient as it was unique. She had but to reach out an arm to get a book, paper or other article that she might desire, that was within the enclosure.”¹⁶

If one follows in Coleman’s tracks and takes the first steps towards an analysis of *Isis Unveiled* based upon standard methods of textual criticism, the true backgrounds to Blavatsky’s work begin opening up. Based on his researches published in 1891, Coleman compiled a short list of titles that were used most frequently as a source of indirect references and quotations. He did not present them in a strictly logical order, so I will here present the same list ordered hierarchically according to the number of passages quoted:

Dunlap’s <i>Sod: the Son of the Man</i> ,	134
Ennemoser’s <i>History of Magic</i> , English translation,	107
<i>Demonologia</i> ,	85
Dunlap’s <i>Spirit History of Man</i> ,	77
Salverte’s <i>Philosophy of Magic</i> , English translation,	68
Dunlap’s <i>Sod: the Mysteries of the Adoni</i> ,	65
Des Mousseaux’s <i>Magie au Dix-neuvième Siècle</i> ,	63
Des Mousseaux’s <i>Hauts Phénomènes de la Magie</i> ,	45
King’s <i>Gnostics</i> , 1 st edition,	42
<i>Supernatural Religion</i> ,	40
Mackenzie’s <i>Masonic Cyclopaedia</i> ,	36
Hone’s <i>Apoeryphal New Testament</i> ,	27
Jaccoliot’s <i>Christna et le Christ</i> ,	23
Cory’s <i>Ancient Fragments</i> ,	20
Howitt’s <i>History of the Supernatural</i> ,	20
Jaccoliot’s <i>Le Spiritisme dans le Monde</i> ,	19
Jaccoliot’s <i>Bible in India</i> , English translation	17
Des Mousseaux’s <i>Moeurs et Pratiques des Demons</i> ,	16

At the very top of this list we find a completely forgotten book by a certain Samuel Fales Dunlap, on whom more below: *Sod: The Son of Man* (published in 1861). Second comes William Ennemoser’s *History of Magic* (first published

¹⁶ Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ was Written,” 80.

in German in 1844, translated by William Howitt in 1854).¹⁷ Third comes a popular *Demonologia* published by one “J.S.F.” in 1827. We then get two more titles by Dunlap and a well-known popular volume by the French author Eusèbe Salverte. Noticeable too are no less than three publications by Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux, a conservative Roman Catholic author nowadays remembered mostly for his virulent antisemitism, but whose demonological writings deserve more serious attention by scholars of nineteenth-century esotericism than they have received so far.¹⁸

It is frankly amazing that over a period of no less than 125 years, no scholar of Theosophy has taken Coleman’s list seriously enough to take a closer look at these authors and their relation to Blavatsky’s work. It is only in 2015 that a Masters student at the University of Amsterdam, Jake Winchester, corrected this omission, at least in the fascinating case of Samuel Fales Dunlap (1825–1905).¹⁹ We learn from him that Dunlap was a wealthy Harvard-educated New York lawyer who had spent a period in Berlin where he studied ancient philology and delved into German Orientalist scholarship. His confused and unsystematic writings on ancient religion and mythology are largely grounded in German Orientalist scholarship, most of which was never translated into English. As already noted by Coleman, Dunlap’s books “consist almost wholly of quotations from and summaries of the writings of other authors, strung together by connecting remarks,”²⁰ and Dunlap himself admitted that his works were “written by quotations.”²¹ This made them into ideal reference works for Blavatsky. Sitting there in her “den,” she did indeed plunder Dunlap, not only for many quotations but also for documentary confirmation of some of her most basic assumptions, notably the distinction between popular exoteric teachings and higher esoteric mysteries derived from the Hindus, Chaldaeans, Egyptians, and Persians, and transmitted through secret Pythagorean, Sabian, and Essenian sects.

¹⁷ On Ennemoser, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 266–73.

¹⁸ See Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif, 2005), 46–50. Cf. Pagès, “Le chevalier Gougenot des Mousseaux,” *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 82 (1830): 304–24; Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 92–97. For an excellent analysis of Gougenot des Mousseaux as the originator of the “Judaéo-Masonic Conspiracy” myth, see Emmanuel Kreis, *Quis ut Deus? Antijudéo-maçonnisme et occultisme en France sous la IIIe République* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017), chapter 2.

¹⁹ Winchester, “Roots of the Oriental Gnosis.”

²⁰ Coleman, “Unveiling” (1, no. 6), 335. Cf. Winchester, “Roots of the Oriental Gnosis,” 39.

²¹ Samuel Fales Dunlap, *Sod: The Mysteries of Adoni* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1861), vi.

Still, this was not all. In addition to the working library available in her “den,” Blavatsky could of course rely on her memory, which seems to have been excellent. She had been a voracious reader of books on religion and the occult ever since her early days in Russia, around the age of fifteen, when she encountered the Masonic/Rosicrucian myth of the “unknown superiors” while reading widely in the rich occult library of her maternal great-grandfather, Prince Pavel Dolgorukov.²² *Isis Unveiled* can therefore be seen as the culmination of a decades-long process of digesting tons of scholarly and non-scholarly literature congenial to her developing beliefs and intuitions. As rightly noted by Winchester, Blavatsky’s genius lies in her remarkable ability to bring all these materials together and integrate them creatively in a larger synthesis all her own.

3. Blavatsky’s Imagination

One has to conclude that given the sources of information available to her Blavatsky needed no supra-natural assistance to write *Isis Unveiled*, just a sharp mind, a good memory, a lively imagination, and – as will be seen – a little help from her friends. That she was a very clever woman is clear from her biography, but her imaginative powers may not have received the attention they deserve. One should remember that Blavatsky’s maternal grandmother, Helena Pawlowna Dolgorukowa (1788–1860), was a natural scientist of international renown, spoke five languages, and was a talented painter and musician as well.²³ Her daughter Helena Andrejewna (1814–1842), H.P.B.’s mother, became a successful novelist during the last years of her short life.²⁴ The third Helena, the founder of Theosophy, clearly inherited these intellectual and imaginative talents from the maternal family line.

Blavatsky herself did not hesitate to describe her work as creative: “I’ll show them up, your European and American men of science, Papists, Jesuits, and that race of the half-learned, *les châtres de la science*, who destroy everything without

²² K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 19–22.

²³ Ursula Keller and Natalja Sharandak, *Madame Blavatsky: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Insel, 2013), 22–24; cf. Charles Johnston, “Madame Blavatsky’s Forebears” (orig. published in *Theosophical Quarterly*, July 1932), repr. in *Hidden Wisdom: Collected Writings of Charles Johnston*, John W. Fergus ed., vol. 4, 35–41 (n.p.: Kshetra Books, 2014).

²⁴ Keller and Sharandak, *Madame Blavatsky*, 25–32; cf. Johnston, “Madame Blavatsky’s Forebears” (according to Johnston, the powerful critic V.G. Belinski even called her “the George Sand of Russia”).

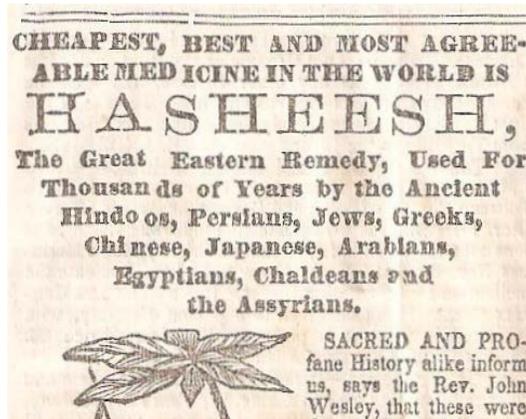
creating anything and are incapable of creating.”²⁵ Nevertheless, Blavatsky’s imaginative abilities have been rather neglected and played down by herself and many of her followers, for reasons that are easy to understand: quite obviously, too much emphasis on her personal creative and intellectual talents would undermine her claims of superior knowledge based upon clairvoyant perception and telepathic contact with her Masters. In other words, she should not be perceived as just another smart and erudite woman who could very well have reached her convictions just from reading books, or, even worse, as a creative writer who relied on her fertile imagination. On the contrary, she should be seen as an inspired seeress who revealed true *knowledge*; and in order to qualify as “knowledge” at all, it had to be grounded not in her personal imagination but in her powers of clairvoyance. Of course, clairvoyance means literally the ability to “see clearly;” however, it was not supposed to consist of the power of clearly seeing vivid images in one’s mind, but of perceiving the true nature of reality “beyond the veil” and communicating with invisible entities whose knowledge was superior to anything science or theology could offer. Against common assumptions, I will be arguing that such an understanding of clairvoyance was more at home in the context of Mesmeric somnambulism and Spiritualism than in Theosophy. In sharp contrast with Mesmeric/Spiritualist understandings, Theosophical clairvoyance was so closely linked to the faculty of imagination as to make it questionable whether the two can be distinguished at all.

If we look again at Blavatsky’s letter to her sister Vera, the picture seems quite clear. Those waking reveries of enchanted panoramas gliding by before her inner gaze, those silent pictures and dreamlike images of past events and the great transformations of history are clearly described by Blavatsky herself as vivid products of the imagination. I see no reason to doubt that this recollection of how she watched the display by “the ancient Goddess of Beauty” is quite authentic, and it becomes even more convincing if we add one further element. Hannah Wolff (already quoted above) reports a detail that may be surprising and even somewhat shocking to admirers of Blavatsky, but is perfectly understandable if seen in its proper historical context. Like other occultists at the time – with Alphonse-Louis Cahagnet and Paschal Beverly Randolph as crucial pioneers²⁶ – Blavatsky was an enthusiastic user of hashish. At the time,

²⁵ Blavatsky to N.A. Aksakov, 20 September 1875, as quoted in Zirkov, “Introductory,” 6 (see also the slightly different formulation in Solovyov, *Modern Priestess of Isis*, 257).

²⁶ See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The First Psychonaut? Alphonse-Louis Cahagnet’s Experiments with Narcotics,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 7, no. 2 (Special Issue: “Drugs and Religious Experience”): 105–23.

this was a perfectly legal substance that could be bought at pharmacies and was often advertised (as one can see from this newspaper clipping) as an “Eastern remedy, Used for Thousands of Years by the Ancient Hindoos, Persians, Jews, Greeks, Chinese, Japanese, Arabians, Egyptians, Chaldeans and the Assyrians.”



Given such impressive Oriental origins, and given Blavatsky’s basic interests, how indeed could she *not* have been interested in hashish? In Hannah Wolff’s words,

[Blavatsky] was addicted to the use of haschisch. She several times endeavoured to persuade me to try the effect upon myself. She said she had smoked opium, seen its visions and dreamed its dreams, but that the beatitudes enjoyed by the use of haschisch were as heaven to its hell. She said she found nothing to compare with its effect in arousing and stimulating the imagination.²⁷

Even normal tobacco seems to have been a powerful stimulant for Blavatsky, as reported by Albert Rawson, her companion in Cairo. “My most precious thoughts come to me in my smoking hours,” she told him, “My mind is then tranquil, and I feel lifted from the earth, and I close my eyes and float on and on, anywhere or wherever I wish.”²⁸ Of course this sounds like a very close analogy to what she describes in the letter to her sister Vera about traveling through history on the wings of her imagination. As for hashish more specifically, Rawson reported a conversation with her that seems of great importance:

²⁷ Wolff, “Madame Blavatsky,” *The Two Worlds* 4, 672; idem *The Religio-Philosophical Journal*, New Series 2, 502. See the interesting footnote in John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 539n71.

²⁸ A.L. Rawson, “Mme. Blavatsky: A Theosophical Occult Apology,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* (February 1892): 202.

[Blavatsky:] “Hasheesh multiplies one’s life a thousandfold. My experiences are as real as if they were ordinary events of actual life. Ah! I have the explanation. It is a recollection of my former existences, my previous incarnations. It is a wonderful drug, and it clears up a profound mystery.”

[Rawson responded:] “What a crowded memory we should have if the incidents of a few thousand previous incarnations should return at once!”

[Blavatsky:] “Idiot!...Only one series can by any possibility be in the mind at a given time. But suppose – ah! only think, if some of those incarnations had been in a brute or a reptile. Then what would the sensations be?”²⁹

The relevance of these quotations to our topic should be clear. Not a word is being said about clairvoyance in these passages, but one sees clearly how Blavatsky was in the habit of giving free rein to her imagination, blissfully daydreaming about previous incarnations, past epochs, and glorious ancient civilizations, while under the influence of tobacco or hashish. It seems that her natural tendency was to dream about other times and other places, and of course that fits perfectly with what we know of her life. All her travels were inspired by a deep longing to explore the mysterious countries and cultures beyond the horizon, and her writings testify to an equally deep longing to move beyond the horizon of time and explore the momentous events of past epochs and cultures as well. Of course, our imagination always works with materials already present in our minds, and in dreaming about things far away and long ago, it would be natural for Blavatsky to depend heavily on the Orientalist scholarship and occultist literature that she had been reading all her life.

4. Blavatsky’s Ghostwriters

That Blavatsky wrote *Isis* “with a little help from her friends,” as suggested above, is in fact an understatement. It is clear that without the labors of her long-suffering collaborator Henry Steel Olcott and Bouton’s editor, the classical scholar Alexander Wilder – in addition to various other people who were involved in the process at some point and to some extent – the book would never have seen the light of day.³⁰ The manuscript went through an enormous-

²⁹ Rawson, “Mme. Blavatsky,” 202.

³⁰ Crucial information for reconstructing the process of writing *Isis Unveiled* can be found in Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 202–54; H.P. Blavatsky, “My Books,” *Lucifer* 8, no. 45 (15 May 1891): 241–47; Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* Was Written.”

ly complicated and chaotic process of writing, re-writing, correcting, cutting and pasting, editing, re-editing, and revising; but even so, with characteristic candor Blavatsky herself would later admit that the published version still had “no system in it” and looked “as if a mass of independent paragraphs having no connection with each other, had been well shaken up in a waste-basket, and then taken out at random and – published.”³¹

When Blavatsky first showed her writings to Olcott, she was not surprised to hear from him that everything would have to be rewritten.³² They then set out to work on the manuscript evening after evening, with Olcott not just “englishing” its formulations, according to Blavatsky, but editing what seems to have been one uninterrupted string of words as separate chapters. The subdivision into two volumes (“Science” and “Religion”) came from Olcott as well.³³ Furthermore, Olcott himself and several friends and visitors, such as J.L. O’Sullivan and A.L. Rawson, were invited to help out with *Isis* by contributing pieces of text of their own. Nevertheless, when an 870–page manuscript had finally emerged from this process, Blavatsky was so dissatisfied that she insisted on starting all over again³⁴ – but hardly with less chaotic results. Presumably it was the result of all these labours that Olcott finally presented to Alexander Wilder, who described it as “truly a ponderous document” that was clearly “too long for remunerative publishing.”³⁵ Hence he was eventually ordered by Bouton (who had procured the copyright in his own name and could therefore do with it whatever he wanted!) to abridge the work. In his own words, “enough was taken out to fill a volume of respectable dimension,”³⁶ and interestingly, Blavatsky seems to have had no problem with these radical cuts: “What had been taken out was ‘flapdoodle,’ she declared.”³⁷ Then, when the galley proofs came in, Blavatsky by her own words “made a mess of it from the beginning.”³⁸ Her many “corrections and alterations” resulted in such a huge

³¹ Blavatsky, “My Books,” 241. Cf. Olcott: “Her own manuscript was often a sight to behold; cut and patched, re-cut and re-pasted... a great smudge of interlineations, erasures, orthographic corrections and substitutions” (*Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 243). Unfortunately, these manuscripts did not survive, presumably because Wilder’s housemaid accidentally threw them away!

³² Blavatsky, “My Books,” 244. That is to say: everything she claimed to have written herself rather than having received as dictations from her Masters.

³³ Blavatsky, “My Books,” 244.

³⁴ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 217.

³⁵ Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ Was Written,” 78.

³⁶ Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ Was Written,” 79.

³⁷ Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ Was Written,” 82.

³⁸ Blavatsky, “My Books,” 244.

bill from the publisher that she finally “had to give up the proof-reading.”³⁹ The real problem, as pointed out by Wilder, was that she never stopped adding new materials: in fact, those “alterations” grew to “a full third, or even more, of what was published.”⁴⁰ The truth is that Blavatsky never finished *Isis* at all: the book simply came to an end because the publisher told her she had to stop. Apart from all these troubles, the proofs went “through a number of willing but not very careful hands” and finally to “the tender mercies of the publisher’s proof-reader.”⁴¹

Blavatsky herself later described *Isis* as a textual disaster: “The full consciousness of this sad truth dawned on me when, for the first time after its publication in 1877, I read the work through from the first to the last page, in India in 1881.”⁴² She now realized that the book was confused, full of misprints and misquotations, useless repetitions and irritating digressions, superfluous materials and internal contradictions. So bad did she find it, that when she started to write a new book in the 1880s, she thought of it for a long time as a “new version of *Isis Unveiled*” that should replace its first incarnation. Nevertheless, the genesis of *The Secret Doctrine* was hardly less chaotic, for once again Blavatsky made a big mess of it. This time, much of the credit must go to the labours of Archibald Keightley (1859–1930) and his uncle Bertram Keightley (1860–1944), two Theosophists with a Cambridge education who were much better qualified to edit a large and complicated book. Their opinion of the original manuscript was identical to Olcott’s opinion in the case of *Isis*:

But we both read the whole mass of MSS. – a pile over three feet high – most carefully through, correcting the English and punctuation where absolutely indispensable, and then, after prolonged consultation, faced the author in her den – in my case with sore trembling, I remember – with the solemn opinion that the whole of the matter must be re-arranged on some definite plan, since as it stood the book was another *Isis Unveiled*, only far worse, so far as absence of plan and consecutiveness were concerned.

After some talk, H.P.B. told us to go to Tophet [that is: to Hell] and do what we liked. She had had more than enough of the blessed thing, had given it over to us, washed her hands thereof entirely, and we might get out of it as best we could.⁴³

³⁹ Blavatsky, “My Books,” 245.

⁴⁰ Wilder, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ Was Written,” 86.

⁴¹ Blavatsky, “My Books,” 245.

⁴² Blavatsky, “My Books,” 241.

⁴³ Constance Wachtmeister, *Reminiscences of H.P. Blavatsky and ‘The Secret Doctrine’* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), 91.

So that is what they did. In an almost exact repetition of Olcott’s editorial work on *Isis*, the entire division into “Cosmogogenesis” and “Anthropogenesis,” as well as the chapter arrangement of *The Secret Doctrine*, comes not from Blavatsky but from the Keightleys. It is impossible to say with any degree of certainty how much they contributed to the final incarnation of the book, but it is safe to say that Blavatsky was not the only writer. As for Blavatsky’s own creative process while writing her chaotic manuscripts for *The Secret Doctrine*, it seems to have remained very much the same as with *Isis*, as she explained in a letter to Sinnett – “only far clearer and better...Such pictures, panoramas, scenes, antediluvian dramas, with all that! Never saw or heard better.”⁴⁴

5. The Key to Theosophy: Buchanan’s Psychometry

The question now arises: how is it that the human faculty of *imagination* could come to be interpreted as a faculty of *clairvoyance*, i.e. as a means of gaining objective *knowledge* superior to conventional science? The French word *clairvoyance* emerged during the 1780s and originally meant nothing more than “sagacity” or “penetration.” Clairvoyance seems to have attained its present meaning of supra-normal vision, both in French and English, as a literal translation from the German word *Hellsehen* that began to be used by German Mesmerists during the 1790s to refer to the visionary capacities that were observed in patients under magnetic trance.⁴⁵ This is how the term clairvoyance continued to be understood when Mesmerism developed into Spiritualism after the mid-nineteenth century. As is well known, the occultist movement emerged as a reaction against popular Spiritualism, and emphasized the importance of the active will (gendered masculine) as opposed to a state of passive trance (gendered feminine) that was required for mediumistic communications. This is why Theosophists such as Sinnett and Olcott found it so important (in the case of Blavatsky’s letter to Vera discussed at the beginning of this article) to stress that she received her “visions and sights with open eyes and no trance whatever to deceive [her] senses.” In short, occultist clairvoyance had to be different from Spiritualist clairvoyance.

⁴⁴ Sinnett, *Incidents*, 303.

⁴⁵ Source: Google Ngram viewer for “clairvoyance” (French, English) and “Hellsehen.” Note that researching the origins and frequency of the term is complicated by Google Ngram’s imperfections in reading German gothic script: as a result, terms such as *bälschen*, *berzchen* or *berrschen* are all misinterpreted as *Hellsehen*.



Josef Rodes Buchanan (1814–1899)

The foundations for this new occultist and eventually Theosophical understanding of clairvoyance appear to have been created by a largely forgotten medical innovator named Joseph Rodes Buchanan.⁴⁶ In a long article published in his periodical *Buchanan's Journal of Man* in 1849, Buchanan described how seven years earlier, in the autumn of 1842, he had discovered

the existence of a wonderful power in the constitution of man, the discovery and use of which at once opens before us a wide realm of knowledge. In that single discovery, lay the germ of a science of lofty pretensions, and so wonderful in its facts as to be difficult of belief, if not utterly incredible, to the greater portion of our scientific men. Yet, high as its pretensions are, they are demonstrable in the most rigid manner, and, incredulous as the public may be, it cannot be long ere the truth of my assertions shall be familiarly known in Europe and America.⁴⁷

Buchanan called his new science “psychometry,” and his announcement seems to have had a considerable impact on his contemporaries. Just eight years after its discovery, in 1850, the then well-known poet and Unitarian minister John Pierpoint delivered a poem at the anniversary of Yale College, which demonstrates that psychometry was seen as the spiritual parallel to the physical process of photography, or daguerrotype. The poem was titled “Progress,” and contained the following lines extolling Buchanan over Daguerre:

⁴⁶ For this discovery I am indebted to the M.A. thesis of my former student Greg Hester, “Into the Celestial Spheres of Divine Wisdom: Joseph Rodes Buchanan and Nineteenth-Century Esotericism” (University of Amsterdam, 2015).

⁴⁷ Joseph Rodes Buchanan, “Art. I. – Psychometry,” *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 2 (February 1849): 49–62; 1, no. 3 (March 1849): 97–113; 1, no. 4 (April 1849): 146–56, here 49.

But much, Daguerre, as has thy genius done
 In educating thus Latona's son,
 In thus educating, in the god of light
 The power to paint so, at a single sight,
 Buchanan has transcended thee, as far
 As the sun's face outshines the polar star.
 Thine *art* can catch and keep what meets the eye –
 His *science*, subjects that far deeper lie.
 Thy skill shows up the face, the outward whole –
 His science measures and reveals the soul.⁴⁸

What was this superior science all about? Much later, in his *Manual of Psychometry*, first published in 1885, Buchanan would describe psychometry – literally “soul-measuring” – as nothing less than “*the development and exercise of the divine faculties in man*, a demonstration of the old conception of poetry and mystic philosophy as to the Divine interior of the human soul, and the marvelous approximation of man toward omniscience.”⁴⁹ However, psychometry seems to have begun rather modestly with Buchanan's discovery that many people appeared to be able to blindly “feel” the exact nature of a metal or another natural substance simply by means of physical contact.⁵⁰ Since he knew that magnetic somnambules had been making such claims for decades,⁵¹ he was at pains to emphasize that no Mesmeric trance was required.⁵² In contrast to the latter, psychometry could be practiced in a perfectly normal state of consciousness, due to a natural sensitivity that (as Buchanan would come to emphasize later) turned out to be surprisingly widespread, especially among women.⁵³ While distancing himself from Mesmerist somnambulism, Buchanan claimed to have discovered the key to what Theosophists would later call the “hidden mysteries of nature and the powers latent in man”:

⁴⁸ Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* (Boston: Holman Brothers, Press of the Roxbury Advocate, 1885) Pt. 1, 1–2.

⁴⁹ Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, Pt. 1, 9–10.

⁵⁰ Buchanan, “Art I. – Psychometry,” 51.

⁵¹ For a classic example, see the many experiments with physical substances described in meticulous detail by Justinus Kerner, *Die Seherin von Prevorst: Eröffnungen über das innere Leben des Menschen und über das Hereinragen einer Geisterwelt in die unsere* (Leipzig: Reclam, n.d. (orig. 1829)), 81–134 (summarized in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Versuch über Friederike Hauffe: Zum Verhältnis zwischen Lebensgeschichte und Mythos der ‘Seherin von Prevorst,’” Pt. 1, *Suevica: Beiträge zur schwäbische Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* 8 (1999/2000): 24–25).

⁵² Buchanan, “Art I. – Psychometry,” 52.

⁵³ Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, Pt. 1, 163; Pt. 2, 20.

The dark underworld of intellect in which we find the responses of oracles, the revelations of magnetic somnambules, the prophecies of the saints, the forecasts of the fortune teller, the mysterious presentiments and sudden impressions by which many are guided, the warnings of death, calamity or accident, and the mysterious influences attached to places, apartments, amulets and souvenirs, is illuminated... In studying Psychometry, mystery disappears, and the most cautious inquirer in vital science will feel that he is treading on safe and solid ground.⁵⁴

Buchanan soon began to broaden his explorations and found that psychometrically gifted individuals could divine the nature of substances even *without* physical contact.⁵⁵ Next he discovered that if an autograph letter in a sealed envelope was placed on a psychometrist's forehead, he or she could give elaborate and correct descriptions of the person who had written the letter.⁵⁶ Eventually, however, he found that *any* object whatsoever could trigger such feats of clairvoyant perception of the person to whom it belonged or with whom it had been in close contact.⁵⁷ Finally, Buchanan went all the way towards concluding that not even contact with an object was required.⁵⁸ The more experiments he performed, the broader became his concept of psychometry, until it finally amounted to little more than the very simple and general claim that many of us have a natural ability to gain direct and wholly accurate knowledge about anything whatsoever.

This claim was a direct reflection of contemporary fascination with photography (daguerrotype). It was based upon the radical assumption (which psychometrists believed they could demonstrate empirically) that absolutely *everything* that had ever happened anywhere in the universe was leaving a kind of photographic imprint or reflection that was normally invisible but could be retrieved by a sufficiently sensitive person. As already mentioned, it is crucial that psychometry required no trance, nor any other unusual state of consciousness: all one needed to do was concentrate one's attention on whatever one wanted to know, and that knowledge would appear in the mind.

Buchanan's approach was purely empirical. He provided countless case descriptions but showed little interest in theoretical explanations for the powers of psychometry. He was content to speak vaguely about some kind of "continual or continuous sympathy," "some imponderable agent" or "subtil [sic] influences

⁵⁴ Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, Pt. 1, 10–11.

⁵⁵ Buchanan, "Art I. – Psychometry," 53.

⁵⁶ Buchanan, "Art I. – Psychometry," 57ff.

⁵⁷ Buchanan, "Art I. – Psychometry," 107ff.

⁵⁸ Buchanan, "Art I. – Psychometry," 153.

which emanate from adjacent objects” which must be somehow connected to the nervous system and its susceptibility to invisible magnetic or electrical forces.⁵⁹ At other times, he used a more psychological language, very much in the tradition of German Romantic speculations about the night side of nature:

It appears that there are deep currents of feeling, which flow beneath the surface, without entering into the *daylight of consciousness*. In these subterranean streams of emotion (to borrow the language of poets) heart speaks to heart; and the magic ties which bind us together in love, are formed in the darker chambers of the soul, where reason, reflection and observation have no place.⁶⁰

As Buchanan’s thinking about psychometry developed from his original articles of 1849 to his *Manual of Psychometry* published in 1885, he finally dispensed with any technical explanation whatsoever. It ultimately did not matter that much to him whether the psychometric power should be explained in physical, occult, or mental terms – or all of them at the same time. The important point was *that it worked*.

Buchanan was a progressive thinker, and extremely optimistic about the unlimited applications of psychometry, for instance in solving crimes and radically improving the general state of society. But most relevant for us is his vision of psychometric *historiography*.⁶¹ As early as 1849, he wrote:

If then, man, in every act, leaves the impression, or daguerrotype of his mental being upon the scenes of his life and subjects of his action, we are by this law furnished with a new clue to the history of our race; and I think it highly probable, that, by the application of this principle, the chasms of history may be supplied, and a glimpse may be obtained of unrecorded ages and nations, whose early history is lost in darkness.⁶²

In his manual of 1885, finally, psychometry had become not just an ability to see things that had happened in the past, but one that allowed the human mind to grasp the very essence of things:

That interior faculty grasps the idea in its essence...and then grasps the object in its wide-reaching consciousness. Whether it be a city in China or Africa, a saint or leader whose name has almost disappeared in the twilight of history, a pre-historic race on earth, or a body in our planetary system, it is conceived, understood and

⁵⁹ Buchanan, “Art. I. – Psychometry,” 53–55.

⁶⁰ Buchanan, “Art. I. – Psychometry,” 153 (emphasis in original).

⁶¹ E.g. Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, 16, 57.

⁶² Buchanan, “Art. I. – Psychometry,” 147.

reported. The divine realm of universal consciousness or intellectual omniscience seems to become occupied by man and either he comes into *rapport* with that limitless sphere of intelligence, or that intelligence is dormant within himself, and is roused by an effort to assert its powers.⁶³

6. The Soul of Things: William and Elizabeth Denton

Inspired by Buchanan's original exposition, in 1863 the naturalist, explorer, geologist and butterfly collector Professor William Denton (1823–1883) and his wife Elizabeth M. Foote Denton (dates unknown) published a book together, titled *The Soul of Things: Psychometric Researches and Discoveries*.⁶⁴ Unlike Buchanan, they did not begin with an account of empirical experiments and scientific observations but, significantly, with a chapter about the phenomenon of *mental imagery*. Next to various other authorities such as Newton in his work on optics, the authors quoted the well-known autobiography of the Scottish geologist and folklorist Hugh Miller (1802–1856), who had given a vivid description of his delirious visions during a state of fever and had concluded that they were based upon forgotten memories. This had made him wonder about “that accessible storehouse, in which the memories of past events lie arranged and taped up” as in “a mysterious cabinet of daguerrotype pictures.”⁶⁵

Miller was thinking only of the images stored in his *personal* memory, but the Dentons went one step further in a direction that would finally lead to Blavatsky's concept of a *universal* memory, the famous akashic records. The original germ of the idea may perhaps be traced to Pierre-Simon Laplace's famous thought experiment known as “Laplace's demon.” The English polymath Charles Babbage had waxed quite lyrical about its implications in a book published in 1837 from which the Dentons took one of their two opening quotes: “The air is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said, or woman whispered.”⁶⁶ Following a logic that is common in radical “holistic”

⁶³ Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, 159.

⁶⁴ William Denton and Elizabeth M.F. Denton, *The Soul of Things; or, Psychometric Researches and Discoveries* (Boston: Walker, Wise, 1863). For an extremely useful source of information on the Dentons see Benjamin Laird's website <https://thecodeofthings.com>; and see Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 109–10, 225–27 (thanks to Jeremy Stolow for the reference).

⁶⁵ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 19; reference to Hugh Miller, *My Schools and Schoolmasters; or, the Story of My Education* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1855), 332.

⁶⁶ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 10. Original passage in Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment* (London: John Murray, 1837), 113 (with reference to an extract from Laplace, quoted in his Appendix Note C, o.c. 173–74).

thinking,⁶⁷ the strict materialist determinism basic to Laplace’s argument was de-emphasized while the exciting prospect of “psychometric” omniscience was highlighted. In a similar rephrasing of positivist materialism, the Dentons made their essential point through a heavily manipulated quotation attributed to the well-known contemporary specialist of optics Sir David Brewster. Here I give the original passage while showing how it was “edited” by the Dentons:

~~That~~ All bodies throw off emanations in greater or less abundance, in particles of greater or less size and with greater or less velocities;—~~that~~ these particles enter more or less into the pores of solid and fluid bodies, sometimes resting near upon their surface, ~~sometimes effecting a deeper entrance, and sometimes permeating them altogether~~ [italics added by the Dentons] —~~that~~ the projection of these emanations is aided by differences of temperature — by great heat — by vibratory action — by friction — by electricity, — in short, by every cause which affects the forces of aggregation, by which the particles of bodies are held together; and ~~that~~ (These emanations, when feeble, show themselves in the images of Fusinieri, Draper, Hunt, Moser, Fizeau, Knorr, Karsten, and Zantedeschi —; when stronger, in certain chemical changes which they produce— when stronger still, in their action on the olfactory nerves, causing smell; and when thrown off most copiously and rapidly, in heat, affecting the nerves of touch — ; in photogenic action, dissevering and recombining the elements of matter-nature; and in phosphorescent and luminous emanations, exciting the retina and producing vision.⁶⁸

As one can see, Brewster had written in corpuscularian terms about minute particles of matter; but by throwing out more than half of his words and replacing “matter” by “nature,” the Dentons made it all sound more like the 9th century Muslim philosopher al-Kindi and his doctrine that everything in the universe transmits invisible occult “rays.”⁶⁹ From the “indisputable facts” thus established, the Dentons then drew a happy conclusion:

In the world around us radiant forces are passing from all objects to all objects in their vicinity, and during every moment of the day and night are daguerrotyping the appearances of each upon the other; the images thus made, not merely resting upon the surface, but sinking into the interior of them; there held with astonishing

⁶⁷ See the illustrative parallel case of Fritjof Capra’s “bootstrap philosophy” in his 1975 best-seller *The Tao of Physics*, based on Geoffrey Chew’s quantum physics monadology (discussion in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996/Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 130–31).

⁶⁸ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 28. The original quotation attributed to Brewster seems to be taken from a long review article about recent publications about photography in *The North British Review* of 1847: Anonymous, “Art. VIII: Photography,” *The North British Review* 7 (May-August 1847): 500–01.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Pinella Travaglia, *Magic, Causality and Intentionality: The Doctrine of Rays in al-Kindi* (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1999).

tenacity, and only waiting for a suitable application to reveal themselves to the inquiring gaze. You cannot, then, enter a room by night or day, but you leave on going out your portrait behind you. You cannot lift your hand, or wink your eye, or the wind stir a hair of your head, but each movement is infallibly registered for coming ages....Not a leaf waves, not an insect crawls, not a ripple moves, but each motion is recorded by a thousand faithful scribes in infallible and indelible scripture.

This is just as true of all past time. From the first dawn of light upon this infant globe, when round its cradle the steamy curtains hung, to this moment, Nature has been busy photographing every moment. What a picture-gallery is hers!⁷⁰

Discussing psychometry in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky quoted these very same lines to argue that historical events can be explored through occult procedures.⁷¹ While the direct line of influence would thus seem to have gone from the Dentons to Blavatsky, the general idea had been in the air for a while already. For instance, we find very similar statements as early as 1857 in the work of another well-known geologist, Edward Hitchcock.⁷² He, too, suggested that a “photographic influence pervades all nature” that may well “fill nature with daguerreotype impressions of all our actions that are performed in daylight.” If so, he wrote, this “great picture gallery of eternity” might perhaps be perceptible to “acuter senses than ours.”⁷³ It remained for the occultists to kick the ball into this wide-open goal.

⁷⁰ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 30–31.

⁷¹ Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1877), 183.

⁷² The Dentons seem to have been acquainted with Hitchcock’s son Charles, whom they quote in *Soul of Things*, 264.

⁷³ Edward Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology and its Connected Sciences* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1857), 426, quoted by Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 263–264. Blavatsky quoted the same passage, probably through Denton: see *Isis*, vol. I, 184–85 (italicizing *acuter*). Interestingly, the quotation was preceded by another visionary account by Hitchcock, which the Dentons had taken from E.P. Hood (*Dream Land and Ghost Land: Visits and Wanderings There in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1852), 98), who in his turn had taken it from a fascinating correspondence between Hitchcock and Nathan Welby Fiske, published in *The New Englander and Yale Review* of 1845 (“Case of Optical Illusion in Sickness, with an Attempt to Explain Its Psychology”); cf. Hitchcock’s description of an earlier and similar series of visions in *A Wreath for the Tomb: or Extracts from Eminent Writers on Death and Eternity* (Amherst: J.S. & C. Adams, 1842), 91–93. It is notable that in these earlier instances (induced not just by fever but certainly also by morphine, opium, and diethyl ether ([Hitchcock & Fiske], “Case,” 193, 199)) the idea of a universal “photographic influence” or “picture gallery of eternity” had not yet occurred to Hitchcock. Fiske interpreted Hitchcock’s visions in terms of solid cognitive science, and I find his analysis remarkably relevant to understanding the visionary imagination of authors such as Blavatsky, Leadbeater, or Steiner.



William Denton (1823–1883)

William Denton devoted a chapter of enormous length to descriptions of experiments with fossil remains psychometrically examined by his wife and his sister. At merely touching a piece of quartz, a fragment of lava, a fossil fish-bone, and so on, it seems that both ladies immediately launched into detailed descriptions of prehistoric scenes, landscapes, animals, plants, and so on that they seemed to be observing at first hand as if they were there. More than this, they eventually started hearing sounds as well. Denton explained that since “nothing we see is ever effaced, so nothing we hear ever dies out,” it only made sense that the images of past events would be accompanied by what he called “phonotypes.”⁷⁴ So now we had not just interior photographs, but interior movies accompanied by sound!⁷⁵ Moreover, Denton went on to speculate that

all fossil remains of animals are imbued with the feelings of the animals of which they formed a part, and, under their influence, the psychometer, for the time being, feels all that was felt by them; and thus the characteristic actions of monsters that have been extinct for millions of years can be accurately realized and described. This branch of psychometry may be termed psychopathy.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 48–49, cf. 262.

⁷⁵ It must be noted that psychometric images were usually not static “snapshots” but had a dynamic quality: subjects typically described images or “scenes” as “floating” or “passing by” the inner gaze. The technique for motion pictures had not yet been discovered when *The Soul of Things* was published, but “spectral illusions” that seemed to be moving were known already by the end of the eighteenth century (see e.g. Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (New York: Zone Books, 2013)).

⁷⁶ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 50–51. See the possible relevance to Blavatsky’s remarks

After more than two hundred pages devoted to one hundred and eleven different geological experiments, the Dentons moved on to other applications of psychometry, including historical research. Taking up Buchanan's suggestion mentioned above, they sketched the outlines of a program that Theosophists such as Blavatsky, Leadbeater and Steiner would soon put into practice: "we shall wander along the shore of time, and watch the empires as they rise and fall before us, as rise and fall the waves of a swelling tide... The clouds that now rest over the histories of all nations shall melt away in the beams of the rising sun."⁷⁷

7. From the Latent Light to the Astral Light

Part II of *The Soul of Things* was written by Elizabeth M.F. Denton alone, and in this fascinating text she answers questions about the practice of psychometry.⁷⁸ We learn that as a child she used to amuse herself at night by watching "the scenes which came sweeping past, not my fancy, *but my vision* [emphasis in the original], as clear and as distinct as were any that greeted my sight by day."⁷⁹ This faculty never seems to have left her;⁸⁰ but once grown up she learned to dismiss and neglect this imaginative faculty as unimportant and deceptive, and thus "allowed myself only an occasional visit to this ethereal land of ethereal forms."⁸¹ This changed when she read Buchanan's 1849 article on psychometry, which gave her scientific permission to start taking her visions seriously again. Now, in discussing the mechanics of psychometry in clearly photographic terms, Mrs. Denton referred to

peculiar conditions of the atmosphere which render it, like the polished plate of the skilful artist, capable of receiving and of reflecting the images of objects occupying positions favorable for such reflection of their images... That there may be conditions of the atmosphere fitting it not only to receive and reflect, but also to retain these images, after the objects have been themselves removed, appears to be a conclusion not altogether unwarranted by the facts.⁸²

to Rawson (quoted above) about the "sensations" of being incarnated in a "brute or a reptile."

⁷⁷ Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 276–77.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth M.F. Denton, "Questions, Considerations, and Suggestions," in Denton and Denton, *Soul of Things*, 309–66.

⁷⁹ Denton, "Questions," 314.

⁸⁰ Denton, "Questions," 311: "I cannot remember the time when I did not behold objects or their representatives, by night as well as by day, in darkness as well as in light, with closed as well as with open eyes."

⁸¹ Denton, "Questions," 315.

⁸² Denton, "Questions," 324.

In discussing these “peculiar conditions,” initially she spoke in Mesmerist terms about an “ethereal fluid which stamps upon it these images.”⁸³ But later on in her discussion, the fluid had become a light: more precisely, she now distinguished between the ordinary light by which we see physical objects, and the “Latent Light” by which the psychometrist perceives his or her visions.⁸⁴

What to make of that reference? First of all, again it is perfectly clear how much this entire line of reasoning owes to the invention of photography. Daguerrotypes resulted from the material transmission and refraction of ordinary light, and the assumption was that a parallel process must be at work on the non-material level of the soul. More specifically, although nothing indicates that the Denton couple had ever heard of the founder of French occultism Éliphas Lévi, it is impossible not to be reminded of Lévi’s discussions in *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, published just seven years earlier, in 1856. In his characteristic exalted style, Lévi explicitly highlighted the imagination as “nothing but our soul’s inherent property of assimilating the images and reflections contained in the living light, which is the great magnetic agent.”⁸⁵ This living, primordial, or astral light he described as

saturated with images or reflections of all sorts that our soul is able to evoke and submit to its *diaphane* [Lévi’s term for the imaginative faculty of the personal soul], as the kabbalists say. These images are always present to us and are wiped out only by the stronger imprints of reality during waking life, or by the preoccupations of our thought, which cause our imagination to be inattentive to the moving panorama of the astral light.⁸⁶

The entire line of reasoning is very much a reflection of German Romantic Mesmerism and its preoccupation with the “nocturnal side of nature”: opposed to the material light of normal daytime consciousness (the province of rationalist science) stands the inner light of the soul (the province of occult science) that becomes dominant in altered states of consciousness such as sleep, dreaming and visionary trance.⁸⁷ There is no such thing as the supernatural: in *both* states of consciousness one can observe empirical facts (*Thatsachen*) that belong to the domain of nature.⁸⁸

⁸³ Denton, “Questions,” 324–25.

⁸⁴ Denton, “Questions,” 342ff.

⁸⁵ Éliphas Lévi, *Secrets de la magie: Dogme et rituel de la haute magie, Histoire de la magie, La clef des grands mystères*, edited by Francis Lacassin (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2000), 78.

⁸⁶ Lévi, *Secrets*, 80.

⁸⁷ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 262–66.

⁸⁸ Hanegraaff, “A Woman Alone: The Beatification of Friederike Hauffe née Wanner (1801–1829),” in *Women and Miracle Stories: A Multidisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Anne-Marie

This distinction between two “lights” was soon picked up by Anglophone occultists – whether directly from Lévi, Denton, or both. For instance, in Emma Hardinge Britten’s *Art Magic* (published one year before *Isis Unveiled*, and its chief competitor at the time), we read that “Material Light and Astral light are as antagonistic to each other as the north poles of separate magnets. They mutually repel each other.”⁸⁹ Britten seems to have been very much aware of how closely Lévi associated the astral light with the imagination. In an interesting exchange published as early as 1868, we read how a member in the audience during one of her appearances as a trance speaker had asked her a loaded question: “Is all imagination simply in sight, or is it possible to imagine things which do not really exist?”⁹⁰ The subtext is clear: could it be that you are simply *imagining* all those spirits? Britten handled it rather well, but at a heavy price, especially for a woman with strong artistic abilities like herself. To legitimate the imagination as an instrument of knowledge, she was forced to *deny* the very existence of human creativity or originality!

Analyze your imagination. Can you point to any idea that is not a reflection of the past, a refraction of the present, or a prophecy of the future? No, there is not in the whole realm of nature one single original idea in the mind of man. When I say “original,” I mean that there is no creative power in the mind of man – nothing but a reproductive one, and therefore as all that you can conceive of, imagine, dream, hope, or believe in, must have some shadow of past, or future, or present, so I say that imagination, however wild, is either the intuitional perception of truth, the prophecy of the future, or the broken or refracted light of the present.⁹¹

If we interpret this statement against the background of psychometry, it seems clear what is going on in this exchange. Hardinge Britten was concerned to play down or wholly deny the active, subjective and creative aspects of the imagination in order to interpret it as a perfectly *passive* medium (Denton’s “latent light,” Lévi’s “astral light”) that receives and transmits purely objective information. Formulated differently, occult clairvoyance should not be seen as an art but as a science. The mental faculty of imagination was presented quite literally as the psychic parallel to a photographic plate: real events leave

Korte, 211–47 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 236 (with reference to Heinrich Straumann, *Justinus Kerner und der Okkultismus in der Deutschen Romantik* (Zurich/Leipzig: Horgens, 1928), 84).

⁸⁹ Anonymous [Emma Hardinge Britten], *Art Magic* (New York: Published by the Author, 1876), 168.

⁹⁰ Hardinge, “Questions and Impromptu Answers,” *The Spiritual Magazine* 3, no. 9 (September 1868): 385.

⁹¹ Hardinge, “Questions and Impromptu Answers,” 385.

objective imprints in the astral light, and this information can be retrieved because the human mind is capable of receiving and perceiving such images in the mirror of the imagination. Against this background, it is clear how we should read the final line from Blavatsky's letter to Vera: "Every event which is at all remarkable, every newly-turned page of this many-colored book of life, impresses itself on my brain with photographic exactitude."

8. From the Astral Light to the Akashic Records

We have seen that during the 1860s and 1870s, occultists came to believe that absolutely everything that had ever happened was imprinted on an invisible medium that functioned like a photographic plate on the level of the world soul. This was the famous "astral light." Scientific clairvoyance was based upon the ability, inherent in the *individual* human soul, of receiving and perceiving these images in what Éliphas Lévi called the *diaphane*: the personal imagination. But whereas Lévi was a full-blooded Romantic with few reservations about emphasizing the role of the imagination, such an emphasis would have been more or less suicidal for English-speaking occultists operating in a climate dominated by scientific positivism. It was already easy enough for critics to dismiss so-called clairvoyant observations as mere imaginative fantasies, so it would hardly be helpful for occultists to confirm that clairvoyance did indeed work through the imagination. As a result, although Blavatsky was explicit about using Lévi's astral light as a theoretical explanation for psychometry (while quoting both Buchanan and the Dentons), she steered away from any reference to the imagination.⁹² In short, the imagination was the "elephant in the room" for the emerging occultist movement: it was clearly central to both the practice and the theory of clairvoyance, and yet it could not be named for what it was.

While taking up the basic theory of psychometric clairvoyance, Theosophists quickly began developing it in new and increasingly complex ways. A first important point is that already Blavatsky began expanding its scope by stating that it not only could retrieve information from the past, but could look into the future as well:

⁹² Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1, 182–85. Instead of the imagination, Blavatsky emphasized training and will-power: "scene after scene crowding upon each other so rapidly, that it is only by the supreme exercise of the will that [the psychometer] is able to hold any one in the field of vision long enough to describe it," and "[u]nless his will-power is very strong, unless he has thoroughly trained himself to that particular phenomenon, and his knowledge of the capabilities of his sight are profound, his perceptions of places, persons, and events, must necessarily be very confused" (*ibid.*, 184).

According to the kabalistic doctrine, the future exists in the astral light in embryo, as the present existed in embryo in the past. While man is free to act as he pleases, the manner in which he *will* act was foreknown from all time; not on the ground of fatalism or destiny, but simply on the principle of universal, unchangeable harmony;... Besides, eternity can have neither past nor future, but only the present.... *The human spirit, being of the Divine, immortal Spirit, appreciates neither past nor future, but sees all things as in the present.* These daguerrotypes... are imprinted upon the astral light, where... is kept the record of all that was, is, or ever will be.⁹³

The term *akāsa* did not yet appear in this connection. However, in *Art Magic*, published one year before *Isis Unveiled*, Emma Hardinge Britten already mentioned it frequently. She described it as an equivalent of “the Rosicrucian’s *Astral fluid*, the Hebrew’s *Life*, the modern magnetizer’s *Magnetism*,”⁹⁴ in short, of the “life force” or “life fluid”; but she discussed it mostly with reference to the miraculous powers of Indian fakirs, and never in relation to clairvoyance or psychometry. Likewise, in the introduction to *Isis Unveiled*, “Before the Veil” (probably written by Alexander Wilder), *akāsa* was described as analogous to or synonymous with “the occult electricity; the alkahest of the alchemists in one sense, or the universal solvent, the same *anima mundi* as the astral light.”⁹⁵ But again, this universal “life-principle” was not seen as relevant to clairvoyance or psychometry.⁹⁶

The connection between clairvoyance and *akāsa* was established at some moment during the years after Blavatsky and Olcott’s move to India, as can be seen from several anonymous articles (written by Blavatsky?) published in *The Theosophist*. In “A Case of Obsession” (1880), we find a general connection drawn between “the Aryan *Akāsa*” and the Universal Ether suggested by Buchanan’s discovery.⁹⁷ Then, in “The Soul of Things,” (1883) we read that if the Dentons would touch an object, “they would at once come into sympathy with the *Akāsa*, or soul, of the person or thing with whom or which the object had been in relations.”⁹⁸ Thus, the article goes on to argue, they established “the truth of the old Aryan dogma that the Akasa (Ether) is the cradle and grave of objective nature, and that it holds imperishably the records of everything that ever existed, every phenomenon that

⁹³ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1, 184–85 (emphasis in original). In attempting to combine “Laplacian” determinism with free will, Blavatsky was opening up a notorious can of worms: if it is possible to have foreknowledge of the free choices we will make, then are those choices still free?

⁹⁴ Anonymous [Hardinge Britten], *Art Magic*, 188 (italics in original).

⁹⁵ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1, xxvii.

⁹⁶ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1, 113, 125, 139–40, 144, 378, 395.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, “A Case of Obsession,” *The Theosophist* 1, no. 8 (May 1880): 208.

⁹⁸ Anonymous, “The Soul of Things,” *The Theosophist* 4, no. 10 (July 1883): no. 46, 239.

ever occurred in the outer world.”⁹⁹ The author grasped the opportunity to point out how the science of psychometry, first discovered by Buchanan, differed from Spiritualist or Mesmeric clairvoyance: “Its researches may be carried on without risk to the ‘patient,’ and without throwing him or her into the state of Mesmeric unconsciousness.”¹⁰⁰ At this time, it appears that Theosophists were very active publicizing Denton’s work beyond the Western world: not only did they put “more than seventy copies of *The Soul of Things* in India and hope to put seven hundred more,” but they also arranged for Professor Denton to continue a lecture tour through Australia by coming to India as well.¹⁰¹ The article ended with a long summary of Denton’s lecture in Sydney. Finally, an article “Psychometry” (1884) announced the imminent publication of Buchanan’s *Manual*. Psychometry was now presented simply as an alternative to “Clairvoyance” (apparently, the latter term now served as shorthand for the competing approach based on somnambulist trance):

While the latter faculty is most rare, and more rarely still to be found, unless accompanied by a tendency in the clairvoyant to self-deception and the misleading of others, by reason of imperfect control over the Imagination, the psychometer sees the secrets of the *Akasa* by the “Eye of Siva,” while corporeally awake and in full possession of his bodily senses.¹⁰²

In *The Secret Doctrine*, published a few years later, Blavatsky introduced a new distinction: she was now differentiating between the higher realm of *akāsa*, on the one hand, and the lower realm of the Astral Light or the Ether, on the other.¹⁰³ The function of the latter was to mediate between the merely human mental faculties and the superior, pure, abstract and noumenal *akāsa*. In response to questions by students in the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society, in 1889, Blavatsky described the actual “Akāsa, or primordial Light” as “the universal and divine mind,” and defined it more specifically as “the undifferentiated noumenal and abstract Space which will be occupied by *Chidakasam*, the field of primordial consciousness.”¹⁰⁴ It was now differentiated sharply from the lower level known as the Astral Light, which merely

⁹⁹ Anonymous, “The Soul of Things,” 239.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, “The Soul of Things,” 239.

¹⁰¹ Anonymous, “The Soul of Things,” 240.

¹⁰² Anonymous, “Psychometry,” *The Theosophist* 5, no. 6 (March 1884): no. 54, 148.

¹⁰³ Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888), 257.

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, *Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society: Discussions on the Stanzas of the First Volume of The Secret Doctrine*, Part II: Stanzas 2 to 4 (Slokas 1 to 5), February and March 1889 (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society/W.Q. Judge, 1891), 10–11.

mirrored (“reflected and reversed”) the “prototypes or ideas of things” existing on this superior, unconditioned and infinite plane of “Divine eternal consciousness.” Since the Astral light was finite and conditioned, it could in fact be called “illusion,” and as a consequence, “unless the Clairvoyant or Seer can get beyond this plane of illusion, he can never see the Truth, but will be drowned in an ocean of self-deception and hallucinations.”¹⁰⁵

9. The Clairvoyant Virtuoso: Charles Webster Leadbeater

Such a distinction was bound to have far-reaching consequences for the distribution of power within the Theosophical hierarchy, for it meant that higher-ranking Theosophists would always have the option of dismissing any competing or otherwise unwelcome claims of clairvoyant observation as “merely astral” and hence deceptive and unreliable. The simplicity and egalitarianism of the original conception of Buchanan and the Dentons, where countless people could make reliable observations by using their natural psychometric abilities, was hence replaced by a far more complex differentiation along a vertical scale, with mere hallucinations below and pure metaphysical vision up above. As second-generation Theosophists inherited the increasing sophistication of Blavatsky’s metaphysics, this resulted notably in a distinction between the lower “Astral plane” and the higher “Devachanic Plane.”¹⁰⁶

These permutations of Theosophical metaphysics are fascinating to trace, but would lead beyond the confines of this article, which purports to demonstrate the centrality of the imagination to what is usually understood as Theosophical clairvoyance. However, it makes sense to conclude with a few words about Theosophy’s most famous virtuoso clairvoyant, Charles Webster Leadbeater. Having abandoned his parish in England to follow Blavatsky to India, young Leadbeater (then only thirty years of age) arrived in Adyar at the end of 1884.¹⁰⁷ Throughout the following year, he lived there as the only European on the property except for Mr. A.J. Cooper-Oakley, whom he disliked and tried to avoid.¹⁰⁸ It must have been a difficult time for him.

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, *Transactions*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ See Charles Webster Leadbeater, *The Astral Plane: Its Scenery, Inhabitants and Phenomena*, Theosophical Manuals 5 (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1895); idem, *The Devachanic Plane: Its Characteristics and Inhabitants*, Theosophical Manuals 6 (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896).

¹⁰⁷ Gregory Tillett, *The Elder Brother: A Biography of Charles Webster Leadbeater* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 33–40.

¹⁰⁸ Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 45–46.



If one just looks at this photo of the 1885 Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society (with a rather distraught-looking Leadbeater in the middle towards the right) it is not so hard to understand that a newly arrived European might feel quite overwhelmed among all those Indian Theosophists comfortably at home in their own country, and undoubtedly conversing among themselves in their own language. It is during this period of loneliness and isolation that Leadbeater is supposed to have received visits from the Masters, who taught him to develop his psychic powers through the practice of kundalini yoga. But the evident problem with this story is that its exclusive source is Leadbeater's autobiographical reminiscences *How Theosophy Came To Me* (1930), published no less than forty-five years later. As pointed out by Gregory Tillett, it is hard to reconcile this account with what we find in Leadbeater's letters to Olcott and Sinnett during the mid-1880s, which are full of complaints about his miserable life, make no references to any of those occult experiences, and mostly just show how badly he longed to return to England.¹⁰⁹

Regardless of how one wishes to evaluate Leadbeater's stories about meeting the Masters, I see no evidence that his claims of clairvoyance had much to do with kundalini yoga; rather, again, everything suggests that we are dealing with psychometry. For instance, in May 1894, Leadbeater began investigating the past lives of a prominent Theosophist, the landscape painter John Varley, simply by "tuning in" to the mind of the Logos or Soul of the world, as he explained. No trance was required: the "investigations" were carried out in a state of full consciousness.¹¹⁰ This would remain the pattern through the

¹⁰⁹ Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 48.

¹¹⁰ Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 58–61. After Leadbeater's death, Jinarâjadâsa published the accounts

following decades, in Leadbeater's never-ending explorations of the lives of Alcyone (Jiddu Krishnamurti) and many other Theosophists.¹¹¹ Jinarâjadâsa, a frequent first-hand observer, points out that Leadbeater did not rely just on his clairvoyant observations alone, but was consulting reference books and encyclopaedias as well:

After examining various scenes, what Bishop Leadbeater then does is to consult some Encyclopaedia or book dealing with that time in history, in order to get a general idea of what ordinary historians have to say. Having got then, as it were, a framework of history, at least so far as historians can build it, he then refers to the true record and corrects, if necessary, the so-called history in books by the real Akashic record.¹¹²



Indeed, a photo of Leadbeater “researching the lives” shows him sitting at a table (together with Dick Balfour Clarke, Irving Cooper, and Fabrizio Ruspoli) with what looks like a well-stocked reference library in the background. Ernest Wood writes that during these sessions, Leadbeater would be dictating for hours on end, “while he walked round and round the room to keep himself awake.”¹¹³ Wood was welcome to interrupt him at any moment for questions or suggestions.

of the lives of Varley (known as “Erato”): Leadbeater, *The Soul's Growth Through Reincarnation: Lives of Erato and Spica*, ed. C. Jinarâjadâsa (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1941).

¹¹¹ Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 114–22.

¹¹² C. Jinarâjadâsa, “The Akashic Records Once More,” *The Occult Review* (July 1923): 53–54.

¹¹³ Ernest Wood, *Is This Theosophy?* (London: Occult Book Society, 1936), 135; cf. Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 115.

Clearly, we need no kundalini yoga to explain how it all happened. In fact, it was Leadbeater himself who told aspiring clairvoyants that the first thing they needed to do was precisely to train their imagination! In an extremely revealing account, the same Ernest Wood recalls what happened when a prominent Theosophist complained to Leadbeater that he did not remember any of his initiations on the astral plane:

Leadbeater's reply was: "But why don't you remember? You ought to be able to remember." "Well, if I let my imagination play on it, I can get a sort of impression about it." "That is just what you ought to do. There is a cause for such imagining. How can you expect your clairvoyant power to develop if you destroy its delicate beginnings?" The member followed this advice and became one of the prominent clairvoyants in the Theosophical Society, though years later he mentioned in conversation, that he never really *saw* anything; only he received an impression so vivid that he felt it must be so, and he was justified in saying with confidence that such-and-such a being was present and saying such-and-such a thing.¹¹⁴

10. Concluding Remarks: The Power of the Visionary

That Theosophical clairvoyance is just another word for psychometry – and must therefore be sharply distinguished from the competing type of clairvoyance based upon somnambulist trance – was confirmed with striking honesty by no one else than Olcott in 1896:

It is not too much to say that if one would have a complete understanding of the revelations given us by Leadbeater, Mr. Scott-Elliott, and some others, and if one would understand the secret of Madame Blavatsky's writing her marvellous books about things quite outside her field of education, one should familiarise himself with the principles and history of psychometry.¹¹⁵

The precise formulation "akashic records" may have been coined by Olcott in the same chapter,¹¹⁶ and again one is struck by how straightforward he was about its limitations: "Of course, it is but fair to say that at the present moment the scientific value of psychometrical research is very far from having been proved."¹¹⁷ Having questioned the scientific claims of psychometry in this

¹¹⁴ Wood, *Is This Theosophy?*, 141–42; cf. Tillett, *Elder Brother*, 267.

¹¹⁵ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1893–96*, 398–99.

¹¹⁶ Hester, "Into the Celestial Spheres," 43; see Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1893–96*, 408.

¹¹⁷ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1893–96*, 405.

manner, Olcott added some lines that can only be read as a sharp critique of Leadbeater, whose past-life investigations had been making big waves among Theosophists for the past two years:

As regards the tracings back of the births of some of us, in the Society, it is but fair to say that they should not be accepted as absolute truth until our observers have developed their clairvoyant sight much more than it is at present, and until they have become able to divest themselves of all feelings of personal preferences or antagonisms to the subject whose evolutionary career is being observed.¹¹⁸

Olcott's remarks reflect the increasing tension between the first and second generation of Theosophical leaders over the ultimate foundations of spiritual authority in their Society. As self-appointed visionaries such as Leadbeater got used to interpreting their own mental imagery as clairvoyant perception, they were moving away from the egalitarian approach that had been typical of Buchanan and the Dentons. These original pioneers, after all, had claimed that anyone with the talent of psychometry could speak with authority about such matters as the history of ancient civilizations or earlier stages of human evolution. Second-generation Theosophists such as Leadbeater in the Anglophone world or Rudolf Steiner in the German-speaking domain,¹¹⁹ by contrast, were now arguing that the cognitive reliability of clairvoyant vision depended crucially on one's level of spiritual development.

It was inevitable that, in making this claim, they would end up privileging themselves as spiritual authorities whose judgment could not be questioned. By definition, the truth or accuracy of their clairvoyant observations could ultimately not be judged by anyone except those who had attained the requisite level of inner development. The logical corollary was if anyone questioned those observations, this only proved that he or she still fell short of that goal. In other words, Theosophists ended up with classic no-win logic: "if you had reached enlightenment, you would agree – therefore if you do not agree, clearly you have not yet reached enlightenment." From this dilemma there was no escape other than what is known as the *argumentum ad verecundiam*, the argument from authority.

¹¹⁸ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1893–96*, 405.

¹¹⁹ For the case of Steiner, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Vorwort: Rudolf Steiner und die hellseherische Einbildungskraft," in Rudolf Steiner, *Schriften – Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Christian Clement, vol. 8, no. 1: *Schriften zur Kosmogonie und Anthropogenese*, v–xviii (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 2018), which incorporates a German translation of the analysis of psychometry provided in the present article.

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