

Correspondences

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Manon Hedenborg White
Aren Roukema **Jimmy Elwing**

Journal for the Study of Esotericism

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Aren Roukema

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I encountered more responses than expected to the editorial Allan Kilner-Johnson and I wrote for last year’s annual issue, in which we set out to explain why *Correspondences* had decided to drop the “Western” from its title. This feedback ranged from agreement with our position to quite justified concerns about foregoing the profile which “Western esotericism” has achieved in the academic community. A further group of responses, however, seemed to misunderstand our motivations for the change. I therefore thought a brief reiteration might be in order, with assurance that we continue to welcome informed disagreement and discussion generated by our decision.

Our editorial team believes that the adjectival Western is no longer needed to demarcate the study of esotericism as a field of critical research, particularly as it continues to encode a number of questionable frameworks of identity, culture, and geographical perspective within it — the problematic heritage of rhetorical strategies that have sought to set Christendom and colonial Europe apart from the world. Most centrally, however, our decision was motivated by the nature of the research we saw emerging within the field, research which unapologetically and unproblematically finds practices, discourses, images, and concepts all over the globe which seem esoteric, or influenced by esoteric currents, or even productively comparable to phenomena produced in cultures and geographies considered “Western.” Perhaps even more crucially, research ongoing in the study of esotericism and alternative or “new” religious movements frequently finds esotericism in cultures and subcultures within the historical and geographical boundaries of the “West,” which would not

themselves readily accept the ethnically European, religiously Judeo-Christian, or politically capitalist and industrialist mantles that the term contains.

Our primary motivation for dropping the “Western” was therefore to proactively promote inclusive and accessible research, as has been our mandate since the journal was founded in 2012. We have no wish to limit the current scope of scholarship, indeed we continue to support researchers who believe that “Western esotericism” best defines and promotes the field. We want only to be open to whatever possible expansions, reinterpretations, and discoveries may be produced by future research. In order to achieve this we want to ensure that we do not unintentionally limit openness to diversity and heterodoxy, in terms of both the researchers and research subjects of esotericism studies. We feel that the field requires, in other words, the broadest possible church, the widest conceivable umbrella, one that reflects the loosely affiliated group of themes, subjects, and traditions we study. We worry that without this breadth the methodologies and frameworks which have thus far been established by scholars of esotericism could be tainted, or even erased, as a result of unnecessary associations with outdated ideologies and narratives.

We have been fortunate to have many opportunities to pursue our mandate of inclusivity and accessibility this year. The current issue contains our usual diverse mix of articles which address strikingly different themes, periods, and cultural contexts. Even more directly, we were very pleased to work with Liana Saif on last summer’s *Islamic Esotericism* special issue. This issue placed the plethora of inter- and intra-cultural correspondences that lie at the heart of esotericism on full display, assessing esoteric aspects of philosophy, religious practice, and cultural expression in medieval Persia, modern day Islamicate cultures, and African-American forms of esoteric Islam. We hope to continue to publish articles and thematic issues which explore new terrain in the study of esotericism, while also continuing to feature research on and analysis of already well-known figures, traditions, and concepts.

Correspondences's open access, web-based format has always allowed us to achieve this mandate of inclusivity and accessibility more easily than journals using subscription-based models. However, we were able to further expand public access to our articles and reviews this year by joining the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Affiliation with DOAJ enables broader searchability and impact as our articles are now indexed in a number of leading academic databases. It is also a stamp of approval for the quality of research we publish.

In order to continue our mission to publish globally accessible and relevant research of esoteric phenomena past and present, we also expanded our team in the past year. Though we were sad to see Allan Kilner-Johnson depart our editorial staff to dedicate more time to his new job as vice-dean at the University of Surrey (congrats Allan!), we are correspondingly excited to welcome Manon Hedenborg White, who will be sharing the helm as editor. We are also saying goodbye to Egil Asprem move on this year, as he left his job as reviews editor to become editor of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*. Again, however, we are more than compensated by the arrival of Justine Bakker as our new reviews editor. She has been hard at work since January, with (I think you will find) excellent results. We also welcome Tommy Cowan as associate editor. Tommy is the fingers behind all our social media postings, as well as a diligent copyeditor.

As any regular reader of *Correspondences* will have quickly noticed, we also got a new look this year. Many thanks to Sing Yun Lee and Jonathan Hedley, the creative braintrust behind Sinjin Li Studios, for the excellent design and patient technical support. Thanks also the University of Surrey for funding this renovation.

Tractatus Logico-Magicus: A Definition of Magic in Three Throws of the Die*

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Abstract

The title of this essay matches its ambition: its purpose is nothing less than to define magic in modern philosophical terms. Yet the Wittgensteinianism of the title also reflects the irony of this ambition: through the metaphor of a thrice thrown die, the essay foregrounds the aleatoriness of its argument and the elusiveness of its object. Magic, it will be argued here, is a quality that is ascribed to a given object, and it is in that ascription, in the *predicative assertion* that a thing possesses magic, that its logic must be sought. However, rather than scan the history of esoteric or occult thought for such assertions, the essay will draw upon Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* to argue that magic is not so much a quality in itself as it is the emotional transformation of a pre-existing quality. Following Sartre's view that emotion effects a magical transformation upon the world, the essay will conclude by arguing that the ascription of magic to a thing is true only if the very act of assertion transforms its ascriptive logic – emotionally, and, therefore, magically.

Keywords: emotion; language; logic; magic; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Feuerbach, Ludwig

Imagine discovering in some distant field a small object of blackish hue. Dodecahedral, with edges too sharp and regular to be hand-hewn, each of its marmoreal faces is furrowed with groups of whitish lines, some curved and some jagged, others crossed with additional dashes; smooth and solid to the touch, it lacks the compaction of stone and the grainy cut of wood. As you weigh and ponder it, its plastic body glinting with the moisture of freshly troubled earth, it strikes you as being of immense age, as if it had lain there for centuries, absorbing time like water. And though you do not comprehend the markings, which you

* This work has been supported by a postdoctoral research grant from the Kone Foundation.

think may represent a fragment of an alphabet, there appears to be a system of permutation that dictates their order and relation, and you are sure that, with the proper tools, you will be able to decipher their intent.

Imagine then that this object prompts you to utter the word magic. Depending on the circumstances of your discovery, what you mean by this word will vary. Assuming that you are an anthropologist, you will perhaps hazard the guess that this object has played some minor role in a complex ritual. Alternatively, if you are a folklorist with an interest in material culture, you may find yourself enthralled by the talismanic qualities of the object: you sense there the presence of emotions once felt and beliefs once held, of vanished worlds recalled to phantasmatic life. As a literary scholar, you may compare it to similar objects as they are found in fictions, more often in fables and fantasy novels than elsewhere, which brings you a step closer to the folklorist; or, if you are an historian of science who is fascinated by the old theory that the natural sciences were built on occult foundations, you may see in this well-wrought artifact a studious effort to model, and perhaps to redirect, the peculiar energies of some heavenly body. And if in any of these incarnations you were familiar with astrological symbols, which, as per the description above, you are not, you would recognize the carvings as the ancient signs of the zodiac.

But let me change the description and grant you this recondite knowledge. In some variations, you will be aware that the object is a die. In others, you will even perceive that this die is the kind that was used in role-playing games. Once considered a trifling thing, a specimen might be bought for as little as £1. But because you are living in the twenty-third century, it will be evident to you that this object was never the mere plaything that previous ages took it to be: it is a machine for generating random combinations, and the sphere of being it commands is cut from the same cloth as the unfortold and unfortellable future. An idol of twelve faces, this piece of plastic is the crafted body of *tuché* and *ananké*, of chance and fate rolled together into a single throw that, as a prophet

of old is remembered to have said, *jamais n'abolira le hasard*.¹ That, you will say, is its *magic*, and how you will define this magic depends, again, on whether you are an anthropologist or a folklorist, a literary scholar or an historian of science, or, to add here a further and more speculative set of variants, an archeoludologist or a paleoepistemographer. For although this is the twenty-third century, you will be no closer to a systematic and consistent concept of magic than your predecessors were, and, like them, cannot use the word without venturing into a thicket of conjunctions and disjunctions, of sympathies and antipathies, that shatter the term into as many incommensurable aspects as there are incommensurable interpretations of it. The indefinability of magic remains an undisputed truth, and you, in all of your disciplinary variations, are cautious enough to know that you can never use the word in a rigorously justified way without specifying or at least signaling the interpretation to which you adhere. Accurate in one sense and erroneous in another, the word remains as splintered in its descriptions as it has been for centuries, and you conclude, not without justification, that it is best not to elevate any single one above the rest.

That is undoubtedly the right thing to do. Yet as you do so, you inadvertently repeat a particular error, a confusion, that has been repeated for centuries before you. Granted, this confusion is indeed inadvertent, born as it is from the effort to ward off a more serious one, yet a confusion it nonetheless remains: a confusion which consists in assuming that this thing called “magic,” being irreducible to its merely linguistic formulations, cannot be better understood through a reflection on the word “magic” as it is used in a predicative sentence of the form “magic is x” or “x is magic.” In other words, it is assumed — if it is possible to assume a notion that does not even cross the threshold of thematizing consciousness — that the question of what magic is cannot be clarified through an analysis of the linguistic forms in which it is captured: whatever magic is, whatever magics there

1. The sage in question, of course, being Stéphane Mallarmé. See Mallarmé, *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*. On Mallarmé as sage, see Robert McGahey, *The Orphic Moment*, 75–100.

may be, linguistic reflection of a formal nature is too linguistic and too formal to have anything of value to contribute. On the contrary, the assumption goes, a linguistic analysis of “magic,” unless it focuses on the “discursive construction” of “magic,” can only muddle the picture: it mistakes what is said of the object with the object itself — and thereby leads to an irremediable confusion of two levels that ought necessarily to be kept separate.

Such, at any rate, is what I, as a philosophically inclined literary scholar, have been able to adduce as the central bit of reasoning that is shared across all the disciplines in which “magic” is a central critical concept: from the fact that there is no one sentence that *incontestably* expresses the essence of magic — “magic is x and nothing but x ” — it is concluded that it is *impossible* for magic at all, as a singular object, to be fitted within the constraints of a sentential form. Yet that is the error; there lies the root of the confusion. And this is the confusion which the present essay will seek to clarify. If this claim strikes you as overstated, consider what all of your scholarly avatars are doing. And not only the fictional ones, but the real ones as well. First of all, in offering their partial impressions of the things they find “magical,” they will necessarily identify certain qualities by which this putative “magic” is identified. And this they will necessarily do, whether expressly or implicitly, in descriptive sentences of the form “magic is x ” (where x is ritual activity, reanimation of the past, causal efficacy, etc.). Secondly, however, they immediately efface this descriptive dimension — this stating that “magic is x ” — by passing over to the side of the object: since we can speak about magic, it evidently is something, but because the things we say of it are not all commensurable, the definition of magic must not be sought by conceptual means, by trying to define the contours of magic *as* magic, but rather by looking at the multiple contexts in which the term is used and the various things which are meant by it. As a consequence, though it is impossible to speak of magic without using predicative language, the only legitimate way to examine magic *as* magic — not *as such* but rather as *something* thus nameable — is to remember that all this language merely serves

— and this is true even in the case of the “discursive construction” of magic — to indicate where the real focus of attention lies. In this view, the best a sentence can do is to state a particular aspect or instance of something that is called “magic”; everything else that it can bring to this question is best left unbrought.

What the following pages will seek to address is this “everything else.” And what they will bring to the question is a perspective that, as yet, has not been tested in any of the fields where magic is a central object of interest. My hope with this essay is that such a test might be undertaken in the future. In his preface to *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*, Christopher Lehrich calls for a truly interdisciplinary study of magic,² and it is as a response to this call that I wish my intensely abstract and professedly challenging contribution to be taken: it will be useful, I believe, for anyone interested in magic to have a more detailed and consequential understanding of what it means to use the word “magic” in a truth-asserting sentence, and if this essay has any grander objective, it is to facilitate this understanding without thereby disenchanting the central object of inquiry.

Hence the irony — the ironic literalism — of the essay’s title. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein patiently and rigorously bares the propositional bones of everything that factually takes place in the world, and it is with similar patience and rigour — though, I should hope, with a greater dose of humour — that this essay will seek to clarify the propositional structure by which the factual existence of magic is adduced. Briefly, the argument to be put forward here consists of three parts, or, metaphorically, of three throws of the magical die. Having shown in the first section that the lack of a universally valid concept of magic does not entail its dispersal into pure polyvalence, I will argue that the elusiveness of “magic” is partly due to the fact that it can function equally well as the subject term and the predicate term of a propositional sentence. In the second section, I will show that “magic,” when examined as a subject term, is in all cases reducible to a set of underlying predicates by which another thing

2. Lehrich, *The Occult Mind*, xiii–xiv.

is determined as the thing that it is. As subject, it is all predicate; as predicate, it crumbles into a dust of further predicates; and at this stage it becomes wholly impossible to determine how the word should be understood and why it should be used in the first place. In the third section, which is the last and lengthiest of the essay, I will solve this dilemma by showing that an underlying predicate must be understood as the *criterion* by which a given sentence about magic is judged to be either true or false: poetry, for example, is magic when it is extraordinarily poetic. From this basis, drawing on Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, I argue that magic exists only as the *emotional transformation* of this criterial predicate: wherever there is talk of magic, there must be, somewhere in the picture, an experience of this kind. However, rather than conclude from this that magic is nothing more than a matter of emotion, the figment of a consciousness led astray by the irrational power of its affects, I demonstrate, by way of deepening and generalising Sartre's claim, that it is *emotions themselves* that are magical, that this emotional transformation is not a *transformation of the predicate by emotion* but rather the *emotionally apprehended self-transformation* of the criterial predicate itself: the quality named by the predicate becomes magical, in and beyond the sense intended by Sartre, when it is removed from its pragmatic and causally determined context and revealed in experience as being *infinitely what it is*. Revealed, in other words, in its *essence*.

This last sentence points at the ultimate aim of my argument. Rather than offer a definition of magic as such, one that is true for all instances where this word is or may be used, my wish is to transform Sartre's philosophical definition of magic into a *properly philosophical* magic, a magic *internal to philosophy*, which inverts the relation between *explanandum* and *explanans* by asking what happens to the criterion itself when it is magically revealed as infinitely itself. To put it briefly and still enigmatically: *if philosophy can give a definition of magic, this is because definition is the magic of philosophy*.³ Thus, still within the third section

3. By philosophy, of course, I mean here *modern* philosophy, understanding by that word the form of

of the essay, I conclude with the suggestion, more than slightly provocative, that there cannot be a philosophical concept of magic, let alone a philosophy of magic, that is not oriented in some mode or degree towards a *belief* in magic. Not towards an assertion that it is real, which would mean that one cannot theorize magic without believing in it, nor towards what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “belief without belief,” a “disowning intertwined with an ‘as if’” for which magic could only have a fictional existence,⁴ but rather towards an act of *naming*. If magic is something, I will argue, it exists as something that can *give its name* to the otherwise unnamable event of a thing being revealed as infinitely itself. Such as, for example, the chance discovery in a distant field of a strangely marked black object, the object being unnamable to the precise extent that its discovery is also the discovery of what this thing *portends* about itself.

That, at any rate, is the line of thought to be pursued in the following pages. Whether the argument fits the description above – whether, in other words, the dice fall with the same sense of urgency and fascination as they are thrown – remains to be seen; my only wish in this respect is that it will take less than two centuries for us to find out.

1. First throw of the die: there is no universally valid concept of “magic”

In their editorial introduction to the anthology *Defining Magic: A Reader*, Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg argue that the concept of magic should no longer be used as an overarching category in the study of religion: in addition to being ethnocentrically biased and ideologically problematic, the word is semantically too diverse and conceptually too heterogeneous to function properly in the role that it is typically assigned.⁵ However, since the word shows no signs of

rational thought that begins with Descartes and still constitutes the foundation of our contemporary *episteme*. one in which, as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes, the ancient differentiation between *human* and *divine* knowledge has given way to a unified *cogito* for which no human experience counts as knowledge unless it is sanctioned by science. See Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 17–24.

4. Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, 95.

5. Otto & Stausberg, “General Introduction,” 10.

going away, the authors attempt to square this circle by showing that the concept of magic does not need to be abandoned but may instead be rescued in and by its inherent multiplicity. Indeed, as Otto and Stausberg show, the plurality of meanings and practices that make it unable to stand as a “supreme metacategory” may itself be made more exact by being subjected to a degree of formalizing pressure.⁶ To this end, rather than speak of magic *as such*, of magic *itself*, they argue that we should speak of *patterns of magicity*, of “forms and conditions of structural stability” that permit certain characterizations and conceptions of “magic” to occur and re-occur across discursive, cultural, and temporal differences.⁷

It is on these recurrent characterizations and conceptions that the formalizing pressure is applied. After disowning all pretensions to scientificity, the authors devise a notation which brings those same pretensions fully and ironically into play: word magic is graphed as “MWOR,” sign magic morphs into “MSIG,” while the attempt to control the desires of others acquires the abbreviated form of “MDES” — and so on and so forth.⁸ Here, each use of the word “magic” is indexed to a particular context of interpretation that is indicated by the subscript letters, and because each context can be treated as a relatively stable totality of beliefs and practices, the semantic and historical vagueness that plagues the word, with one sense of “magic” smudged into another by the passage of time, is effectively broken up into chunks or modules that would together constitute the proper object of the field.⁹ Thus, for example, the formula “MWOR” “is derived from the recurrent observation that humans tend to ascribe efficacy to the utterance of specific words in ritual sequences and that this pattern of ascription is attested cross-culturally in a multiplicity of sources.”¹⁰ Similarly, “MEVA” refers to “modes of evaluation of ritual activities conducted by specific actors and the views on, and social position of, such actors.”¹¹ For this reason, the patterns

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. See Aspren, “Patterns of Magicity,” 132.

10. Otto & Stausberg, “General Introduction,” 11.

11. *Ibid.*

“do not automatically involve ‘MAGIC’ (as the supreme meta-category), nor are they ‘magic’ (as referring to ontological features), but they are a way of dealing with cross-culturally attested observations. ‘Magicity’ acknowledges the fact that they were traditionally assigned to the overall category ‘MAGIC’ in which we have stopped believing.”¹² If it is not immediately obvious whether this yields any greater clarity, the attempt, at any rate, is commendable, for, as may be seen from the following list, there is indeed a great deal of clarifying to be done. Magic, the authors write, has been described as being:

- coercive;
- manipulative;
- seeking to exercise control of others or change the state of things or other human beings;
- interventionist;
- purely mechanical;
- powerful, self-efficacious ritual action;
- analogical/symbolic/sympathetic;
- typically operative in the form of contagion or similarity;
- imitative and/or mimetic;
- instrumental ritual action with limited aims and scope;
- a practice of obtaining ordinarily unavailable this-worldly benefits;
- a ritual counter-measure against “witchcraft” attacks;
- performed on “critical” occasions;
- based on associative thinking;
- immune to falsification;
- compulsive, hallucinatory behaviour;
- based on a non-ordinary “participatory” worldview or consciousness;
- derived from strong emotions such as anger or fear, related to desires;
- related to (supernatural, invisible) agents or agency typically distinct from gods;

12. Ibid.

- non-legitimate dealing with the supernatural;
- private and/or secret;
- egocentric and/or autistic;
- antisocial or related to societal sub-groups;
- performed by self-employed, non-institutionalized specialists (the “magicians”) serving their clients;
- lacking institutional (infra)structures;
- a specific kind of technique, art or craft requiring special knowledge and/or training;
- associated with “others” such as marginalized groups or outsiders;
- a category and discursive practice of denunciation of “others”;
- immoral or lacking moral considerations;
- characterized by strange or exotic behaviours;
- characterized by a distinctive use of language and words;
- an illocutionary or performative (speech) act;
- producing miraculous events;
- an art of creating illusions, also employed in entertainment.¹³

I have cited this list in full for no other purpose than that of added perplexity – and the clarification that it consequently invites. Exhausting as it is, the list is far from exhaustive, and it may readily be seen why the authors have tried to find a way around it without resorting to an essentialism that treats all these descriptions as particular species of the genus “magic.” Rather, they have given themselves a theoretical tool that enables them to denote an attestable practice of naming, and what they will find named in this practice of naming, rather than magic in itself and as such, is always a set of qualities that are perceived in some historical context as magical. These qualities constitute patterns that may be found in the historical record and discussed with the same degree of objectivity as any other historical phenomenon. And since it is only by their descriptive accuracy that these patterns

13. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

may be evaluated, a not inconsiderable degree of vagueness is dissolved. Because each use of the word is indexed to a particular context or pattern that is explicable in its own terms, it is unnecessary to refer this particular “magic” to any other “magic.” Though various patterns may be cross-referenced and correlated, they are permitted, if need be, to remain in isolation from each other.¹⁴

This, however, is problematic for at least two related and immediately evident reasons. The first is that the model is valid only if the researcher assiduously refrains from the theoretical business of defining and determining the object being researched. Otherwise, the model would constitute yet another pattern of magicity and thereby lose its standing as a *metatheory* of magic. However, although this detachment is indeed necessary, it deprives Otto and Stausberg of a substantial *criterion* by which to distinguish a legitimate “pattern of magicity” — one that arises from a consistent ontological commitment — from a merely spurious one that involves nothing more than the application of the label to any given thing. The difficulties that ensue are multiple, because the lack of a criterion means that every single mention of magic must by rights count as a “pattern of ascription” that “is attested cross-culturally in a multiplicity of sources”¹⁵ — even when the ascription (i.e. the formal assertion that x is magic) and the attestation (i.e. the objective *fact that* some x has been asserted to be magic) call for entirely different concepts and methodologies.

And this is where the second problem arises. A pattern of magicity, we have seen, is a pattern of magicity only if it is explicitly referred to magic or some roughly synonymous term. If not, this pattern will be a pattern of something other than magic. As a consequence, within the framework set up by Otto and Stausberg, a pattern of magicity is never just a pattern of magicity. Owing to this necessity of explicit reference, a pattern of magicity is also a *verbal* pattern, and not just any old pattern made of such and such words, but a strictly *propositional* one:

14. *Ibid.*, 12.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

considered analytically, a “pattern of magicity” may be broken down into a set of *predicate terms* that are attributed to magic as a *subject term*, and if there is any truth in speaking of “patterns of magicity,” everything that may be seen as forming such a pattern must be similarly structured. In other words, to say that a thing is “magic” is to affirm its “magicity,” and this happens by identifying a certain set of attributes that are taken to constitute that magicity. As a result, formulas like “MHAR” (magic as harming others by ritual means), “MOBJ” and “MPLA” (magic as the efficacy of objects or places) or “MMIR” (magic as the possession of miraculous capacities) are shown to be theoretically beguiling and slightly showy translations of simple sentences which say neither more nor less than that “magic is x,” “magic is y,” or “magic does z and causes q.”¹⁶ In the end, therefore, what Otto and Stausberg have to offer is less the new metatheory of magic they purport it to be than a novel taxonomy of magic-referring expressions. It is, to be sure, an elegant solution, but its elegance is sorely vitiated by this lack of theoretical reflexivity. Furthermore, to make matters worse, this second problem compounds the first: if there is no formally consistent criterion by which to distinguish a legitimate pattern from a spurious one, this means by the same token that a true proposition cannot be distinguished from a false one.¹⁷

16. Ibid.

17. One way out of this cul-de-sac is indicated by Kimberly B. Stratton’s essay “Magic Discourse in the Ancient World” in *Defining Magic*. “What gets labelled magic is arbitrary,” Stratton writes, “and depends upon the society in question. Once the label is affixed, however, it enables certain practices to *become* magic by virtue of being regarded as such by members of the society. Magic becomes real by virtue of being conceived” (Stratton, “Magic Discourse,” 246–47). One may recognize here the Foucauldian approach that Stratton has elsewhere brought forcefully to bear on stereotypical representations of magic and witchcraft in European antiquity. See Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 15–18. However, given that the discursive *fiat* by which this transformation is achieved is explicitly a passage from the false statement to the true, the structural distribution of the true and the false remains in place and must be interrogated as such. That, briefly, is what I am trying to do in this part of the essay.

2. Second throw of the die: magic is grammatical

Whether it is true or false, a sentence about magic is just that: a *sentence* about *magic*. Thus, from this perspective at least, the historical and semantical vagueness of “magic” is not the most disastrous of conditions. For what is not vague, or at least is decisively less so, is the logical grammar that governs the *use* of the word. Because there are only a few functions that the word can fulfil in a propositional sentence, and since these functions are in turn bound by rules of logic, they will necessarily limit the ways in which the word may be legitimately used. In other words, “magic,” regardless of the many conflicting patterns in which it can be recognized and recollected, is in this respect neither more nor less vague than any other word that can be used in a grammatically correct sentence. This may be ascertained by looking at the following examples:

a) Magic is poetry.

b) Poetry is magic.

In both sentences, “magic” is evidently a noun. In *a*, it is the subject of which “poetry” is the predicate; in *b*, it is the predicate ascribed to the subject “poetry.” These, however, are not the only forms it can take, as may be seen from the next four samples:

c) There is no magic bullet.

d) It was a magical summer.

e) Magical beliefs are afoot.

f) The pumpkin was magicked into a horse-drawn carriage.

In sentence *c*, “magic” remains a noun: its function is to modify the one that directly follows it. In sentence *d*, it is adjectivized: the “magical” is a quality that may characterize a particular thing. Even there, however, its root form is substantive and requires a precomprehension of the thing denoted: a summer cannot be aptly described as “magical” (or, for that matter, as “sunny”) if the speaker has no conception of what the noun “magic” (or, indeed, “the sun”) denotes. The same applies to *e*, where the adjective functions as a transferred epithet and simply indicates the magical content

of the belief: magical beliefs are beliefs in the real and effective existence of magic (regardless of how “magic” is construed). Finally, in *f*, the word “magic” is transformed into a verb that is, like the adjectives in sentences *d* and *e*, meaningless without a prior understanding of what magic is (such that the ability to “magic” means the capacity to effect a change “as if by magic”). As regards Otto and Stausberg, it should be noted that these grammatical considerations show just how intractable are the problems that they sought to evade. Briefly, their notion of “magicity” (the quality or condition of having “magic”) is easily resolved by observing that it is synonymous or logically equivalent with the adjective “magical.” In turn, this adjective, as has just been seen, has no meaning if it does not refer back to the noun “magic.” As a consequence, therefore, the invention of “magicity” does not solve the problem of “magic” in the least: it only camouflages the latter under a layer of merely seeming precision.

But let us return to the example sentences. In all six cases, magic is a noun that denotes a specific thing. If there is anything vague about these sentences, this vagueness lies in the fact that the thing denoted by the word is not an object at all in any straightforward sense of the term. If this was not evident before, the conclusion becomes inescapable when one pays closer attention to the two functions that the word may have in a propositional sentence:

- 1) As a *subject* term, “magic” refers to an object that is characterized by a finite set of attributes: “magic” is what is x but not y , or y but not z , or x but not x . Here, for example, it denotes the things that sentences *a–f* were respectively seen to presuppose: magic as verbal power in *a*, magic as enchantment in *b*, magic as literal or metaphoric spell in *c*, and so on and so forth.
- 2) As a *predicate* term, “magic” expresses an attribute belonging to another object: poetry, for instance, can be many things, depending on how it is defined, and there are many definitions in which it is characterized by a “magic” of some sort. In this case, a specific interpretation of magic is first selected as salient and then transferred onto the subject of the sentence: the particular “magic” that poetry is said to possess is only one “magic” among many others.

In its first function, magic is *constituted* by the set of properties that are attributed to it. In its second function, magic is *constitutive* of another thing by adding its own properties to those of the thing of which it is said. At first glance, this appears to be a firm and stable distinction. Since “magic” is in both cases a noun, the latter function (magic as constitutive) appears to refer back to the first (magic as constituted). This is because, as was stated above, the possibility of attributing magic to some other object is assumed to depend on a preconception of what “magic” means, or, in other words, of the qualities that constitute “magic” as “magic.” On a closer look, however, the reference to *constitution* reveals this assumption to be more problematic than one might at first be inclined to believe. A preconception, after all, is nothing more than a set of predicative qualities by which we specify the “magic” that we are talking about. And since this specification cannot be done on a whim, by some arbitrary *fiat* of pure stipulation, there must in each case be a *criterion of selection* to which this act of specification is referred. Magic itself, obviously, cannot serve as this criterion. Because “magic itself” cannot be conjured out of thin air, every attempt to define “magic” according to a list of “magical qualities” is a fallacy of the *virtus dormativa* kind: to identify magic by its magical qualities is to identify certain qualities as magical – and to do this is necessarily to fall guilty of circular reasoning, because these qualities must be identified as magical before they can serve as the definition of magic. As a consequence, the criterion can only be sought in the actual thing to which “magic” is attributed. What is magical about poetry, for instance, must be some attribute that actually and verifiably characterizes poetry – not poetry as such, in all its instances, but in this or that poem, in one stanza or a single verse, in the fine mutation of a prosodic pattern.¹⁸ Such attributes, I propose, are best defined as *magic-bearing qualities*: a

18. Ezra Pound, echoing Walter Pater, puts this finely in his early study *The Spirit of Romance*. “Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions. If one have a mind which inclines to magic rather than to science, one will prefer to speak of these equations as spells

quality may be called “magical” if and only if it is able to serve as a qualitative substrate for “magic” (i.e. if and only if its semantic content can be passed over to “magic” as the proper definition of the latter). As may be seen from the litany cited in the previous section, magic is very near – very near, but not all the way – to being parasitic on such qualities: an (apparently) empty term with no (clear) identity of its own, it cannot function (as far as we can tell) without a host.

Whether this characterization is too negative – essentially, rather than merely rhetorically – remains to be seen. Yet, grounded in this way, what is certain is that “magic” finds itself defined by a set of predicates that is selected according to another set of predicates: poetic predicates in the context of poetry, ritualistic in the context of ritual, occulting in the context of the occult, ecstatic in an ecstatic context.¹⁹ This, as we prepare for the next throw of the die, will prove to be decisive for my attempt to grasp the problem of “magic” beyond its dispersal into semantical and historical vagueness. Whenever the word “magic” is used in a sentence, there is an underlying predicate

or incantations; it sounds more arcane, mysterious, recondite. Speaking generally, the spells or equations of ‘classic’ art invoke the beauty of the normal, and spells of ‘romantic’ art are said to invoke the beauty of the unusual” (Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 14). For Pater’s view on the mixture of strangeness and beauty, see his *Appreciations*, 246–47. Another perspective is offered by Reuven Tsur in *On the Shore of Nothingness*. Tsur draws upon Roman Jakobson in disputing the equation of poetry and magic: “In verbal magic and mysticism, the signifier is frequently indistinguishable from the signified. God, and the name of God, have sometimes the same powers. The sounds of the name of God, and the letters that signify those sounds (e.g., the tetragrammaton), have sometimes the same magic power. In this respect, poetry is diametrically opposed to verbal magic. In a complex cultural situation of human society in which the automatic identification of signifiers with their signifieds may be the source of maladaptive behaviour, the signifiers and signifieds must be properly kept apart. It is here where poetry comes in” (Tsur, *Shore*, 209). Bronislaw Malinowski might not agree: magic, he writes, “seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man’s mysterious possibilities. Witness to this is the power which the words *magic*, *spell*, *charm*, *to bewitch*, and *to enchant*, possess in poetry, where the inner value of words, the emotional forces which they still release, survive longest and are revealed most clearly” (Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 51).

19. This is not to say, of course, that magic has only one definition or interpretation in a given context. Contexts are not necessarily cut off from each other, and the qualities that are magic-bearing in one context will often be found to have carried their magic into another.

that bears it. And whenever a sentence mentions “magic,” this mention does something to the magic-bearing predicate. Qualifying the quality to which it is added, it transforms this quality and the thing determined by this quality into something more and something other than it was before: more potent, more beguiling, more efficaciously present than it might otherwise be. This is why its emptiness is not the emptiness of an illusion and its parasitism the parasitism of an error. Or, to be more precise, this is why its emptiness is not simply a pure absence and its parasitism not just a superficial and surreptitious addition. To the contrary: it may well turn out to be the case that “magic” has nothing else to commend itself except this capacity for heightened presence.

3. Third throw of the die: there is always a criterion which decides whether “magic” is attributable to a thing

Magic as capacity for heightened presence? Ludwig Feuerbach, for one, would not abide by such claims. In *The Essence of Christianity*, this ingraspable sense of something *more* – the sense of a thing being itself, but with an added and strange degree of *profundity* – is seized as an opportunity to excoriate religion in general – and “Christian sophistry” in particular – for its obfuscatory and obscurantist tendencies. Near the beginning of a chapter that deals with the contradiction inherent in the divine nature – namely, that God is at once universal and personal, infinite and individual – we find this striking paragraph:

A peculiarly characteristic artifice and pretext of Christian sophistry is the doctrine of the unsearchableness, the incomprehensibility of the divine nature. But, as will be shown, the secret of this incomprehensibility is nothing further than that a known quality is made into an unknown one, a natural quality into a supernatural, i.e., an unnatural one, so as to produce the appearance, the illusion, that the divine nature is different from the human, and is eo ipso an incomprehensible one.²⁰

20. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212.

In the previous paragraph, having first stated that the “essence of religion is the immediate, involuntary, unconscious contemplation of the human nature as another, a distinct nature,” Feuerbach observes that this “projected image of human nature,” as it is taken up as the object of theological reflection, “becomes an inexhaustible mine of falsehoods, illusions, contradictions, and sophisms.”²¹ Against this relentlessly critical background, the passage quoted above functions as a transition to another discussion, lengthier and yet more acerbic than the one preceding it, that deals with the properly *imaginary* quality of divine incomprehensibility. By treating it as imaginary, of course, Feuerbach does not mean that incomprehensibility should be seen as a sign and a spur for profounder learning, as Friedrich Schlegel argued in one of his fragments some four decades previously: that would be much too romantic, much too ironic for his purposes.²² Rather, his point is to show that the idea of an inscrutable God emerges from eminently scrutable elements that are rendered mysterious and inhuman only by the spontaneous removal of everything that determines them as human: finitude, dependence, measure. Furthermore, because this removal is indeed spontaneous — or, in Feuerbach’s terms, “immediate,” “involuntary,” and “unconscious” — it lends itself effortlessly to the kind of dismantling that Feuerbach is engaged in. “In the truly religious sense,” he writes in the next paragraph, “incomprehensibility is not the dead full stop which reflection places wherever understanding deserts it, but a *pathetic note of exclamation* marking the impression which the imagination makes on the feelings.”²³ This association of feeling and imagination explains why, for Feuerbach, “the incomprehensibility of God has only the significance of an impassioned expression.”²⁴ What takes us by surprise, Feuerbach argues, elicits from us the exclamation that it is “incredible” and “beyond conception,” and since these exclamations are thoroughly

21. *Ibid.*, 211–12.

22. Schlegel, *Fragments*, 257–71.

23. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212, my emphasis.

24. *Ibid.*

imbued with a pathetic note, a note of *pathos*, the incomprehensibility that is ascribed to God turns out to be nothing other than the imaginatively exaggerated and intellectually hyperbolized form of a quintessentially human feeling. For the human imagination, many things feel incredible and beyond conception; yet God is that which feels *absolutely* incredible and beyond *all* conception.

This is what Feuerbach means when he says of the imagination that it is “the original organ of religion.”²⁵ Defining this faculty as “the limitless activity of the senses” and the nature of God as “the nature of the imagination unfolded, made objective,”²⁶ Feuerbach describes religion as the *intellectual infinitization of a finite feeling*. In religion, everything that limits the imagination is negated, and the imagination, thus freed from the dross of human finitude, is granted to a God that *feels* infinite and therefore *is* infinite. Here, the parallels to my argument as I have developed it thus far become evident, and they are nowhere more so than in the specific act by which, as Feuerbach writes, “a known quality is made into an unknown one, a natural quality into a supernatural, *i.e.* an unnatural one.”²⁷ From a strictly formal perspective, what this act of imagination comes to effect is nothing other than the transformation of a *human quality* into a *God-bearing quality*; furthermore, because this formal efficacy does not pass unnoticed by Feuerbach, he is able to redefine the language of religion, and specifically of theology, as tantamount to a set of God-referring expressions. Or, more precisely, a set of *God-referring pathetic exclamations*.

But that is not the end of the matter. If imagination is the organ of religion, it is equally the organ of magic. Yet magic and religion are not the same, which is why it remains to be asked how this organ of emotional infinitization works in this somewhat shadowier realm.

This, of course, is a nearly intractable question. However, though answers are hard to find, they are, happily, not altogether nonexistent: for, by a stroke of luck, if not of magic, it is precisely this that Jean-Paul Sartre comes to elucidate,

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

without exactly intending to, in his early essay *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. In this short work, which gives an overview of then-current psychological theories of emotion before supplementing them with a relatively detailed phenomenological analysis, Sartre deploys the notion of magic in a way that makes up in conceptual inventiveness what it lacks in descriptive accuracy.²⁸ What this inventiveness consists in will be dealt with shortly. On the latter score, it should be noted here that its shortcomings are glaring indeed, and apart from a brief mention in Randall Styers’s landmark book *Making Magic*, which examines the way in which “magic” is posited as the counterpart to a putatively rational “modernity,” it is no surprise that the ideas put forward in the essay have passed undiscussed by scholars of the subject.²⁹ This choice snippet, quoted by Styers in a different translation, gives a good idea of where Sartre is coming from:

The magical, as Alain says, is “the mind crawling among things”; that is, an irrational synthesis of spontaneity and passivity. It is an inert activity, a consciousness rendered passive. But it is precisely in that form that others appear to us, and this, not because of our positions in relation to them, nor in consequence of our passions, but by essential necessity; ... It follows that man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical. Not that it is impossible to take a deterministic view of the inter-psychological world or to build rational superstructures upon it. But then it is those structures

28. By “descriptive accuracy,” I simply mean the extent to which Sartre’s concept of magic can be reconciled with everything that historical and empirical investigation has been able to say about “magic” – in other words with Otto and Stausberg’s “patterns of magicity” (and it is, among other things, merely one pattern among others). Furthermore, it should be noted that Sartre’s theory of magic is fundamentally a theory of the imagination and as such would be able to do without the former concept. (On the equivalence that Sartre draws between the magical and the imaginary, see O’Shiel, “Sartre’s Magical Being.”) In the following reflections, what I am aiming at, ultimately, is the *deconstruction* of Sartre’s theory of the emotions through its appeal to the concept of magic. In other words, the argument will consist, to quote Jacques Derrida, “in making appear – in each alleged system, in each self-interpretation of and by a system – a force of dislocation, a limit in the totalization, a limit in the movement of syllogistic synthesis” (Derrida & Ferraris, *A Taste for The Secret*, 4). As will be seen, magic is precisely what exceeds Sartre’s system, his phenomenological theory of the emotions, even as it gives this theory the *force* that it needs.

29. Styers, *Making Magic*, 179.

that are ephemeral and unstable, it is they that crumble away as soon as the magical aspect of faces, gestures and the human situations becomes too vivid. And what happens then, when the superstructures laboriously built up by the reason disintegrate, and man finds himself suddenly plunged back into the original magic? That is easily predicted; the consciousness seizes upon the magic as magic, and lives it vividly as such.³⁰

“Crawling,” “passivity,” “inertia”: that would seem to say it all. For a scholar of magic, claims such as these are debatable at best, and their sole merit, if merit there is, bears solely on the structure of emotional experience that the essay investigates.

Or does it? Note, at the end of the quotation, these two crucial expressions: *magic as magic*, *magic as such*. I drew your attention to these objectifying expressions in the introduction and will do so later on. Before that, however, let us read what Sartre writes only a couple of pages earlier:

Indeed, there is a world of emotion. All emotions have this in common, that they evoke the appearance of a world, cruel, terrible, bleak, joyful, etc., but in which the relations of things to consciousness are always and exclusively magical. We have to speak of a world of emotion as one speaks of a world of dreams or of worlds of madness. A world — that means individual syntheses in mutual relations and possessing *qualities*.... We are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction.³¹

In the world of emotion, then, magic is found in *qualities*. In other words, there is no need to add any magic to a quality. Emotion itself, for Sartre, is nothing other than a magical relation to a quality, and if Sartre’s argument holds, we may propose, as a hypothesis, that the converse is also true: *magic is nothing other than an emotional relation to a quality*.

But emotional in what sense? The answer to this question entails a decisive turn. Thus far, I have adduced my broader argument only abstractly and without any certainty that it might hold true of any given object. Yet Sartre’s account changes all this. There, the word “magic” does not refer to yet another “pattern of magicity.” Nor, for that matter, does the essay deal with a phenomenon that

30. Sartre, *Sketch*, 56–57.

31. *Ibid.*, 53–55.

can vaguely be called “magical.” Rather, the word “magic” is used there, as it is elsewhere in Sartre’s work, because it accurately describes the phenomenon that Sartre is trying to understand: when he says that the magical is “an irrational synthesis of spontaneity and passivity,” when he describes it as “an inert activity, a consciousness rendered passive,” this passivity is not primarily a qualitative state, although it is that too, but first and foremost it is the state of being an object *for the other*, which, in this case, is not another consciousness, another subject, but rather a quality “that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction.” For this reason, despite the connection that scholars and thinkers like Malinowski or Collingwood have drawn between magic and emotion,³² what Sartre is grappling with here is in fact something altogether different: of all the shorthands available to him, “magic” is the one that best expresses a situation in which both mind and world are gripped and transformed by a power that is wholly other to either of them.

The implications of this are of paramount importance. For, even if Sartre’s broader description of magic is disputed, it nonetheless satisfies, concretely and materially, the two conditions that have been elaborated in the two preceding sections. Formalized, they are as follows:

- 1) A magic-referring expression is true only where it refers to a magic-bearing quality: the latter is the criterion of the former.
- 2) Magic cannot be defined by reference to putatively “magical” qualities: when used in a true proposition, the word indicates only that an identifiable quality has been transformed into a magic-bearing quality.

Together, these conditions must be understood as stating that a definition of

32. In an earlier part of the essay, Sartre comes close to Malinowski’s view that the function of magic is the management of emotion (cf. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 51–55). From a related perspective, R. G. Collingwood notes in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* that the perception of a magical connection between objects is emotionally motivated (Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment*, 196–207). More recently, Giorgio Agamben has made the unexpected argument – which is the kind of argument that he prefers to make – that magic consists in the felicitous knowledge of a thing’s secret name (Agamben, *Profanations*, 19–22).

magic is always *specific to its object*: a true definition of magic for x is not necessarily true for y or z (i.e. where x = emotion, y = physics, and z = poetry). Furthermore, it must be noted that a definition may be simultaneously true for more than one class of objects (e.g. for emotion and poetry), whereas for others (e.g. physics), there is and cannot be a true definition of magic (in other words, the laws of physics preclude, in domains governed by these laws, the existence of a *physical* magic). Bearing this in mind, the single merit of Sartre's essay is that it succeeds in laying out the *conditions of truth* for the definition of magic that it proposes: judged to be true, a given description is believed to meet these conditions; judged to be false, it does not. Because of this, and strictly within these theoretical bounds, it is a completely immaterial question whether Sartre's theory is true or false either partly (i.e. for some aspect of its object) or as a whole (i.e. for the object in all its aspects). Whether it stands or falls, it stands or falls according to its own criterion, and what matters is that such a criterion can be asserted.

But what is this criterion? Where is it found? And to what extent is Sartre aware of its criterial quality? Here, we must return to the two phrases, the two philosophemes, that I evoked twice above: “magic as magic” and “magic as such” (“the consciousness seizes upon the magic as magic, and lives it vividly as such”³³). The most important thing to be observed about these phrases is that they function in Sartre's analysis as phrases of *objectification*: through them, the active attention of the theorist passes over to the thing itself. Yet another question immediately follows: *from what* does the attention of the theorist pass over to the thing itself? The answer takes time to formulate, and we must begin with what Sartre says immediately after the sentence just quoted. “The categories ‘suspicious’ and ‘disquieting,’ etc.,” Sartre writes, “designate the magical, in so far as it is being lived by consciousness or tempting consciousness to live it.”³⁴ *The magical*: another formula of objectification, now designated by emotional categories

33. Sartre, *Sketch*, 57.

34. *Ibid.*

such as the two he mentions. But let us keep reading. Halfway through the next paragraph, the answer gains additional depth: there is a shift from the internal to the external that further blurs the boundary between emotion and object. “Consciousness,” Sartre writes, taking as his example the image of a staring face that incites terror, “plunged into this magic world drags the body with it in as much as the body is belief and the consciousness believes in it. The behaviour which gives its meaning to the emotion is no longer *our* behaviour; it is the expression of the face and the movements of the body of the other being, which make up a synthetic whole with the upheaval in our own organism.”³⁵ Note these last words: *a synthetic whole with the upheaval in our own organism*. What magic is, then, prior to its objectification *as* magic, is a synthesis which involves the external dimension *in* the internal and the internal *in* the external: when the subjective consciousness is an object for the other, the other is thereby brought into the innermost sphere of the subject, into the heart of its intimacy with itself, and makes it quake with an intensity of affect that no natural occurrence can incite. And this happens because *the body believes* in the magically transformed quality.

This, I feel, is where the answer to the question posed above begins to gain real momentum. Returning to the passage quoted above, now reading it at greater length, what can be found there is a point of upheaval that is as emotional as it is *philosophical*: it is one in which the author – the *abstract organism* without which no such thing as the *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* would exist – forms a synthetic whole with the object of his discourse.

Indeed, there is a world of emotion. All emotions have this in common, that they evoke the appearance of a world, cruel, terrible, bleak, joyful, etc., but in which the relations of things to consciousness are always and exclusively magical. We have to speak of a world of emotion as one speaks of a world of dreams or of worlds of madness. A world – that means individual syntheses in mutual relations and possessing qualities. But no quality is conferred upon an object without passing over into the infinite. This grey, for instance, represents the units of an infinity of real and possi-

35. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

ble *abschattungen*, some of which will be grey-green, some grey seen in a certain light, black, etc. Similarly, the qualities that emotion confers upon the object and upon the world, it confers upon them *ad aeternum*. True, when I suddenly conceive an object to be horrible I do not explicitly affirm that it will remain horrible for eternity. But the mere affirmation of horribleness as a substantial quality of the object is already, in itself, a passage to the infinite. The horrible is now in the thing, at the heart of it, is its emotive texture, is constitutive of it. Thus, during emotion an overwhelming and definitive quality of the thing makes its appearance. And that is what transcends and maintains our emotion. Horribleness is not only the present state of the thing, it is a menace for the future, it is a revelation about the meaning of the world. The “horrible” means indeed that horribleness is a substantial quality, that there is horribleness in the world. Thus, in every emotion, a multitude of affective protentions extends into the future and presents it in an emotional light. We are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction. Immediately, the emotion is lifted out of itself and transcends itself; it is no ordinary episode of our daily life, but an intuition of the absolute.³⁶

My aim in the preceding discussion has been to discover the criterion by which Sartre’s notion of magic may be judged either true or false. In searching for it, I noted that Sartre passes at a key juncture of his discussion from an unobjectified magic to an objectified magic expressed in the formulas “magic as magic,” “magic as such,” and “the magical.” Finding it imperative not to judge in advance what that unobjectified magic might be, I drew several interconnected quotations from Sartre’s essay in order to locate the specifically argumentative place, the architectonic rather than simply textual locus, where that passage occurs and Sartre finds it possible to begin speaking of “magic as magic,” of “magic as such,” of “the magical.” Reading the citation above, we may see that it is here that this locus is found, in this passage where Sartre affirms that there is horribleness in the world, and it is found as having stared us in the face all the time: in describing emotion as magical, in the very *act* of transforming emotion into magic, Sartre’s discourse enters into the emotional structure it describes

36. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

— and thereby undergoes the same magical transformation. There is, Sartre says, horribleness in the world, and while another philosopher might conclude from this that subjectively felt qualities are just as real as objectively material qualities, Sartre goes farther, far beyond what his phenomenology of emotion would strictly require, and transforms the merest apprehension of a quality into a “passage to the infinite,” a “menace for the future” and a “revelation about the meaning of the world,” an “intuition of the absolute.” The spontaneous hyperbole of these phrases is no aberration: what it proves is that the description is also a self-description, the theory also a theorization of itself, the author not only the author but also the prime example of the structure that he is disclosing. And, most importantly, the criterion of magic a criterion *for itself as magical*. For when Sartre writes that “[w]e are living, emotively, a quality that penetrates into us, that we are suffering, and that surrounds us in every direction,”³⁷ what he himself is living emotively is the very criteriality of the criterial quality: what penetrates into him, what he is suffering, what surrounds him in every direction is the quality of *essentiality*, of *infinitude* and *plenitude*, the quality of a thing being infinitely itself — which, in the theory of the emotions that is coming into being as it is being written, is not only the criterion by which a thing is determined as magical, but, more directly and profoundly, the criterion by which the magical is revealed *to the author of the theory* as magical. Thus, when he adds that “[i]mmediately, the emotion is lifted out of itself and transcends itself; it is no ordinary episode of our daily life, but an intuition of the absolute,”³⁸ what happens is that this emotional description of emotion, lifted out of itself by virtue of its philosophical *pathos*, ceases to be an ordinary episode of philosophical discourse and becomes instead *infinitely* itself. Transformed into an “act of consciousness which destroys all the structures of the world that might dispel the magic and reduce the event to reasonable proportions,”³⁹ it is no longer a

37. *Ibid.*, 54.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 59.

statement about emotion as an intuition of the absolute; rather, having become *an absolute intuition about the intuition of the absolute*, it is transformed into a magical phrase about magic. And this for reasons internal to philosophy, which, when it believes itself to have attained this state of pure seeing, cannot but undergo in a properly philosophical mode the “upheaval in our own organism”⁴⁰ that we have seen Sartre and Feuerbach define respectively as “the return of consciousness to the magical attitude”⁴¹ and the “peculiarly characteristic artifice and pretext”⁴² of the religious imagination: *when the criterion is revealed as infinitely criterial, the definite becomes infinitely definite, and the infinitely definite, passing infinitely beyond the powers of philosophical definition, confronts the philosophizing consciousness with the boundlessness of the infinitely other*. The infinite otherness of the infinite criterion: that is the magic proper to philosophy, the magic upon which philosophy both founds itself and founders, rendering unthinkable the very thing that it needs in order to think anything at all.

Such is the final throw of the die: a throw that suspends the difference between magic and philosophy, between the criterion of magic and the criterion as magic, and, consequently, between the definition of magic and the magic of definition. No longer the third throw but rather a fourth that splits off from it, not in fact a throw at all but rather the fourth fall of the thrice thrown die, it is one that resists and defies formalization. One, in other words, that demands that we leave it where it fell, in its scattered and discarded state, hoping only that it may one day be found by someone for whom it is not only an object *of* thought but rather a portent *for* it.

But the die has not fallen yet. Not, at least, before we ask the following questions: What does this entail for the question of defining magic? What should a scholar of magic conclude from this? What, in short, are we to make of this transformation? Should one say, in imitation of Feuerbach, that Sartre’s discourse is from this point onwards “an inexhaustible mine of falsehoods,

40. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

41. *Ibid.*, 61.

42. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 212.

illusions, contradictions, and sophisms”?⁴³ Or should one follow Sartre himself as he scales down from these hyperbolic heights and say with him that magic is always *of* the Other and thereby opposed to the responsibly existing Self? That, in other words, “man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical”?⁴⁴ Not necessarily, for there is a third alternative, or rather a second alternative to the reductive one that both Sartre and Feuerbach exemplify, and it is one that consists precisely in not *reducing* magic from rational thought but rather in *inducing* it. Here, before proceeding to the concluding section of this essay, I will leave the last word to Roger Caillois, founding member with Georges Bataille of the Collège de Sociologie and onetime interlocutor of André Breton, who writes in an essay from 1936:

[T]he mind has always grappled with extraordinarily disturbing questions that it seems driven to resolve. *There is, in man, a full mantle of shadow that spreads its nocturnal empire over most of his emotional reactions and imaginative processes, and his being cannot stop struggling with this darkness for an instant.* Man’s stubborn curiosity is immediately drawn to these mysteries, which so strangely border on his fully conscious state. He rightly feels that any form of knowledge that denies them credence and attention, that deliberately rejects or neglects them out of indifference, thus irremediably betrays its own purpose. When positivism excluded these emotive obstacles from methodical research, they became the exclusive monopoly of emotional and sentimental forces that were unable to control them and, instead, found satisfaction in making them divine.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The quaint little fiction that opened this essay was written in order to demonstrate vividly the *idée reçue* that magic is too vague and polyvalent a term to admit of a rigorous theoretical definition. If the argument made in the preceding pages is at all successful, it will have effectively rewritten the story by reconfiguring the polyvalence of the term and thereby dissolving the vagueness

43. *Ibid.*, 212.

44. Sartre, *Sketch*, 56. See also Julie Van der Wielen, “The Magic of the Other,” 72–73.

45. Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, 133–34.

that was assumed to surround it. In the first part of the essay, I showed that all sentences in which the word “magic” is used must be examined as propositional sentences consisting of a subject term and a predicate term. In the second part, I demonstrated that all judgements concerning “magic” must be referred to that “magic-bearing” predicate by which a given thing is determined as “magical.” In the third and final part, I argued that the truth of a proposition containing a magic-bearing predicate is always specific to a class of objects from which the definition of “magic” is derived. In other words, magic is definable for any class of objects in which it refers back to a magic-bearing predicate; as a consequence, a magic-referring expression is always either true or false for the class of objects to which it refers.

Everything up to this point was demonstrable in a straightforwardly analytical fashion. It was only with the fourth throw of the die – or, as I said above, with the fourth fall of the thrice thrown die – that my argument shouldered the burden of phenomenological proof. Which is the same as shouldering the “full mantle of shadow” of which Caillois speaks. There, following Sartre, I argued that there is no magic without emotion. By this, however, I did not mean that magic is a mere function of our internal and subjective states. Indeed what was seen is that the contrary is true. It is of a synthetic whole that Sartre speaks, and it belongs to this synthetic whole that it should be a strange admixture or interweaving of subject and object: finding itself as an object *for* the other, the subjective consciousness is captive *to* the other, and, rendered passive in and by this captivity, finds itself unable to react by any other than emotional – magical – means. A final quotation from Sartre:

[I]n a general way, areas form themselves around me out of which the horrible makes itself felt. For the horrible is *not possible* in the deterministic world of tools. The horrible can appear only in a world which is such that all the things existing in it are magical by nature, and the only defences against them are magical. This is what we experience often enough in the universe of dreams, where doors, locks and walls are no protection against the threats of robbers or wild animals for they are all grasped in one and the same act of horror. And since the act which is to disarm them is the same as that which is creating

them, we see the assassins passing through doors and walls; we press the trigger of our revolver in vain, no shot goes off. In a word, to experience any object as horrible, is to see it against the background of a world which reveals itself as *already* horrible.⁴⁶

What is important to note here is that this is also *empirically* true: to speak of magic is to speak of a world that *has revealed itself* as already magical. Not to the philosopher or researcher, but to someone, anyone in general, to whom we owe the very possibility of having magic as an object of scholarly research. Yet this does not mean that scholarly research is the only way to repay this debt. To the contrary: what the *facticity* of magic properly entails for the study of magic — what follows, in other words, from the fact that something like a belief in magic has *taken place in the world* — is the obligation *never to defer to existing traditions and practices of magic*. Not because we can do without them, for it is evident that we cannot, but rather because this attitude of deference may so easily derail the inquiry, making it stray from the path of *thinking* into the thicket of the *given*. Yes, it is absolutely necessary that magic must be discovered before it can be studied. But if we wish to avoid losing it to the twin extremes of denied essentialism and enforced relativism, it must be discovered *as magic* wherever and in whatever form it is found. And this means that it must be found *philosophically*.

That this creates problems for philosophy itself is no disaster. Or, if it is, this disaster is where all the riches lie. For what this philosophical disaster means is that the *recognition* of magic — the event in which a philosophizing subject is prompted to utter a *declarative statement* about magic — may suffice to grant magic the ontological weight that philosophical reason would rather deny it. And to grant magic any ontological weight at all is to cease speaking in purely intellectual terms of something that cannot be spoken of in purely intellectual terms. That is what happened to Sartre, albeit briefly, when he admitted magic into his ontology: in that moment of philosophical hyperbole, of an all but unavowable mysticism, he put one toe over the threshold, slipped a fingertip into the

46. Sartre, *Sketch*, 59–60.

parting of the veil, sent an unformed wish out into the realm of transcendental essences. Not because he told the truth about magic, for it is questionable whether there can be any such thing, but rather because he was able to say with conviction that magic *is*, that *something* is magic, that magic *works* in such and such a way and is *defined* by such and such qualities. For, having given such a definition, and having given it with conviction, he was then permitted entry into it — magically, as it were — and found it at work in places where no objective theory of magic would have been able to discern it. And we, if we choose to follow this strand in his thought rather than the other, may widen the orbit of his thought, finding instances of magic in the most unexpected places — for example among insects.

Insects? To understand this, begin by recalling to mind the last extended quotation from Sartre: a magical world is one from whose magical relations the mind cannot extricate itself by any other than magical means. Then, turning again to Roger Caillois, who argues in his 1937 essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” that mimetic insects *charm themselves into believing* that they are what they are mimicking, consider the following observation. “This tendency, whose universality thus becomes hard to deny,” Caillois writes, referring, by way of Frazer’s principles of contagion and similarity, to the propensity of living beings to imitate the things and circumstances that environ them,

might have been the determining force behind the current morphology of mimetic insects, at a time when their body was more plastic than it is today (as we must anyhow assume, given the fact of transformationism). Mimicry could then accurately be defined as an *incantation frozen at its high point* and that has caught the sorcerer in his own trap. Let no one call it sheer madness to attribute magic to insects: this novel use of terms should not hide the utter simplicity of the matter itself. *Prestige-magic* and *fascination*: what else should we call the phenomena that were all grouped under the very category of mimicry? ...

In any event, resorting to the explanatory claim that magic always tends to seek out resemblance simply provides us with an initial approximation, as this too must be accounted for in turn. The search for similarity presents itself as a means, if not as an intermediary. It seems that the goal is indeed to *become assimilated into the environment*. And in this respect, in-

stinct completes the work of morphology: the *Kallima* symmetrically aligns itself with a real leaf, its lower wing appendage in the spot that a real leaf stalk would occupy. The *Oxydia* attaches itself perpendicularly to the tip of a branch, for the marks imitating the median vein require it to do so. The Brazilian *Cholia* butterflies settle in a row on little stalks so as to form bellflowers like those on lily of the valley sprigs, for example.⁴⁷

An incantation frozen at its high point and that has caught the sorcerer in his own trap: such is the philosophical magic of which I have tried to give an example here. To assure yourself of this, of the veracity of this description, take another look at the die you have found and spent the last few hours deciphering. If you are still certain that a die is what it is, I congratulate you on the hardness of your convictions: mine have long since wavered.

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47. Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, 98–99.

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The Finding of Hidden Texts in Esoteric and Other Religious Traditions: Some Notes on “Discovery Narratives”

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Abstract

This article deals with a motif that appears repeatedly in the history of the Western traditions of esotericism and alternative spirituality. The motif is an essentially simple one: a person claims to have discovered an older, previously hidden text containing sacred knowledge, and he then duly circulates that knowledge to the world. The term “discovery narrative” may be used to describe this phenomenon. Perhaps surprisingly, discovery narratives have generally been neglected by scholars of esotericism. This article traces occurrences of the motif through history and examines both the drivers behind its usage and the tensions which appear to be inherent within it.

Keywords: Esotericism; hermeticism; neopaganism; pseudepigraphy; scriptures

This article deals with a motif that appears repeatedly in the history of the Western traditions of esotericism and alternative spirituality. The motif is an essentially simple one: a person claims to have discovered an older, previously hidden text containing sacred knowledge, and he then duly circulates that knowledge to the world. The term “discovery narrative” may be used to describe this phenomenon, although other terms can also be found in the literature, such as “find story,” “*Fundbericht*,” and “pseudo-documentarism.”

Perhaps surprisingly, discovery narratives have generally been neglected by scholars of esotericism.¹ We will trace occurrences of the motif through history, and examine both the drivers behind its usage and the tensions that appear to be inherent within it.

1. However, they are known to scholars of textual forgery more generally. See, for example, the references to religious and secular discovery narratives in Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 9, 18, 23, 33–4, 44–5, 57–8, 95–6, and 103.

*

As our point of departure, we may take one of the best-known and most recent discovery narratives of the modern occultic and pagan revival: Gerald Gardner's discovery of the "Wica." Gardner's story first appeared in print in 1954, in his book *Witchcraft Today*. In short, Gardner purported to describe an esoteric pagan witch religion that had survived from the Stone Age into 1950s England, having absorbed influences on the way from the Celts, the Graeco-Roman mystery cults, and the ancient Egyptians. Gardner undertook to describe the beliefs and practices of the witches whom he had discovered. But he did not merely claim to be recounting his own subjective observations or passing on a fluid oral tradition. He gave his readers something more solid and direct. He had *texts*. He quoted from apparently authentic witch documents, including a version of the key Wiccan liturgical text known as the "Charge of the Goddess," which is regarded by Wiccans as a self-revelation of the goddess of the witches. In 1959, Gardner repeated his claim to have discovered an ancient witch religion in a further book entitled *The Meaning of Witchcraft*. In an appendix, he repeated one of the texts from *Witchcraft Today*, a mythological narrative that he called the "Magical Legend of the Witches" (this is better known today as the "Legend of the Descent of the Goddess").

In the meantime, Gardner had been busy disseminating copies of another text among his network of initiates: the religious and ritual document known as the "Book of Shadows." Though mutable in form, the Book of Shadows still remains central to Wicca, the nearest thing that it has to a scripture. Gardner also found time to circulate a mysterious text known as the "Old Laws" or "Ardanes." He claimed that this was a traditional set of rules for members of the witch-cult. The Ardanes appeared in 1957, at a time when Gardner was engaged in a dispute with his collaborator and pupil Doreen Valiente over the rules to be followed by coven members. Commentators since Valiente herself have regarded the appearance of this text with some suspicion.²

2. See, for example, Heselton, *Doreen Valiente: Witch*, 98-100. It is only fair to note that some Wiccans have argued that this suspicion is misplaced: on the debate, see Oakseer, "Gerald Gardner."

Gardner presented himself not as a religious prophet but as an anthropologist with secular academic credentials. The foreword to *Witchcraft Today* was written by Margaret Murray, a recognised Egyptologist and scholar of witchcraft, whom Gardner seems to have known through the eminently respectable Folk-Lore Society. Gardner claimed that his knowledge of the witches' texts and activities came from his having stumbled on a coven in the New Forest area in 1939.³ Yet Gardner's discovery narrative was challenged almost from the outset. Valiente was not shy about letting Gardner know that she had spotted that his ritual texts had been put together from well-known and public sources.⁴

The development of Gardner's texts has been examined and discussed in some detail by scholars, as has the early history of Wicca more generally.⁵ In particular, successive studies have traced the Book of Shadows back to a manuscript entitled "Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical," which was created by Gardner no earlier than the 1940s. To take the specific example of the "Charge of the Goddess," this text can be shown to have been largely constructed out of material drawn from Aleister Crowley and from Charles Leland's curious little book *Aradia* (which we will return to later).⁶ It bears mentioning that Gardner knew Crowley personally and had several meetings with him in 1947; there has even been a false report that he paid the "Great Beast" to compose his Wiccan material.⁷

It is now generally acknowledged that the true progenitor of Wicca was Gerald Gardner himself. He created a new initiatory tradition by fusing together elements of two related streams of counter-cultural thought and practice: esotericism and neo-pagan religiosity. Very little of his work was original. Precisely

3. The canonised narrative is set out in Gardner's authorised biography (Bracelin, *Gerald Gardner: Witch*) and need not be repeated here.

4. See Hutton, "Crowley and Wicca," 301.

5. The standard treatments include Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; Heselton, *Witchfather*; and Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft*.

6. See, for example, Heselton, *Doreen Valiente: Witch*, 82-86, Serith, "The Charge of the Goddess," and Dearnaley, "The Influence of Aleister Crowley."

7. See Crowley, *Secrets*, 142-46.

the same may be said of the discovery narrative that he employed to explain the sudden appearance of authentic witch texts in the placid world of postwar England. The motif of newly discovered hidden documents is far too old to be seen as an innovation of Gardner, or even of any historically recent movement such as romanticism. The Western esoteric and pagan traditions provide a long line of precedents for what Gardner did in putting forward his fictive narrative. He was very far from being the first spiritual entrepreneur to present his innovations as a rediscovery of an older order, brought about through the tangible medium of pseudepigraphical texts. Nor is he likely to be the last.

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Gerald Gardner was identifiably a product of the ritual magic tradition, parts of which duly ended up becoming embedded in Wicca. In particular, his life was lived in the afterglow of the activities of the most famous magical fraternity of all, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This highly influential group was founded around 1888 by Dr William Wynn Westcott, Dr W. R. Woodman and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. It broke up in confusion in the early 1900s, but not before it had permanently made its mark on the history of Western esotericism.

The discovery narrative attached to the foundation of the Golden Dawn is quite well known.⁸ By 1887, some mysterious papers written in an old cipher had come into the hands of Dr Westcott. The origin of these papers has proven to be something of a mystery. Different versions of the story report that the cipher MS was found lying somewhere around Victorian London: the most romantic version traces it to an anonymous bookstall on Farringdon Road. Researchers have pointed to internal evidence that the document cannot have been written long before its supposed discovery. It has plausibly been suggest-

8. See, for example, Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 1-25; Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 3-6; Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 223-24; Küntz, *The Complete Golden Dawn Cipher Manuscript*, 11-15; Cicero and Cicero, *The Essential Golden Dawn*, 48-51; and McIntosh, "'Fräulein Sprengel' and the Origins of the Golden Dawn."

ed that it was originally composed by the occultist Kenneth Mackenzie for a forerunner group of the Golden Dawn known as the “Society of Eight.”⁹ Fortunately, we are not required to decide precisely where the MS came from or how it reached Westcott. For our purposes, the most significant thing is not what its origin *was* but rather the fact that its origin came to be *obscured*.

Among the leaves of the cipher MS was a paper containing the address of a Rosicrucian adept: a certain Fräulein Sprengel of Landsfelt, near Nuremberg in Germany. At some point in the story, Fräulein Sprengel acquired the forename Anna.¹⁰ No such person as Anna Sprengel has ever been traced; but this did not stop her from exchanging a series of letters with Dr Westcott. This correspondence, along with the original reference to Sprengel found among the cipher MS, was almost certainly forged by or at the behest of Dr Westcott.

So it was that a set of documents of questioned and questionable origin was used to create a kind of Malinowskian charter myth for the Golden Dawn. The cipher MS became the basis of the ceremonies of the order, while the link with Anna Sprengel gave it a lineage. Like Gerald Gardner, the founders of the Golden Dawn could claim to be carrying forward older traditions which they had stumbled upon rather than creating something new; and this claim was mediated through obscurely sourced and “rediscovered” texts and rituals.

As noted, the elusive Fräulein Sprengel was said to be a member of the Rosicrucian movement. So, in real life, were all three of the Golden Dawn’s founding fathers, and the order that they formed was certainly Rosicrucian in character. Perhaps they had read the Rosicrucian-themed novel *Zanoni* (1842) by the writer and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in which the narrator claimed to have come by certain mysterious cipher MSS through a London bookseller.¹¹ In any event, the Golden Dawn founders

9. See Gilbert, “Provenance unknown”; “Supplement to ‘Provenance Unknown’”; and also “From Cipher to Enigma,” 214-15.

10. The forename probably came from the Victorian esotericist Anna Kingsford. Sprengel’s supposed magical motto, *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*, appeared on the title page of Kingsford’s edition of Valentin Weigel’s *Astrology Theologized*, which was published in 1886.

11. [Bulwer-Lytton], *Zanoni*, 1: iii-xxii. Bulwer-Lytton’s narrative was inspired in turn by the

had previously been members of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, or SRIA. This body was founded in or around 1867, although it bore the influence of an earlier German society, the Orden der Gold- und Rosenkreuzer. The SRIA is still in existence today. It is interesting to note that the grade system in the Golden Dawn cipher MS seems to have been copied from the SRIA's structure.

Like the Golden Dawn, the SRIA had an unusual relationship with secret and fortuitously discovered documents. A leading light in the SRIA, Robert Wentworth Little, was said to have taken the order's rituals from documents that he had found in Freemasons' Hall, where he worked.¹² Another SRIA member was Kenneth Mackenzie, whom we have already mentioned as the likely source of the Golden Dawn cipher MS. He may have been the true father of the SRIA; but, as it happens, he ended up rejecting the organisation. He claimed that he had been initiated as an authentic German Rosicrucian and that he had the real, secret Rosicrucian rituals in his possession.¹³ This claim may have had some truth to it; but that is not really the point. The interesting thing is that such a claim – a claim to superior legitimacy backed up by hidden documents – was made at all.

Going back in time, it is well known that Rosicrucianism itself consciously set out to present itself at its inception as a vehicle for newly rediscovered knowledge. According to the canonised narrative, the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross was founded by a German mystic known as Frater C. R. or C. R. C. (Christian Rosenkreuz), who lived between 1378 and 1484. The founder's tomb was supposedly rediscovered in 1604, and this was followed by the publication of the three original Rosicrucian pamphlets between 1614 and 1616.¹⁴ These mention various mys-

real-life occult bookshop run by John Denley (1764–1842) in Covent Garden. He may also have been influenced by the discovery narratives that were used by the authors of contemporary divinatory texts such as *Napoleon's Book of Fate* and the *Royal Book of Dreams* (see Owen Davies, *Witchcraft*, 138; and Perkins, *Reform of Time*, 67–69).

12. See, for example, Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry*, 2:227; Lewis, *Rosicrucian Questions*, 127–29; and Küntz, "From the Ashes," 16.

13. See McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 98–99.

14. That is, the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614), the *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) and the *Chymical Wedding of Christian*

terious texts, including the “Book T” (variously interpreted as “Testamentum,” “Thesaurus,” and “Torah”), which is described as “our greatest treasure next to the Bible”; and the “Book M” (possibly signifying “Mundi” or “Magicon”).¹⁵ Like Gardner’s books, the Rosicrucian pamphlets explicitly claimed to be uncovering and publicising a much older tradition of wisdom that had fallen into obscurity; but in fact they were recent compositions that are best understood in the context of contemporary religious politics.¹⁶ In an interesting variant of the usual pattern, the Rosicrucian author(s) referred to texts whose existence had newly come to light, but did not directly publish their secrets. The hidden knowledge is rediscovered, and yet not so; it remains just out of reach.

Beyond early modern Rosicrucianism lay the venerable old Western esoteric tradition, which went back to Graeco-Roman times. Discovery narratives are not difficult to find in this tradition. Indeed, the motif of discovering a hidden esoteric text was so well known by the late eighteenth century that it could be satirised by Christoph Martin Wieland in his short story “The Philosopher’s Stone” (1786), which was subsequently turned into an opera by a team of composers who included Mozart. Some years previously, the French priest Jean Terrasson had published his best-selling novel *The Life of Sethos* (1731), which dealt with secret quasi-Masonic initiations in ancient Egypt. This text claimed to be a translation of an ancient Greek MS found in a foreign (i.e. non-French) library. It is also worth mentioning in this regard a popular contemporary book of moral advice entitled *The Oeconomy of Human Life* (1750). This was composed by the English writer Robert Dodsley, but it claimed to have been translated from an Indian Brahmin MS found in the Dalai Lama’s temple in Tibet.

Rosenkreutz (1616). A modern edition of the texts is available in Godwin et al., *Rosicrucian Trilogy*.

15. On which see further, for example, Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 185; Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 308; and SantaColoma, “The Book M,” which links it to the Voynich MS (another example of a mysteriously found text). The manifestos also speak of another text known by a letter, the “Book H,” which is believed to be John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*.

16. See, in general: McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 42-52; Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 60-62; and the editorial material in Godwin et al., *Rosicrucian Trilogy*.

One of the more obvious places to look for esoteric discovery narratives is in the texts of the grimoire tradition: grimoires being perhaps the foremost examples of secret documents which purport to disclose hidden and dangerous knowledge. It is no surprise that we duly find such narratives in this body of material. For example, the following passage appears in the seventeenth-century *Lemegeton*: “These Bookes were first found in the Chaldean & hebrew tongues at Hierusalem, by a Jewish Rabbi, & by him put into the greeke Language, & from thence into y^e Latine, as it is said &c.”¹⁷ Similarly, the introduction to the *Key of Solomon* tells of how the treatise was buried with the king and subsequently re-discovered by “certain Babylonian Philosophers,”¹⁸ while a grimoire attributed to St Cyprian was supposedly found in a village priest’s bookstall after the text was personally revealed by Lucifer.¹⁹

Esoteric discovery narratives go back all the way to classical antiquity. Among the earliest is an account found in a highly influential Greek alchemical treatise known as *Physica et Mystica*. This treatise, which dates from around 300 CE, was ascribed to the early Greek philosopher Democritus and drew on the work of the Pythagorean writer Bolos of Mendes (c. 200 BCE). The narrative describes how the work was discovered in a broken pillar in a temple in Egypt, with the assistance of the spirit of the great Persian sage Ostanos.²⁰ Democritus also had other esoteric works ascribed to him: somewhat ironically, for a philosopher who is often seen as a father of the rationalist tradition. Some of these works apparently claimed to have been based on writings recovered from the tomb of the legendary character Dardanus.²¹

17. Peterson, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, 6.

18. See Mathers, *The Key of Solomon the King*, 3-4. The treatise was then reburied and, presumably, rediscovered subsequently a second time before being disseminated.

19. See Stratton-Kent, *The Testament of Cyprian the Mage*, 1:11-14.

20. See Diels and Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 68 B 300 and Bidez and Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, Ostanos A 6. We may note here that the earliest religious discovery narrative in Graeco-Roman literature may have been fashioned by the pioneering Greek historian Acusilaus (sixth/fifth century BCE), who claimed as the source of his mythographical writings some bronze tablets which his father had found.

21. See Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.2; also Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 32.

There is no lack of other discovery narratives from ancient esoteric circles. A writer from the Roman imperial period, pretending to be the Egyptian priest Manetho, asserted that his work was derived from inscriptions carved by Hermes-Thoth.²² A manual of divination known as the *Oracles of Astrampsychos* or *Sortes Astrampsychi* (dating from the second or third century CE) claimed that it was originally composed by Pythagoras and that it was found in a temple; as the title attests, it purported to have been discovered by the legendary Persian sage Astrampsychos. We are further told by late antique sources that the prophet Bitys, or Bitos, found a book by Hermes Trismegistus in a sanctuary at Sais.²³

One could go on. Another Hermetic work which declares itself to be a discovered text is the collection of magical treatises known as the *Kyranides* (the nucleus of which took shape in the fourth century CE, although its origins may go back to the first century CE). The *Kyranides* claimed to have come from God through Hermes Trismegistus, and to have been originally inscribed in Syrian characters on a column of iron.²⁴ In similar vein, a text known as the *Compendium Aureum*, which was transmitted with the *Kyranides*, claimed that it had been found in the grave of King Kyranos at Troy.²⁵

The discovery narrative motif also found its way into the Arabic branch of the Hermetic tradition. One of the central texts of the tradition, the *Emerald Tablet* or *Tabula Smaragdina*, has fairly typical discovery narratives attached to it. One such narrative appears in an Arabic treatise dating from between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, which is known as the *Mystery of Creation* and is attributed to one “Balinus” — a mangled form of the Greek holy man Apollonius of Tyana. According to the narrative, Balinus undertook to dig under a statue of Hermes located in his home town of Tyana. He ended up discovering an underground vault. His attempts to enter the vault were initially frustrated, as winds kept blowing

22. See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xv.

23. See Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 8.5, 10.7; Zosimus, *On Apparatus and Furnaces*, fr. 230–35.

24. See Ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction with Lucian*, 164–65.

25. See Speyer, *Bücherfunde*, 73–74.

out his lantern. But he was rewarded for his efforts with a supernatural dream that explained how he could overcome the problem. Once inside the vault, he found not only Hermes Trismegistus himself, sitting on a golden throne, but also the two texts from which he gleaned his supernatural wisdom: the *Emerald Tablet*, which Hermes held in his hands, and the *Mystery of Creation*, which lay at Hermes's feet.²⁶

Discovery narratives persisted in the Arab Hermetic tradition. The mediaeval *Book of the Treasure of Alexander* is said to have come to light when the Caliph al-Mu'tasim (794-842 CE) and his men found a golden book in a chest in the wall of a monastery. It had supposedly been hidden there by the Hellenistic monarch Antiochus I (324-262/1 BCE). Like Balinus in the story of the *Emerald Tablet*, the Caliph was assisted in this discovery by a supernatural dream.²⁷ The *Book* itself claims to contain information which was entrusted to Alexander the Great by Aristotle, and which ultimately went back to Hermes. Another discovery narrative, probably from the ninth century CE, is found in the *Book of Crates*. This slightly confusing story features up to three books of esoteric wisdom, the first one being found by the narrator in a temple treasury and the final one being seen in a vision in the possession of Hermes Trismegistus.²⁸

It would be wrong to close this section without mentioning the most recent sighting of the discovery narrative motif in esoteric literature. I refer, of course, to Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown's *magnum opus* is based on a (slightly) older story about a secret society called the Priory of Sion, which was also known, in good Rosicrucian style, as the *Ordre de la Rose Croix Veritas*. As is by now widely known, the secret of this society lay in its claim to preserve the bloodline of Jesus Christ. Yet it is also now known that the Priory was established no earlier than 1956 by a French hoaxer by the name of Pierre Plantard. An important part of the story is that Plantard and his accomplices took care to provide the public with spurious "rediscovered" texts, including the so-called *Dossiers Secrets* that were deposited in the French Bibliothèque Nationale.²⁹

26. See Weisser, *Das "Buch über das Geheimnis der Schöpfung,"* 74-75 and Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, 91-94.

27. See Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*, 73-77.

28. See Ruska, *Arabische Alchemisten*, 1:16-18.

29. For a good summary of this interesting case, see Introvigne, "Beyond 'The Da Vinci Code'" and "The Da Vinci Code FAQ."

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The second tradition that Gerald Gardner represented was that of pagan religiosity, as refracted through the lenses of the modern neo-pagan revival. The best-known discovery narrative from this tradition was published by Charles Godfrey Leland in 1899 in his book *Aradia*.³⁰ As we have noted, Gardner himself was quite familiar with this work, as he drew on it when composing his own witch texts.

Aradia was a small book that made some big claims. Along with some other Italian folkloric material, Leland revealed to the world what he claimed was the *Vangelo*, or gospel, of a witch religion that had survived into nineteenth-century Italy. He thought that the text might be a translation of a mediaeval or even an ancient Roman work. As to its contents, it featured the Aradia of the book's title: a supernatural female figure who was the daughter of the goddess Diana and served as a kind of pagan messiah. The *Vangelo* also had a socially radical bent, as it was opposed to the Catholic Church, the feudal class system, and conventional sexual mores.

Unlike Gardner, Leland appears not to have written his source material himself. The character of Aradia had a genuinely old pedigree in Italian folklore.³¹ The passages of Italian that Leland quotes bear telltale signs of having been transcribed imperfectly from genuine oral recitations. And the pre-publication drafts of *Aradia* seem to show that he treated the *Vangelo* as a special, discrete text: one that he did not attempt to revise and rework as he did other material.

Yet there are problems with taking Leland's little book at face value.³² Leland claimed that he received the *Vangelo* in 1897 from an informant named Maddalena. There is corroborating evidence that Maddalena existed (her full legal name was Margherita Taluti),³³ but the same cannot be said of her witch

30. The best current edition of the work is Pazzaglini and Pazzaglini, *Aradia*.

31. She was ultimately derived from the biblical character Herodias, the woman who brought about the death of John the Baptist. See further Magliocco, "Who Was Aradia?"

32. See generally Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 141–48, and the essays in Pazzaglini and Pazzaglini, *Aradia*.

33. See Jacobs and Nutt, *The International Folk-Lore Conference 1891*, 454. Raven Grimassi first drew attention to this reference in an unpublished paper delivered at the 2008 Pantheacon conference.

religion. *Aradia* stands out as an eccentric text, not wholly unlike the Book of Shadows. Well over a century of further research into Italian folklore has failed to turn up a surviving pagan witch-cult or any other *Vangeli*. The content of *Aradia* very probably drew on authentic peasant traditions, but in its current form it has been put together and creatively elaborated by a modern hand, probably that of Maddalena. To put it another way, Leland was not merely bringing to light a scriptural text that he had received from an old witch religion: his discovery narrative belongs to the same category as that of Gerald Gardner.

Again, the roots of the motif lie deep in the past. Our earliest discovery narrative from the world of Western European paganism refers to events that allegedly took place in 181 BCE.³⁴ Numa Pompilius was the legendary second king of Rome, who was thought to have lived between 753 and 673, and was credited with being the founder of traditional Roman religion. In 181, a chest was found buried in the vicinity of the Janiculum Hill containing books that were alleged to have been written by him. The exact number of the books is disputed, and our sources cannot decide whether they contained material relating to Roman religious law and ritual or treatises on Pythagorean philosophy. It was reported that the authorities decided that the books were religiously subversive, and they were duly burned on the orders of the Senate.

It is difficult to know exactly how to read this strange little episode, and scholars have disagreed on what to make of it.³⁵ The discovery itself may well have really taken place, but no one believes that the books were actually written by King Numa. Our sources attest that forgery was already mooted as an explanation in ancient times (and they note that the books did not look very old). One popular theory is that the books were planted with the intention of proving that Numa had been a pupil of Pythagoras. The notion that Numa was taught by Pythagoras seems to have been quite popular in Rome, and it served to link traditional Roman religion to the prestigious world of Greek culture.

34. For a round up of the relevant ancient sources, see Briscoe, *Commentary*, 480-83.

35. See, for example, Stott, "'Book-Find Reports' in Antiquity," 123-27; Stott, *Why did they Write this Way?*, e.g. 117-21.

An argument can also be made in the other direction, however. In 186 BCE, just a few years before the discovery of the books, the Roman authorities had taken action to suppress the Greek cult of Dionysus. The near-coincidence of these two events — the suppression of Dionysianism and the burning of Pythagorean books — may suggest an attempt to *distance* Rome from the Greek world. The physical act of discovery may not even have happened: it may be a nationalistic myth. If this is indeed the true meaning of the discovery narrative, it forms an exception to the usual pattern, as the narrative ends up *delegitimising* the discovered texts. At any rate, the one thing that we can say with confidence about the episode is that someone was making use of the discovery narrative motif in an attempt to establish a normative claim of some sort about Roman religion.

So much for Numa. It is also worth mentioning here a work known as the *Phoenician History*, which was composed in Greek by Philo of Byblos (c.70–160 CE) and which survives in fragmentary form through the work of the Christian historian Eusebius. Philo claimed that his treatise was based on the theo-mythological writings of a Phoenician priest by the name of Sanchuniathon, who allegedly lived as long ago as 1000 BCE. It seems that Sanchuniathon himself drew his information from the secret writings of “Taautos” (the Egyptian god Thoth or Tahuti), which were deposited in temples. It seems to be generally agreed that Philo cannot be taken at face value: his sources were probably relatively recent, and Sanchuniathon may not even have existed.³⁶ In other words, what Philo tells us about his sources is not so much a scholarly footnote as a variant on the discovery narrative motif. Interestingly, scholars have noted other parallels to the story that Philo tells, including Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri that claimed to be copies of documents found in temples.³⁷

Moving away from pagan religious milieux, discovery narratives also recur in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The oldest and most celebrated discovery narrative of all appears in the Hebrew Bible: in 622 BCE, the scriptural narra-

36. See, for example, Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History*, 261–68; Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 3–9; and Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 43–44.

37. See, for example, Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History*, 80.

tive recounts that a “Book of the Torah” was found by the high priest Hilkiah while he was taking money out of the treasury of the great Temple in Jerusalem. This mysterious document was full of religious laws that the people of Judah were failing to keep. When he heard the contents of the book, the devout young King Josiah tore his clothes in anguish. A careful reading of the biblical text has suggested to scholars that the “Book of the Torah” was in fact the first edition of the book of Deuteronomy. In any event, the importance of its discovery is difficult to overestimate. The discovery formed part of a religious reformation spearheaded by Josiah which pushed Judahite religion some way towards what became Jewish monotheism.

Not surprisingly, the story of the “Book of the Torah” has generated a significant scholarly literature. It has been interpreted in a number of different ways,³⁸ and precedents and parallels have been cited for it from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, including notably the case of Philo and Sanchuniathon.³⁹ Exactly what happened may never be known. Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians take the story literally and accept that Hilkiah really did make an unplanned discovery of a sacred text of ancient authorship. Most scholars, however, have concluded that the purpose of the discovery narrative was to legitimise a monotheising reform programme that was essentially innovatory in nature. The book was hidden in the Temple precisely in order to be discovered; or else there was no book and the narrative is a construct to explain and justify the policies attributed to Josiah. In any event, we can add the Josianic reform to our lengthening list of religious novelties whose novel nature was obscured by means of a discovery narrative.

Discovery narratives continued to play a role in early Christian literature. The best-known example is found in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in which the story proceeds as follows. The date is around 388 CE. An angel appears to a noble-

38. For a survey of the scholarship, see e.g. Droge, “The Lying Pen of the Scribes’: Of Holy Books and Pious Frauds”; Henige, “Found but not lost”; and Stott, *Why did They Write this Way?*.

39. See e.g. Römer, “Transformations,” 7-9; Stott, “Finding the Lost Book of the Law” and Na’aman, “The ‘Discovered Book,’” 49-53.

man who is living in St Paul's old house in Tarsus. The angel overcomes, rather forcibly, the man's initial reluctance and makes him dig among the foundations of the house. The man finds a marble box, which ends up in the hands of the Emperor Theodosius, and is discovered to contain an account of the heavenly visions of the Apostle. Already in antiquity this story was subject to doubts; it was investigated by the Christian writer Sozomen and found to be baseless.⁴⁰ Another, more prosaic example of the discovery narrative motif is found in the prologue to an account of Jesus's passion known as the *Acts of Pilate* (or the *Gospel of Nicodemus*). The supposed author, one Ananias, claims that he discovered the original Hebrew version of the *Acts* in the Jewish archives, and that he then translated the work into Greek. To these patristic-era forgeries we may add a forgery of a patristic text to which a discovery narrative was attached. The Renaissance scholar Erasmus composed a work entitled *De Duplici Martyrio*, which he ascribed to St Cyprian and claimed was discovered in a library.⁴¹

Apocryphal texts dealing with the early history of Christianity have continued to be "discovered" in more recent times. These include the *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (which supposedly came from the Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Hemis); *The Crucifixion, by an Eye-Witness* (from a Greek monastery in Alexandria); the *Letter of Benan* (from a tomb in Saqqara); and the twenty-ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (from the Ottoman archives in Constantinople).⁴² It may also be noted that the American prophet Joseph Smith provided a very traditional discovery narrative for his *Book of Mormon* (1830): an angel called Moroni showed him the location of some golden plates which were buried in a stone box.⁴³ It has been suggested that Smith was showing direct esoteric influence here: the prophet had Masonic connections, and there is a legend in Royal Arch

40. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.19. The narrative is found at *Apocalypse of Paul*, 1-2.

41. See Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 44-45.

42. See generally Goodspeed, *Strange New Gospels*.

43. This is the account given in the Mormon scriptures: see *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith - History, 30-52.

Freemasonry in which Enoch records sacred teachings on a golden plate which is left in a stone vault.⁴⁴ A few years later, in 1842, Smith produced a further scripture, the *Book of Abraham*, which he again claimed to have translated from an ancient text. In this case, he identified as his source a set of Egyptian papyri, which his fledgling church had acquired a few years previously.

The example of Mormonism illustrates a point on which larger new religious movements (NRMs) tend to differ from smaller ones in their handling of discovery narratives. It seems to be the case that larger NRMs are able to insulate themselves from the consequences of their narratives being empirically discredited. When the papyri from which the *Book of Abraham* was allegedly translated were rediscovered in 1967 and found by scholars to be standard pagan funerary texts, a major crisis in Mormonism ought to have resulted. But the episode seems to have had little or no effect on the close-knit Mormon community. The Mormon Church acknowledges the discrepancy, but addresses it by seeking to redefine what “translation” means.⁴⁵ More broadly, Mormon scholars have sidestepped rationalist challenges to their scriptures by drawing on ideas from postmodern subjectivism: a very unusual move for religious conservatives.⁴⁶ By contrast, real problems were caused in the Wiccan and Golden Dawn communities when the discovery narratives promoted by Gardner and Westcott started to come apart, and most modern adherents have had to accept that the narratives are simply false. But it seems that larger NRMs are likely to have sufficient social capital and scholarly resources to stop matters from reaching that point.⁴⁷

44. See Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 157. One theory of how Smith produced the *Book of Mormon* is that he took it from an unpublished novel by one Solomon Spalding. It is interesting that a surviving novel MS composed by Spalding contains the motif of the narrator stumbling across ancient documents hidden in the ground: see Spalding, *The “Manuscript Story,”* 11-14.

45. See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Translation and Historicity,” which redefines the concept from a “literal rendering of the papyri” to a process of “meditation, reflection, and revelation” on Joseph Smith’s part, for which the physical documents merely provided a starting point.

46. See Introvigne, “Book of Mormon Wars.”

47. Another illustration of this point is provided by the *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* referred to above. It is believed that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Islamic NRM known as

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Discovery narratives are seductive things. Even when we do not believe them, we may feel that we *wish* that we could do so. They are exciting and mysterious. They announce the disclosure of hidden secrets. In some cases, the drama is heightened by the presence of overtly supernatural elements. In any event, they offer us the irresistible chance of accessing a past that is otherwise lost, and the “thrill of making a fragile connection with something distant and unusual.”⁴⁸ They are compelling, as Eva Mroczek has argued, on a prerational level: “Although the past is at risk of loss... its recovery might always be around the corner. The world is full of hidden writing, including dangerous words from long ago, waiting to unleash a secret power that comes from ancient times and other worlds.”⁴⁹

A discovery narrative works, in essence, by harnessing this prerational force for the purpose of increasing the value of the text to which it is attached. The basic purpose of a discovery narrative is to substitute the text’s true but mundane origin for a false but more valuable one. The psychological motivation is no doubt a conviction that the text’s contents are so important that they deserve to be validated in a suitably out-of-the-ordinary manner. From this point of view, inventing a discovery narrative is not so much an act of deceit as a means of communicating a higher truth. The closest we have to a confession in this regard is a letter from Salvian, a Christian priest from fifth-century Gaul who forged a document in the name of the apostle St Timothy. In a letter to his bishop (in which he chose to write about the forger in the third person), he presented his deception as a white lie that served a greater good:

As the document itself shows, the author had such devotion and love for God that he thought that nothing should be put before God... And so when the writer saw that sin was to be found amongst almost everyone... zeal for the Lord was ‘put into his heart like a blazing fire,’ as the scripture says.⁵⁰

Ahmadiyya, drew on this text when he claimed that Jesus visited India; but his followers seemed not to care when the text was exposed as a hoax.

48. Hansen, “Strategies of Authentication,” 314.

49. Mroczek, “True Stories,” 21.

50. Salvian of Marseilles, *Letters*, 9, 170A, 171B–C. Salvian did not use a discovery narrative in his

The principal reason why a discovery narrative confers a higher value on the text to which it is attached is that it signals a link with past times. Gerald Gardner correctly intuited that his Wiccan material would not have been taken as seriously if he had admitted that it had been created more recently than *Casablanca*. Karen Ní Mheallaigh has written in this context of “the power of antiquity to confer authority.”⁵¹ That we instinctively revere cultural products that are old is a truism of human nature generally; and it applies all the more in esoteric circles, where age carries a particular cachet.

A claim of age can be used to validate an esoteric text in two distinct ways. First, the supposed connection with the past may come via a recent link in a longer chain. The Golden Dawn is an example of this: Dr Westcott claimed not that Anna Sprengel was a figure from the past, but that she stood at the head of a *tradition* which offered access to the past. The notion has tended to prevail among esotericists that legitimacy depends on establishing a lineage of this kind. This phenomenon is well established and can be traced back past the Golden Dawn and the various Rosicrucian and Masonic networks to the mystery cults of ancient Greece. The notion that initiation into a lineage serves as the appropriate channel for the transmission of sacred knowledge was included by Antoine Faivre as one of his well-known six characteristics of the esoteric tradition.⁵² A discovery narrative taps directly into this concern with lineage as a guarantor of legitimacy. Ideally, it offers a lineage that is just about plausible and slightly beyond the reach of verification; this has been referred to informally as the “girlfriend in Canada” syndrome.

Second, a discovery narrative may connect with the past by offering us a direct conduit into a single lost past moment – or even more than one such moment. The discovery of the *Book of the Treasure of Alexander*, for example, opened a door directly into the Hellenistic era, and indirectly into the time of Hermes Trismegistus himself. This recalls the venerable esoteric motif of a *prisca*

forged document, but his psychological motivations are readily transferable to the present context.

51. Ní Mheallaigh, “Pseudo-documentarism,” 424.

52. See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 14–15.

theologia: a pure, primaeval divine wisdom that was vouchsafed to Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Zoroaster, and even Adam. This notion became an integral part of Western esoteric thought during the Renaissance. It doubtless seemed a natural and intuitive idea in the context of an essentially premodern world in which the notion of progress had not yet taken hold.⁵³

The conduit into the past which a discovery narrative offers us may well lead not only to a specific past time but to a particular *person*, sometimes via the discovery of the relevant text in their tomb (as with, for example, Dardanus and Christian Rosenkreuz). This phenomenon has been termed “celebrity association” in the literature.⁵⁴ Salvian has something to teach us here. He admitted that he chose to ascribe his work to St Timothy because using his own name would not have won a hearing for the important things that he had to say:

[The forger] rightly inserted another individual’s name into his composition, no doubt in order that the smallness of his person should not detract from the authority of the salutary things that he wrote; for everything that is said nowadays is thought to have the same worth as the person who said it... So the writer wanted to withdraw and hide himself by all means possible, so that a piece of writing which in itself was very wholesome should not happen to be diminished because of the name of its author.⁵⁵

Sometimes, there is an interesting variation of this motif. Discovery narratives may claim that texts have been discovered in temples: Josiah’s “Book of the Torah” is exemplary here. A temple might be considered to be the obvious place for a religious or esoteric book, but there seems to be another notion at work here too. The text is conceived as emanating from a physical locus of sanctity. The temple itself is speaking.

53. On this and related ideas, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, esp. 7–12. Cf. also the words of Frances Yates in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*: “The great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigour, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards... [T]he search for truth was... of necessity a search for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the baser metals of the present and the immediate past were corrupt degenerations.”

54. Hansen, “Strategies of Authentication,” 307.

55. Salvian of Marseilles, *Letters*, 9, 172B–C.

It should further be noted that, as well as harnessing the inherent power of age and lineage, a discovery narrative serves to explain the absence of the text that has allegedly been discovered.⁵⁶ If the text is so important, why have we never heard of it before? If the ideas contained in it are so good, why are they only now being brought to light? The answer must be that the document was lost or concealed. The *Apocalypse of Paul* must have been left buried on Paul's old property. The Book of Shadows must have been kept hidden from the witchfinders.

So much for the purposes of discovery narratives. Our survey would not be complete if we did not also recognise that discovery narratives have anomalies and tensions embedded within them. This is illustrated most clearly by the juxtaposition of the themes of age and lineage with that of new revelation. A discovery narrative announces that the information in the text to which it is attached is new and yet not new. Something that was always there has now been revealed, and things will not be the same again.

In this way, discovery narratives bridge the gap between two radically different ways of validating a body of esoteric or religious ideas: the claim that the ideas in question partake of the wisdom and legitimacy of antiquity, and the claim that they are destined to bring about the dawn of a new spiritual era. These two lines of thinking – the *prisca theologia* and the New Age, as we might call them – are found more broadly in the esoteric tradition, both separately and in combination with each other. Florian Ebeling has written in this context *à propos* of the Hermetic tradition:

[T]he Hermetic writings harbored a lost primeval knowledge that had allowed antediluvian men to reach a happy old age. In the most recent past and the immediate present, this knowledge was largely inaccessible. Only by recovering the writings from the most distant past was it possible to regain the Golden Age of primeval times.⁵⁷

56. Cf. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 57-58.

57. Ebeling, *The Secret History*, 46.

There is a further way in which discovery narratives attempt to have their cake and eat it. A discovery narrative purports, by its very nature, to announce the uncovering of existing information that has merely been temporarily hidden. Yet the moment of discovery around which the narrative turns resembles a moment of special, new divine revelation. The claim that a book has suddenly been rediscovered in, say, a temple archive has an emotional impact not unlike the claim that a book has just been revealed by God for the first time through the pen of a prophet. The common feature is the sudden disclosure of previously unavailable sacred truths under dramatic circumstances.

To change the metaphor, discovery narratives not only have their cake and eat it; they may in addition bite off more than they can chew. A writer who deploys a discovery narrative is taking a big risk, one that may undermine his whole enterprise. In writing down a text and adorning it with a story of this kind, the writer is permanently committing himself to an attackable position: a position, indeed, that positively *invites* scrutiny and challenge. *Scripta manent*. It may only be a matter of time before the deception is exposed: ironically, in spite of their habit of setting aside limitations of time, discovery narratives may be only temporary products. The author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was already exposed in antiquity. Gerald Gardner's narrative has arguably posed as many problems for the legitimacy of Wicca over the years as it has solved; and more people have heard the dubious story of Anna Sprengel than have ever studied and learnt from the Golden Dawn texts themselves.

In the case of some discovery narratives, this tension between overtly asking for belief and implicitly inviting doubt may be more or less deliberate. To be sure, most discovery narratives seem to have been formulated in order to be believed.⁵⁸ There is unlikely to be much playful irony in, for example, the account

58. This poses an obvious ethical problem, which the present writer leaves to others to resolve. There is a wider debate – quite a lively one – on the ethical status of pseudepigraphy in religious writings: for different approaches, see e.g. Metzger, “Literary Forgeries,” 13–20; Droge, “The Lying Pen of the Scribes”; Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*; and Bautch, “Concealment.”

of Josiah's "Book of the Torah." This is probably why those narratives that were crafted after the Enlightenment (with the notable exception of Joseph Smith's) tend to steer clear of the arresting supernaturalism of some of the earlier ones. Finding some papers in Farringdon Road is more plausible to a modern audience than being guided by the spirit of Ostanes to a scroll in a temple, even though what is going on in the two cases is essentially the same.

Yet when reading some discovery narratives, one might doubt whether (all) readers were necessarily meant to take them literally. Examples in this category might include those attached to the *Mystery of Creation* and Christian Rosenkreuz's enigmatic texts. As we read the narrative, is the author smiling at us knowingly? Are we expected to recognise the deployment of a literary device? Was the preoccupation with lineage and legitimacy something to be played with, or even satirised? Tim Whitmarsh has observed: "At the same time as it purports to authenticate the narrative it buttresses...pseudo-documentarism also ironises it."⁵⁹ How conscious the irony was in any given case may be debated; but certainly, the figure of the ironist or trickster is not unknown to the esoteric tradition.

As a final observation here, we may note that a discovery narrative might be thought to undermine itself by the very fact that it is attached to a written text. If one of the purposes of such a narrative is to confer legitimacy through lineage, is not that purpose undermined if anyone can initiate herself simply by reading the text? The implicit message is that lineage and tradition are not really all that important. This problem (if it is a problem) is well illustrated by the case of Gerald Gardner: the publication of Gardner's texts has given birth to a proliferation of non-initiatory and book-learned forms of Wicca, not always to the approval of more conservative initiated Wiccans. More broadly, this issue strikes at the root of the very concept of esotericism. Esoteric knowledge tends to become rather exoteric once it is written down and disseminated in textual form. Maybe the Rosicrucians were well advised not to make it clear what was contained in the Book T.

59. Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity*, 86. It should be noted that Whitmarsh was writing in the context of secular literary works.

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This article has not purported to provide a comprehensive survey of discovery narratives, and it has restricted itself to the esoteric and religious spheres. Discovery narratives are not an uncommon phenomenon in Western literature, and a full survey of this extensive field would have to include many claimed discoveries of secular documents, from Dictys of Crete to Ossian to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). As Anthony Grafton writes in this context, "the same tales have been received with equal warmth and credulity in a dizzying range of times, places, and cultural settings."⁶⁰ It should also be remembered that discovery narratives constitute just one motif that is found in connection with the emergence of new sacred texts. In other cases, texts are believed, for example, to have been channelled from higher powers (*The Urantia Book, A Course in Miracles*), or are accepted as having been consciously composed by a founder figure (L. Ron Hubbard, Claude Vorilhon (Raël), Li Hongzhi).

Nevertheless, it is hoped that some light has been shed on the role played by discovery narratives in Western occultic and religious history, their pervasiveness, the psychological drivers behind them, and the tensions inherent within them. This is currently a surprisingly under-researched area, and there is much scope for future inquiry: not least because it is only a matter of time before the next example of the genre makes its appearance.

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60. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 58.

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“One Magical Movement from Kether to Malkuth”: Occultism in the Work of David Bowie

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Abstract

One of the twentieth century’s best-known popular musicians, David Bowie (1947–2016) drew upon a diverse range of influences in crafting his lyrics. Among these was occultism. As with many members of his generation, Bowie pursued a ‘pick and mix’ individualist approach to what he called ‘spirituality,’ rejecting institutionalised Christianity while taking an interest in a broad variety of culturally alternative belief systems. Bowie introduced occultist elements into his work in the early 1970s, adding references to Aleister Crowley and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in songs like “Quicksand” and possibly also “After All.” Rather than reflecting a committed adherence or practice of these occultist currents, such references probably represented attempts to imitate other popular musicians like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin. Bowie’s interest in occultism resurfaced in a more concentrated fashion when living in the United States in 1974–75. Suffering from severe paranoia, he came to believe that malevolent supernatural forces were acting against him and turned to occultist literature, particularly the work of Arthur Edward Waite and Dion Fortune, for protective purposes. He also developed an interest in Qabalah, demonstrating this in the lyrics to “Station to Station”. After 1976, he vocally distanced himself from occultism, but his work continues to offer an important case study for the influence of occultism in the history of popular music.

Keywords: David Bowie; Aleister Crowley; Dion Fortune; Arthur Edward Waite; Occultism; Popular Music

From gender-bending space alien to clean-cut stadium rocker, David Bowie (1947–2016) cemented his reputation as one of the preeminent icons of Western popular music. Over a five-decade career, he produced twenty-seven studio albums and a string of hit singles, accruing a devoted, multi-generational, and international cult following. A creative chameleon who repeatedly shifted his musical style and personal aesthetic, he cultivated a legacy that very few of his

contemporaries could challenge. Perhaps key to his ever-evolving persona was his status as a cultural magpie: throughout his career, he drew upon a broad array of source material, both within Western culture and beyond it. Among these sources was occultism.

This has not gone unnoticed by his biographers, fans, and detractors. Bowie's relationship with occultism has been subject to much speculation online, largely among esotericists and conspiracy theorists. The quality of this material varies. Much consists of reading occult-influenced messages into his lyrics and music videos, typically without much evidence that Bowie ever intended them.¹ These provide interesting data regarding the reception of Bowie's work, however, such an approach cannot be satisfactory for historians focused on Bowie himself and how he selected sources for incorporation into his creative output. To understand these issues, we must be discriminating in determining what elements of his work and thought clearly demonstrate the influence of occultism.

Since Bowie's death, a burgeoning scholarly literature has appeared on the man and his work. None of this academic material has yet included a concerted exploration of his relationship with religion or esotericism. To examine this facet of his work, we must turn not just to his lyrics, but to his own statements made in interviews and to the accounts of those who knew him. Central to understanding his artistic approach is the recognition that Bowie drew from a disparate range of sources and recombined them into something new.² The end result was not necessarily meant to be cohesive. In 1969, he asked listeners "not to go too deeply into my songs. As likely as not, there's nothing there but the words and music you hear at one listening."³ Four years later, he stated: "I don't necessarily know what I'm talking about in my writing. All I try to do in

1. Some of this has been summarised in Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*, 139–54. Thus far, perhaps the best treatment has been the short article by MacDonald, "White Lines, Black Magic," 140–47.

2. Moore for instance examined Bowie's work through the concept of bricolage; see Moore, "2004 (Bowie vs Mashup)," 153.

3. Coxhill, "Don't Dig Too Deep, Pleads Oddity David Bowie," 2.

my writing is assemble points that interest me and puzzle through it, and that becomes a song.”⁴ Bowie rarely crafted clear narratives and many of his songs readily permit multiple interpretations. It is in this context that we must appreciate the occultist references in Bowie’s oeuvre.

Prior examinations of occultism’s influence on popular culture have often utilised the framework of “occulture” put forward by the sociologist Christopher Partridge.⁵ Partridge’s framework would have utility for examining Bowie’s work but is impracticably broad for this particular study. For Partridge, “occulture” is not simply a portmanteau of “occultism” and “culture” but encompasses “an essentially non-Christian religio-cultural milieu, a milieu that both resources and is resourced by popular culture – the ‘occult milieu.’”⁶ Thus, Partridge’s occulture encompasses not simply occultism but also “a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range or beliefs out of a general interest in the paranormal.”⁷ While many culturally alternative movements, such as the religions of South and East Asia, did influence Bowie, this article looks specifically at the influence of occultism on his work. Here, occultism is specifically defined, following the scholar of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, as “a category in the study of religions, which comprises *all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.*”⁸ In this, it includes modern Western esoteric traditions such as Theosophy, Thelema, and New Age, but not imported Asian traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism or other culturally alternative movements like ufology or cryptozoology.

4. Murray, “Goodbye Ziggy,” 33.

5. The term “occulture” itself was probably devised by the British occultist-cum-musician Genesis P-Orridge (b. 1950) before being repurposed by Partridge for scholarly usage.

6. Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, 4. On the concept of occulture more broadly see also Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary.”

7. Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, 4.

8. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 422.

Bowie, a Spiritual Seeker

On 8 January 1947, Bowie was born — as David Robert Jones — to a lower middle-class family in Brixton, south London. Relocating to the suburb of Bromley in 1953, as a teen he committed himself to the goal of pop stardom. By the mid-1960s he was circling London’s mod scene and fronting a string of unsuccessful bands. Later that decade, he began moving in counter-cultural circles and developed an interest in some of the alternative ideas encountered there, ideas which contributed to the otherness or outsider status that helped define his artistic trajectory.

Perhaps the most important religious influence upon Bowie during the 1960s was Tibetan Buddhism, an interest he attributed to his reading of Jack Kerouac (1922–1969).⁹ Bowie visited both Tibet House in South Hampstead — there befriending the Lama Chime Rinpoche (b. 1941) in 1965 — and the Samye Ling monastery in Dumfriesshire.¹⁰ In 1972, he claimed that he had considered becoming a Buddhist monk, although his first wife Angie Bowie (b. 1949) later suggested that here he may have been exaggerating for effect.¹¹ He shared his interest in Tibetan Buddhism with his friend and collaborator, the producer Tony Visconti (b. 1944),¹² and the influence of Buddhism and Tibet is evident in two 1967 songs, “Silly Boy Blue” and “Karma Man.” Although Buddhist allusions are far rarer in his later work — in 1973 he declared himself no longer a Buddhist¹³ — he retained links with the Tibet House organisation, performing at their annual benefit gigs in 2001, 2002, and 2003. In his 2004 will, he stipulated that his ashes should be scattered in Bali, “in accordance with the Buddhist rituals.”¹⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given how space exploration and/or extra-terrestrial life pervades much of his early work, another counter-cultural movement Bowie encountered was ufology. Having developed a lifelong interest in science-fiction

9. Copetas, “Beat Godfather Meets Glitter Mainman.”

10. Trynka, *Starman*, 84; Tulku, “Lama Chime Rinpoche Tribute.”

11. Watts, “Oh You Pretty Thing,” 9; Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 44.

12. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 47; Visconti, *Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*, 253–54 and 355.

13. Salvo, “David Bowie Tells All.”

14. Sawyer and McNulty, “David Bowie’s lifetime interest in Buddhism.”

from his childhood viewing of *The Quatermass Experiment*,¹⁵ Bowie was well-read in science-fiction literature.¹⁶ According to Angie Bowie, he believed “very strongly” in extra-terrestrial visitors;¹⁷ the music arranger Paul Buckmaster (1946–2017) noted that they had conversations “about aliens and UFOs a lot when we first met. It seemed to be the primary topic of debate.”¹⁸ For several weeks circa 1968 Bowie joined flying saucer meditation sessions at the Hampstead flat of singer-songwriter Lesley Duncan (1943–2010).¹⁹ Despite his brief involvement in that group, it does not appear that Bowie seriously pursued involvement in any UFO religions, steering clear of Scientology when it was introduced to his band on their 1972 U.S. tour.²⁰

An interest in ghosts and hauntings was also present in Bowie’s life during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969 he moved into Haddon Hall, a large and reputedly haunted Victorian house in Beckenham, south-east London. According to Visconti, “all of us, at one time or another, saw a mysterious young lady dressed in white, possibly a burial shroud, walking in the garden, slowly, along the hedged border around dawn.”²¹ Bowie apparently shared this belief, informing his later girlfriend Ava Cherry about the Haddon Hall haunting.²² Beliefs about ghosts resurfaced when Bowie and Visconti were working on the *Low* album at the Château d’Hérouville near Paris in 1976, where again they both claimed to have sensed spectral entities.²³

Evident here is Bowie’s clear interest in ideas which, in the context of 1960s and 1970s Britain, were regarded as heterodox and alternative. Conversely, there

15. Trynka, *Starman*, 11.

16. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 60.

17. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 264.

18. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 60.

19. Trynka, *Starman*, 83.

20. Trynka, *Starman*, 174–75; Buckley, *David Bowie*, 155.

21. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 81. Visconti also mentions the haunting in *Bowie, Bolan, and the Brooklyn Boy*, 144.

22. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

23. Trynka, *Starman*, 264; Visconti, *Bowie, Bolan, and the Brooklyn Boy*, 239.

is little or no evidence that at this juncture Bowie was interested in mainstream Christianity or Christian symbolism. As a baby boomer — and thus part of what Wade Clark Roof called a “generation of seekers”²⁴ — Bowie partook in a growing trend for pursuing an interest in supernaturalism outside of institutionalised religious organisations. This pick and mix approach to belief and practice avoided the doctrinal attitudes more prevalent among earlier generations and represented a marked shift in Western religiosity. Although many individuals followed similar approaches prior to the 1960s, that decade is often seen as pivotal in its growth and move towards the mainstream.²⁵ Some sociologists have seen this as a reflection of a broader “subjective turn” impacting many areas of life in Western countries.²⁶ By the 1970s, such attitudes were associated with the vague terminology of the “New Age,” although this label had fallen out of fashion by the twenty-first century.²⁷ It may be overstating the case to call Bowie a New Ager, but clearly he was part of a broader move towards subjectivised and individualist pick and mix spirituality.

Similar attitudes can be seen among many of Bowie’s coeval collaborators. The work of American rocker Lou Reed (1942–2013), whom Bowie knew by at least 1972, demonstrated an interest in Theosophy, while King Crimson co-founder Robert Fripp (b. 1946) — who played guitar on Bowie’s 1977 album “*Heroes*” — incorporated Gurdjieffian influences into his songs after 1974.²⁸ Jim Henson (1936–1990), who directed Bowie in the 1986 fantasy film *Labyrinth*, was interested in Hinduism and Theosophy and used Jane Roberts’s (1929–1984) channelled Seth Material in his 1982 picture, *The Dark Crystal*.²⁹ David

24. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*.

25. See for instance Ellwood, *The 60s Spiritual Awakening*.

26. Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 2–5.

27. There is a vast literature on the New Age. Prominent texts include Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*; Heelas, *The New Age Movement*; Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*; Kemp and Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age*.

28. Fripp’s use of Gurdjieffian work is explored by Robertson, “Turning Ourselves.”

29. Odell, “Working with Jim Henson.”

Lynch (b. 1946), whose 1992 film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* features a brief Bowie appearance, practiced Transcendental Meditation, while Theosophical influences made their way into Lynch's earlier television series, *Twin Peaks*.³⁰ This is not to say that Bowie worked with these artists because of their religious interests, nor that he gave much thought to the Seth Material, Theosophy, or Transcendental Meditation. However, it reflects the broader popularity of alternative supernaturalist and spiritual ideas among many creative Anglo-American baby boomers and their willingness to draw upon such sources in their work. Bowie, therefore, was hardly atypical.

“I’m Closer to the Golden Dawn”: The Late 1960s and Early 1970s

Lyrics evidencing a clear influence from occultism are absent from both Bowie's debut album, *David Bowie* (1967), and its follow up, also titled *David Bowie* (1969). There is nevertheless a non-album track from this period which makes a passing reference to an esoteric belief. In “Did You Ever Have a Dream” — a B-side for the 1967 single “Love You Till Tuesday” — Bowie refers to traveling the world “On the magic wings of astral flight.” Having been promoted by the Theosophical Society from the late nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth the concept of astral travel had been popularised through books about out-of-body experiences.³¹ The concept would likely have been known to most individuals with alternative interests in late-1960s Britain and referencing it would necessitate no in-depth knowledge of occultism. Indeed, Bowie was not the only popular musician referencing the astral, as Van Morrison's (b. 1945) 1968 album *Astral Weeks* demonstrates. Bowie's reference to the astral should probably be seen in connection with his clear interest in fantasy at this time. His 1967 track “The Laughing Gnome” is a classic example, presenting a gnome as a real living creature, while in “When I Live My Dream”, written that same year, Bowie describes a fairy-tale

30. Doyle White, “My People Call it the Dweller on the Threshold.”

31. For instance, Fox, *Astral Projection*; Smith, *The Enigma of Out-of-Body Travel*.

world replete with romance, castles, and dragons. Other songs from this period attest to his aforementioned alternative preoccupations; “Silly Boy Blue” and “Karma Man” allude to Tibetan Buddhism while “Memory of a Free Festival,” with its reference to “tall Venusians,” nods to Bowie’s interest in extra-terrestrials.

It is only with the dawn of the 1970s that Bowie’s music begins to exhibit a firm occultist dimension, something apparent in several tracks on the albums *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) and *Hunky Dory* (1971). The opening song on the first of these, “The Width of a Circle,” may allude to the occultist’s practice of magic, with the titular circle likely representing a magic circle – the lyrics make reference to “this magic spell,” “the master,” “devil’s love,” and “the Gods,” all of which could have been drawn from the ready imagery of the occult milieu. However, nothing here suggests that Bowie was adhering to, or seeking to promote, a specific occultist system; none of the language reflects the definite influence of, for example, Thelema or Theosophy. Rather, he seems to be playing with stock imagery that could just as easily have come from a fantasy novel or film than the writings or doctrines of occultists.

In this it would be another example of Bowie’s already-displayed interest in fantasy and would also exhibit similarities to the lyrical work of Marc Bolan (1947–1977), his friend-cum-rival whose 1965 song “The Wizard” refers to a magical practitioner in a manner drawing upon popular stereotypes rather than occultism. Potentially bolstering the idea that “The Width of a Circle” lacks intentional reference to occultism is Peter Doggett’s argument that its lyrics allude to a taboo sexual encounter between Bowie and another man, in which case the references to magic and the “devil’s love” are deliberately euphemistic.³²

A potentially more explicit reference to occultism appears on the album’s fourth track, “After All,” which includes the lyrics “Live till your rebirth and do what you will, oh by jingo” in its final verse. *Do What You Will* is the title of a book of essays by Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) first published in 1929, and this

32. Doggett, *The Man Who Sold the World*, 80–81.

may be what Bowie is alluding to.³³ However, given its juxtaposition alongside a reference to rebirth, it may instead be that Bowie was providing an adaptation of “do what thou wilt,” the central ethical tenet within Thelema, the religion established by the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).³⁴ It is of little surprise that Crowley might interest Bowie, for there are clear parallels between their lives; both were counter-cultural figures rejecting societal norms through, among other things, their bisexuality. However, it is difficult to interpret “After All” as a deliberate espousal of Thelemic teachings, in part due to the opaque nature of its lyrical content. It is not replete with either Crowleyan or broader occult references, with the “do what you will” reference standing alone in that regard. Bowie biographer David Buckley thought that the possible Crowley reference meant that Bowie was “envisaging a fan base of star-child occultists,” expressing the view that the song was “the first of Bowie’s mini-manifestos for his chosen children.”³⁵ This is possible, but it may be reading too much into this single, passing reference.

Bowie’s interest in Crowley was hardly idiosyncratic within the British pop music environment. The Beatles included the Thelemite prophet among the seventy-one figures adorning the cover of their 1967 *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, Led Zeppelin had “Do What Thou Wilt” engraved on the vinyl of their 1970 album *Led Zeppelin III*, while the lesser-known singer Graham Bond (1937–1974) had released two Crowley-themed albums, *Love is the Law* (1969) and *Holy Magick* (1970). Such Crowleyan influences would recur through ensuing decades, particularly among heavy metal artists: Ozzy Osbourne included “Mr Crowley” on his 1980 solo debut, *Blizzard of Ozz*, while Iron Maiden opened their 1988 album *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* with “Moonchild,” a song inspired by Crowley’s eponymous novel. Crowley was certainly a known figure within British counter-cultural circles at the time Bowie was writing “After All.” This being said, there is no equivocal evidence that Bowie’s quotation of

33. Huxley, *Do What You Will*.

34. The quotation first appears in Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, I.40.

35. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 85.

“do what you will” was a deliberate Crowleyan reference at all. It may allude to Huxley’s book, or simply reflect a phrase that Bowie had heard in conversation without being aware of its origin.

Occultism’s possible influence is also evident in two songs on Bowie’s fourth album, *Hunky Dory*. The album’s second track, “Oh! You Pretty Things,” references disparate influences then attracting Bowie’s interest. Its underlying theme is a form of pop Nietzscheanism prophesying the replacement of *homo sapiens* with a forthcoming “Homo superior,” a term borrowed not from Nietzsche himself but from *Odd John*, a 1935 novel by the English science-fiction writer Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950).³⁶ Elsewhere in the song, Bowie refers to these superior humans as “the coming race.” Again, this is a science-fiction reference, having been drawn from the title (and final lines) of *The Coming Race*, a book published anonymously in 1871. Its author was the English novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873), himself an occultist. On this count, it could be argued that the Bulwer-Lytton reference is also a nod to Bowie’s interest in occultism, however unlike some of Bulwer-Lytton’s other works, *The Coming Race* does not betray its author’s occultist leanings, and it is possible that at this stage Bowie had no idea about this aspect of Bulwer-Lytton’s life.³⁷

Far less ambiguously occultist is the sixth track on *Hunky Dory*, “Quicksand.” Here, Bowie declares that he’s “closer to the Golden Dawn / Immersed in Crowley’s uniform / Of imagery.” These are blatant references to two of the most prominent actors in the history of British occultism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn — a ceremonial magic group active between 1888 and c.1903 — and Crowley, one of its most famous members. As with the potentially Crowleyan reference in “After All,” these figures are presented in such a way so as not to suggest anything beyond a passing familiarity. Such a scenario is supported by some of Bowie’s later statements. In a 1993 interview, he recalled having referenced Crowley in “Quick-

36. As noted, for instance, in Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 98.

37. The Bulwer-Lytton reference has previously been recognised by Buckley, *David Bowie*, 233; Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 102.

sand” before having delved into the late occultist’s voluminous oeuvre. Instead, he noted, at that time he was reading “his biography,” presumably a reference to *The Great Beast*, a somewhat unflattering 1951 book by John Symonds (1914–2006).³⁸

In 2003, Angie — Bowie’s wife between 1970 and 1980 — opined that her ex-husband’s interest in occultism developed out of a desire to imitate Led Zeppelin, whose guitarist Jimmy Page (b. 1944) was keenly interested in the subject, and particularly in Crowley.³⁹ Bowie had known Page since at least January 1965, when the two were frequenting the same London hangouts.⁴⁰ It is certainly plausible that Page’s interest in the subject, and his inclusion of Crowleyan references in Led Zeppelin’s work, influenced Bowie’s desire to do the same. At the same time, attributing this influence to one singular source might be misguided given the prevalence of Crowley in the counter-cultural zeitgeist. In tapping into the Crowley chic, it is possible that Bowie wanted to accrue subcultural capital by demonstrating to his listeners that he too was familiar with the obscure, edgy references his more successful contemporaries were citing.

“Quicksand” also prefigures Bowie’s later interest in the intersection between occultism and Nazism through his lyric “I’m living in a silent film / Portraying Himmler’s sacred realm / Of dream reality.” This is the first clear reference to Nazism within Bowie’s oeuvre, an interest that became increasingly prevalent in the mid-1970s. At this juncture, however, it does not reflect a special interest in Nazism above other ideologies; tracks produced between 1971 and 1974 also reference such political figures as Winston Churchill (“Quicksand”), Aneurin Bevan (“Star”), and Che Guevara (“Panic in Detroit”). It is significant that of the eleven tracks on *Hunky Dory*, only one makes such an obvious, unambiguous occult reference, and even this juxtaposes it against other material; “Quicksand” also references Churchill, Greta Garbo, and the bardo, the state between two consecutive rebirths in Tibetan Buddhist belief.

38. Sutherland, “One Day, Son, All This Could be Yours . . .,” 218.

39. Angie Bowie was interviewed in 2003 for Koenig, “The Laughing Gnostic.”

40. Trynka, *Starman*, 45–46.

It is also from this period that we begin to see possible visual references to occultism. In mid-1971, Bowie had a publicity photograph taken by Brian Ward in which his garb mimicked ancient Egyptian costume.⁴¹ This may simply reflect the Egyptomania that emerged in British culture in the wake of nineteenth-century Egyptology. At the same time, Egyptomania had close links with forms of occultism, including Thelema, and many occultists regarded ancient Egypt as a source of ancient wisdom.⁴² Perhaps Bowie selected this outfit with such associations in mind; then again, perhaps not.

Bowie's early work demonstrates that, from at least 1970, he was aware of various topics pertaining to occultism, specifically the Golden Dawn, Crowley, and Bulwer-Lytton. At the same time, nothing suggests he knew a great deal about any of them. All his lyrics demonstrate is the ability to mention them in passing. It may be that he had some deeper knowledge, but this is not evidenced by his lyrics nor is it supported by his later statements, which instead suggest comparative ignorance of such matters. It is also apparent that at this juncture, Bowie was juxtaposing elements drawn from occultism with material from Tibetan Buddhism and with references to Nietzsche. It is nevertheless interesting and significant that he should choose to namecheck occult references in his work, in doing so mimicking similar references by other prominent pop musicians of the period, namely The Beatles and Led Zeppelin. He may have consciously sought to present himself as part of a wider zeitgeist, tapping into broader counter-cultural interests in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultism, in large part as a fashion statement. References to occultism then vanish from Bowie's work for five years. There are no obvious nods to the topic in *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), *Aladdin Sane* (1973), *Pin Ups* (1973), *Diamond Dogs* (1974), or *Young Americans* (1975). These albums contained occasional references to other religious or supernaturalist beliefs and practices,

41. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 110.

42. Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt*; Jordan, "Esoteric Egypt;" Tully, "Walk Like an Egyptian."

including prayer (“Drive-In Saturday”), Voodoo (“Ziggy Stardust”), reading tea leaves (“1984”), and Apollo (“Big Brother”), but occultism had apparently lost the interest it had held for him when composing “Quicksand” and possibly also “After All” and “Oh! You Pretty Things.” This further bolsters the argument that such references had never been particularly important to Bowie, having reflected just one of the many elements he drew upon in crafting his lyrics.

“Making Sure White Stains”: The Mid 1970s

Following the British success of Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust character, he moved to the United States in April 1974. It was there, according to Buckley, that the singer entered “the most paranoid and out-there period of his life” as his cocaine use “became very excessive very quickly,” soon morphing into an addiction.⁴³ It was at this point that Bowie’s interest in occultism revived, now in a more intense form, although exactly how this came about is unclear. In November 1974, Bowie appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show*, where the eponymous presenter related how a woman had informed him of her “feeling” that Bowie was “into black magic and that sort of thing.” Bowie’s laughing response suggested — if perhaps in a tongue-in-cheek manner — that it might be true, adding: “I’m a person of diverse interests.”⁴⁴ As earlier lyrics attest, Bowie clearly had at least a passing interest in occultism since 1971 and possibly 1970, and it may have been these references that generated the anonymous woman’s comment to Cavett. Several months later, a second incident occurred which likely encouraged his further immersion in the topic. In the U.S., Bowie initially resided on West 20th Street in the Chelsea area of New York City, and it was here, in February 1975, that Jimmy Page visited him. According to Ava Cherry, Bowie’s then-girlfriend who was present at the time, Page had spilled his wine on silk cushions but remained silent on the issue. Bowie was angry, and according to Cherry the two men

43. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 189, 197, and 204.

44. *The Dick Cavett Show*, Episode 1539, Season 7.

stared at each other; Bowie “wanted to show Jimmy that his will was stronger. Then all of a sudden, after that night, David has all these books around and is reading them.”⁴⁵ Angie Bowie later noted that her husband believed Page “was in league with Lucifer, and was out to get him.”⁴⁶

The following month, Bowie relocated to Los Angeles. His friend, the fellow Englishman Glenn Hughes (b. 1952) of the band Deep Purple, allowed Bowie to stay at his Beverly Hills house while he was away. On returning, Hughes found that Bowie had drawn pentagrams and other apotropaic symbols on the walls and windows.⁴⁷ Hughes later recalled that his conversations with the singer became “scary. This black magic theme crept in; and my house was near where the Sharon Tate murders were, he was convinced the whole Manson family was still around, and I found he’s hid all the knives in my house. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was learning all about cocaine psychosis.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Hughes noted that Bowie would “go on very bizarre tangents about Aleister Crowley or the Nazis or numerals a lot.”⁴⁹ In June, at which point he had moved into the Hollywood home of his manager, Michael Lippman, Bowie gave an interview to Cameron Crowe during which he claimed to see a body fall from the sky outside the window. He then pulled down the blind – on which had been scrawled a star and the word “AUM” – and briefly lit a black candle before blowing it out. To Crowe, Bowie declared: “Don’t let me scare the pants off you. It’s only protective. I’ve been getting a little trouble from . . . the neighbors.”⁵⁰

Bowie subsequently moved into a mid-twentieth-century “white cube” house at 637 North Doheny Drive along the West Hollywood/Beverly Hills border.⁵¹

45. Trynka, *Starman*, 231. Cherry also recounted the incident for Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 246–47 and Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

46. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 282–83.

47. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 261. Also attested in Trynka, *Starman*, 237.

48. Trynka, *Starman*, 234.

49. Spitz, *David Bowie*, 259.

50. Crowe, “David Bowie: Ground Control.”

51. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303; Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 226.

The house had what, in a 1983 interview, he called “Egyptian décor,” noting that it appealed to him because he then “had this more-than-passing interest in Egyptology, mysticism, the cabala, all this stuff that is inherently misleading in life, a hodge-podge whose crux I’ve forgotten. But at the time it seemed transparently obvious what the answer to life was. So the house occupied a ritualistic position in my life.”⁵² His paranoia about malevolent forces continued. According to Cherry, Bowie painted an apotropaic pentagram on her hand and once incanted a spell over her when she was in the bathtub.⁵³ Cherry also recalled him destroying one of his bracelets, a gift from a former girlfriend whom he now thought had malicious intentions.⁵⁴ He interpreted another gift, a red doll sent to him by his cousin Kristina, as a malevolent icon.⁵⁵ There is a story, repeated in various biographies, that he kept his urine in the fridge to prevent magicians from stealing and using it, although Angie Bowie noted that she never saw any evidence for this and — as noted by Bowie biographer Paul Trynka — it is possible that the tale is simply apocryphal, a myth to “exaggerate a situation that was already bizarre.”⁵⁶ There would nevertheless be some precedent for such a practice in various occultist texts. Crowley for instance described how practitioners of black magic acquired physical artefacts from their victims to aid their magical machinations, while Dion Fortune (1890–1946) urged people to destroy their hair and nail clippings lest such black magicians obtain them.⁵⁷ Angie noted that Bowie was aware of the tradition that witches could use “one’s cast-off bodily matter” for malevolent practices against the individual they originated from.⁵⁸

52. White, “David Bowie: The Interview.”

53. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

54. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263; Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

55. Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

56. It is repeated in Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 261; Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 231. See also Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 301–02; Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

57. Crowley, *Moonchild*, 149 and 151; Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defence*, 178.

58. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 302.

Cherry recalled Bowie talking about a secretive group of magicians whom he believed were intent on harming him; on one occasion, biographers Tony Zanetta and Henry Edwards relate, he held a ritual to deflect the harmful spells directed at him. This entailed writing down the name of his magical nemesis and burning it at midnight, but when he missed the appointed time he was forced to perform a longer variant. This involved writing out the name using a special quill dipped in “dove’s blood ink,” a concoction containing cinnamon, bay leaves, alcohol, gum Arabic, and rose oil. After this, the piece of paper was folded in a prescribed manner and then burned.⁵⁹ This was not the only instance in which Bowie claimed magical practitioners were attempting to harm him. In one instance he phoned up both his friend Cherry Vanilla (who was in New York) and his wife Angie (in London) claiming that a warlock and two female witches had abducted him. He insisted that they wanted him to mate with one of the witches – accounts differ as to whether this would take place on Walpurgis or Halloween – to bring Satan’s child into the world.⁶⁰ According to Angie, she alerted Lippman, and he convinced the singer to leave the reputed witches’ house and hail a cab to Lippman’s home. Angie flew into California to find Bowie there, paranoid that the witches would kill her as a means of getting to him.⁶¹

What exactly happened in this incident is not clear; it is possible, but far from certain, that he really was with a group of occultists. Angie suggested that his cocaine-induced paranoia had resulted in him envisioning a scenario that was “puffed-up, superheated, secondhand bullshit.”⁶² She suggested that Bowie had obtained the idea of witches wanting him to father their child from the

59. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 262–63. It is unclear who told them this, but it is likely to have been Cherry.

60. Vanilla’s account recorded by Trynka, *Starman*, 236 and Spitz, *David Bowie*, 260–61; Angie Bowie’s appears in Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 293, 295–97; Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 264–65; Koenig, “Laughing Gnostic,” and Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 232.

61. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297–99.

62. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297.

1968 film, *Rosemary's Baby*.⁶³ A less direct influence may have been Crowley's novel *Moonchild*, written in 1917 but republished in 1970, in which a woman undergoes a ritual process overseen by an occult order before giving birth to the eponymous "Child of the Moon."⁶⁴

In the aftermath of this incident, Bowie was guided by Walli Elmlark, a New York City Wiccan who had various contacts within the music industry — she had worked with Fripp on an unreleased album in London — and who wrote books on Wicca and rock music prior to her death in the late 1970s.⁶⁵ Quite how Elmlark was brought into the situation is unclear. According to Vanilla, she had passed Elmlark's name onto Bowie after he asked her if she knew of any "white witches."⁶⁶ Alternatively, Angie claimed that it was she who contacted Elmlark, noting that Bowie had met the "white witch" while in London in 1972. Angie noted that Elmlark provided her with "a prescription over the phone: the ritual scattering of household herbs" along with selected readings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a copy of which Bowie owned.⁶⁷

According to various accounts, Bowie eventually oversaw an exorcism to deal with the malevolent forces plaguing him, although as Trynka noted, "the details" of this "vary with the telling."⁶⁸ According to Angie, David became paranoid about the indoor swimming pool in his Doheny Drive home, alleging that he saw Satan rising from its waters one night.⁶⁹ Hughes confirmed this, noting that at one point Bowie asked him to go in "fully clothed searching for

63. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297; also suggested by Spitz, *David Bowie*, 260–61.

64. Crowley, *Moonchild*, 333.

65. See Elmlark, *Wicca*; Elmlark, *Rock Raps of the 70s*. Elmlark's work with Fripp is discussed in Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson*.

66. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

67. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 299; an account also provided to Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 265.

68. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

69. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303.

the devil.”⁷⁰ Angie related that Bowie wanted an exorcism and that she called Elmlark again for advice. She found that the Greek Orthodox Bishop from LA’s Santa Sophia Cathedral would oversee the ritual, but Bowie refused his assistance. Instead, he performed the exorcism himself, using a book and paraphernalia Angie bought in a Hollywood esoteric store. He placed these items on a lectern, during which he spoke in a language Angie did not recognise, occasionally stopping to snort cocaine.⁷¹ She later related that during the exorcism, the pool’s water “bubbled vigorously,” something she thought “very, very strange,” and that after it was completed a “large shadow, or stain” resembling “a beast of the underworld” could be found at the bottom.⁷² Bowie left the Doheny Drive house not long after, relocating to Bel Air.⁷³ Years later, in 1997, he acknowledged the incident, noting that he remembered the appearance of the dark stain because “it was such an indelibly real thing at the time.”⁷⁴

Biographers have attributed this behaviour to paranoia induced by heavy cocaine usage.⁷⁵ However, in explaining away Bowie’s views at the time as an irrational aberration and sign of mental instability, we may be preventing fuller understandings of precisely why his paranoia took the form it did. Why, for example, did his fears take the form of witches, curses, and supernatural forces, rather than a belief in alien abduction or government agencies spying on him? One possibility is that it reflects his contacts within the Los Angeles occult scene of the period.

One may have been the underground filmmaker and Thelemite Kenneth Anger (b. 1927), whom he and Cherry reportedly met; Cherry noted that “I don’t remember exactly what happened. I kind of blotted it out.”⁷⁶ How this meeting

70. Hughes, “Glenn Hughes.”

71. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303–5; also interviewed for Koenig, “Laughing Gnostic.”

72. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 304–5; she also recounted this to Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 232.

73. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 306.

74. Dalton, “Drum ’N’ Bass Oddity,” 20.

75. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

76. Cherry is quoted in Trynka, *Starman*, 236; the encounter is also discussed in Gillman and

came about is not clear, but Bowie and Anger had associates in common. In the early 1970s, Anger established a friendship with Page, spending time at Page's Boleskine House in Scotland — a property previously owned by Crowley himself — before moving into the basement of Page's London mansion.⁷⁷ Alternatively, Bowie might have been introduced to Anger through Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger (b. 1943), a longstanding friend-cum-rival of Bowie's who had been acquainted with Anger since the late 1960s.⁷⁸ What Bowie and Anger thought of each other is not clear, but there is evidence suggesting their relationship was not a warm one. Cherry recalled that after the meeting, Bowie "felt very strange . . . he felt all those negative vibes were after him, whatever they were."⁷⁹ Anger has claimed that he and Bowie never met, which contrasts with Cherry's (somewhat vague) recollection of the event.⁸⁰ This perhaps indicated a desire to disassociate himself from Bowie, an attitude that appears to have been mutual. According to Zanetta and Edward, Bowie believed Anger was leading a small Thelemic group which meant him harm; it is unclear where they obtained this information, although it was likely through Cherry.⁸¹ Bowie would not speak regularly about Anger, however in a 1980 interview he stated that, given the chance, he would "far more work with [director Nicolas] Roeg than, say Mr. Anger," perhaps reflecting a negative encounter that he had had with the latter.⁸²

Another prominent Los Angeles occultist was the artist Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995), an associate of Anger's and the widow of the prominent Thelemite Jack Parsons (1914–1952). Cameron was just the sort of individual who

Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411. For more on Anger see Landis, *Anger*. For more on Anger's occultist framework and its influence on his work see Allison, "Kenneth Anger" and Doyle White, "Lucifer Over Luxor."

77. Landis, *Anger*, 183–84.

78. Landis, *Anger*, 163–65.

79. Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

80. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

81. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

82. MacKinnon, "The Future," 113.

would have interested Bowie — as noted by Cameron’s biographer, “Bowie’s themes dovetailed nicely with Cameron’s own longstanding passions and preoccupations” — although no evidence has come to light suggesting they ever met.⁸³ While in the city, Bowie also associated with the actors Dennis Hopper (1936–2010) and Dean Stockwell (b. 1936),⁸⁴ who, like Anger, were associates of Cameron back in the late 1950s.⁸⁵ This lends further circumstantial weight to the idea that Bowie may have been introduced to her at some point. Quite who else Bowie may have socialised with on the occult scene is not yet apparent. By the mid-1970s, the city’s organised Thelemic movement had largely dissipated; the Agape Lodge had existed from 1935 till the late 1940s, and the Solar Lodge from the 1960s to the early 1970s.⁸⁶ There may have nevertheless been Thelemic groups meeting either informally or in an organised setting whom Bowie could have encountered. The city was also then home to Israel Regardie (1907–1985), the English-born Qabalist who served as Crowley’s personal secretary before becoming a prominent author on Qabalah and the Golden Dawn tradition. No evidence has arisen suggesting Regardie and Bowie ever met, but Bowie would likely have been interested in meeting the eminent occultist; as will be discussed, he was familiar with Regardie’s work.⁸⁷

While personal contacts may have helped revitalise Bowie’s interest in occultism, the impact of his prodigious reading cannot be discounted. As noted by Cherry, he could be found “reading fifty books at a time about one subject, stacking them up and reading them for days.”⁸⁸ Angie noted that he had amassed a large number of books on occult subjects, but she also suspected that at this period, his heavy cocaine use ensured that “the necessary attention span” required

83. Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 230. On Parsons see Carter, *Sex and Rockets* and Pendle, *Strange Angel*.

84. Trynka, *Starman*, 234–35.

85. Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 140–41.

86. On these groups see Starr, *The Unknown God* and Starr, “Chaos from Order.”

87. Regardie lived in Los Angeles from 1947 to 1981; a biography of Regardie is provided in Suster, *Crowley’s Apprentice*.

88. Trynka, *Starman*, 198.

to study them in depth just “wasn’t there.”⁸⁹ There were few academic studies on occultism available in the mid-1970s, but much emic and popular literature existed. Looking back on these years in a 1993 interview, Bowie remarked that:

I was up to the neck in magick which was a really horrendous period. All my reading in that particular time were people like Ishmael Regarde [*sic*; Israel Regardie], Waite [Arthur Edward Waite] and Mavers [*sic*; Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers] and Manley [*sic*; Manly P. Hall] and all these sort of warlocks. And, y’know, it was all the secrets of the cabalistic practices and all that, an intense period of trying to relate myself to this search for some true spirit. And I thought I was gonna find it though [*sic*] reading all this material.⁹⁰

He returned to the subject in a 1997 interview with the *NME*, where he related that in 1974 and 1975 he had been “welling up Manley [*sic*] P Hall and the Theosophy Society [*sic*] and the Holy Grail and my descent into the Kaballa [*sic*].” He highlighted that he had not been involved in “devil worship” but rather “pure, straightforward, old-fashioned magic.” He further clarified that he:

always thought Crowley was a charlatan. But there was a guy called Edward Waite who was terribly important to me at the time. And another called Dion Fortune who wrote a book called *Psychic Self Defence*. You had to run around the room getting bits of string and old crayons and draw funny things on the wall, and I took it all most seriously, ha ha! I drew gateways into different dimensions, and I’m quite sure that, for myself, I *really* walked into other worlds. I drew things on walls and just walked through them, and saw what was on the other side!⁹¹

That Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942) was “terribly important” to Bowie in these years likely offers clues to how the musician viewed occultism and particularly the practice of magic. Like Crowley, Waite was a member of the Golden Dawn but came to renounce magic as immoral, stripping it from his own occult order, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross.⁹² In his influential *The Book of Black*

89. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 265, 302.

90. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218.

91. Dalton, “Drum ‘N’ Bass Oddity,” 20.

92. On Waite’s life see the biography provided by Gilbert, *A. E. Waite*.

Magic (1898), later republished as *The Book of Ceremonial Magic* (1910), he provided an overview of various grimoires but while accepting a distinction between white and black magic, compared this to “the distinction between the idle and the evil world.”⁹³ For Waite, all black magic and most of the white was “a combination in equal proportions of the disgusting and the imbecile.”⁹⁴ Waite’s negative attitude towards magic may well have impacted Bowie, who at no point appears to have engaged in ceremonial magic. Bowie’s reference to Fortune’s *Psychic Self-Defence* is also instructive; its focus on protecting oneself from the malevolent attacks of “black magicians” was no doubt what attracted Bowie in 1975. However, his later description of it appears erroneous, for it does not encourage the reader to “run around the room getting bits of string and old crayons and drawing funny things on the wall.” What is apparent here is that Bowie’s later recollections of the contents of the literature he reportedly read in the mid-1970s are unreliable, perhaps unsurprisingly given the amount of time elapsed.

Bowie’s embrace of Waite and Fortune might have influenced his decision to distance himself from Crowley, a far more infamous figure. As well as characterising Crowley as “a charlatan” in the aforementioned 1997 quote, in a 1993 interview Bowie stated that he “didn’t get into Crowley . . . because he uses too much Greek.”⁹⁵ These claims nevertheless conflict with a 1995 interview in which he noted that his “overriding interest [in this period] was in Kabbalah and Crowleyism,” and another from 2004 in which he described having been involved in “black magic, Qabalism” and “the Crowleyism of the times.”⁹⁶ It also contrasts with comments made by Steve Schapiro (b. 1934), a photographer who oversaw a photo shoot with Bowie in 1975; Schapiro noted that Bowie “talked a lot about Aleister Crowley, whose esoteric writings he was heavily

93. Waite, *Book of Ceremonial Magic*, xxviii.

94. Waite, *Book of Ceremonial Magic*, 314.

95. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218.

96. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279; in a 2004 interview with O’Brien, “David Bowie ’04.”

into at the time.”⁹⁷ Bowie’s interviews were produced nearly two decades after the events in question; by his own admission, his memories of this period were patchy. This may explain the apparent contradiction. Alternatively, it may be that here Bowie was not using “Crowleyism” in specific reference to the teachings of Crowley himself, but rather as an (idiosyncratic) synonym for occultism more broadly. Evidence that Bowie employed language in ways unfamiliar to most occultists is apparent in other statements, like his aforementioned description of Regardie, Waite, and Mathers as “warlocks.”

While living in Los Angeles, Bowie focused on two projects. The first was Nicolas Roeg’s (1928–2018) film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which Bowie starred as its extra-terrestrial protagonist. The second was his tenth studio album, *Station to Station*, recorded between September and November 1975. Significantly, the album’s eponymous opening track is the most concentrated instance of occultist influence in Bowie’s oeuvre. The lyrics involve the singer, in his current incarnation as the Thin White Duke, declaring:

Here are we, one magical moment, such is the stuff
From where dreams are woven
Bending sound, dredging the ocean, lost in my circle
Here am I, flashing no colour
Tall in this room overlooking the ocean
Here are we, one magical movement from Kether to Malkuth
There are you, drive like a demon from station to station.

The second verse then ends with the words: “Making sure white stains.” These are all references drawn from occultism. The circle in which Bowie is lost is presumably a magic circle in which rituals are performed, and perhaps harks back to “The Width of a Circle.” “Flashing no colour” is probably a reference to the idea of flashing colours, a Golden Dawn practice of placing contrasting colours next to each other to affect the practitioner’s vision. Bowie could have encountered

97. Quoted in the front dust jacket flap of *Bowie: Photographs by Steve Schapiro*; the quotation does not appear in the book’s contents.

this practice in books like Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah*, published in 1935, or in the fourth volume of Regardie's *The Golden Dawn*, first published in 1940 and later reissued as part of a single volume.⁹⁸ The “magical movement” that goes from Kether to Malkuth is a Qabalistic reference, describing the journey from the highest to the lowest of the sephiroth on the Qabalistic Tree of Life. The final reference is a nod to *White Stains*, Crowley's book of poetry published in 1898.

For Trynka, the lyrics to the song “Station to Station” were “capable of wonderfully diverse interpretations.”⁹⁹ It thus remains difficult to ascertain what Bowie wanted to convey with this song. The words “station to station” perhaps pertain to the travel between one sephiroth to another on the journey from Kether to Malkuth, although it may also have more prosaic associations. The music critic Ian MacDonald thought the title was partly a reference to Bowie's travels by train; the singer was known for his fear of flying.¹⁰⁰ Equally mundanely, “station to station” was an established American term for a type of operator-assisted phone call; it appears in this form in the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. The reference to *White Stains* is also of note, because while it draws a clear link to Crowley, this book of poetry was not explicitly part of Crowley's occult system and predates his development of Thelema. Taken together, these elements suggest that, as with earlier songs like “Quicksand,” Bowie was using terminology drawn from occultism without presenting a coherent framework or narrative based in any single occult system or world-view. The opaque nature of the song's lyrics may have been exacerbated by the use of the cut-up technique, by which he divided a paragraph of text into smaller chunks before rearranging them; Bowie adopted this technique from William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) and certainly used it on both *Diamond Dogs* and *Low*.¹⁰¹

98. Regardie, *Golden Dawn: Volume Four*, 51–56. For more on the flashing colours of the Golden Dawn system and its context see Godwin, “Esoteric Theories of Colour.”

99. Trynka, *Starman*, 243.

100. MacDonald, *People's Music*, 141.

101. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 261–62; Trynka, *Starman*, 199.

“Station to Station” was the first and only song in which Bowie explicitly referenced the Qabalah. There are various books from which he could have developed this interest, although MacDonald suggested Regardie’s *The Tree of Life* (1932) as the likely source.¹⁰² This is certainly possible, as Bowie later recalled having read some of Regardie’s work; moreover, the book was in circulation, with Samuel Weiser Inc. having brought out a new hardcover edition in 1969 and a paperback in 1972.¹⁰³ However, there had also been a spate of publications dealing with Qabalah in the preceding years. Since at least the late 1950s, Ernest Benn had regularly reprinted Fortune’s 1935 work, *The Mystical Qabalah*, while in 1964 the Aquarian Press first published W. E. Butler’s *Magic and the Qabalah*.¹⁰⁴ In 1970, Samuel Weiser Inc. re-released MacGregor Mathers’s *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, which they followed in 1973 with *The Qabalah of Aleister Crowley* (a text later republished, and today better known as, *777 and Other Qabalistic Writings*). In 1974 they published an edition of Eliphas Lévi’s *The Mysteries of the Qabalah*, with the UK-based Thorsons following suit that same year.¹⁰⁵ Bowie could have read any or all of these.

In 1996, a journalist quoted Bowie as saying that “absolutely no one else realised” that *Station to Station* was a step-by-step exploration of the Qabalah.¹⁰⁶ Although the interviewer believed Bowie was referring to the album itself, it is possibly he was instead referring to its titular song, the only track on the album containing explicit Qabalistic references. Indeed, in a 1997 interview, Bowie stated that this song “is very much concerned with the stations of the cross. All the references within the piece are to do with the Kabbalah.” Speaking of *Station to Station* itself, he added: “It’s the nearest album to a magick treatise that I’ve written. I’ve never read a review that really sussed it. It’s an extremely dark album.”¹⁰⁷ We might question

102. MacDonald, *People’s Music*, 144.

103. Regardie, *Tree of Life*.

104. For instance, Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*; Butler, *Magic and the Qabalah*.

105. MacGregor Mathers, *Kabbalah Unveiled*; Crowley, *Qabalah of Aleister Crowley*; Lévi, *Mysteries of the Qabalah*.

106. Brown, “Star Comes Back to Earth,” 310.

107. Cavanagh, “Changesfiftybowie,” 324.

how accurate these statements, made twenty years after the event, actually are. In the same interview, Bowie noted that he found much of the time spent in the U.S. during the 1970s, including the making of *Station to Station*, “really hard to remember.”¹⁰⁸ Certainly, there is nothing else on the album to suggest a clear influence from occultism. Rather, it contains more conventional religious references; “Word on a Wing” presents itself as a prayer to God, while references to prayer also appear in “TVC 15.” Structurally, the songs do not link with Qabalistic beliefs; there are for instance only six tracks on the album, four fewer than might be expected were each track to represent a different sephiroth on the Qabalistic Tree of Life.

While there remains little evidence that *Station to Station* was consciously structured around Qabalistic beliefs, it cannot be denied that Bowie was clearly thinking about the subject during its creation. For the album’s back sleeve, he selected a Schapiro photograph in which he – with white diagonal lines painted across his dark outfit – sketches the Tree of Life on the floor.¹⁰⁹ The album image makes this visible, although it is probable that few who bought it recognised the symbolism. How important Qabala was to Bowie in 1975 remains unclear, and it is apparent that within a year he was distancing himself from it. In “Breaking Glass,” the second track on *Low*, the lyrics relate how the singer has “been breaking glass in your room again / Don’t look at the carpet / I drew something awful on it.” In a 2001 interview, Bowie revealed that these referred “to both the cabbalistic drawings of the tree of life and the conjuring of spirits.”¹¹⁰

In interviews, Bowie also referred to a growing interest in Arthurian mythology, particularly the notion that, prior to World War II, a Nazi SS team travelled to Glastonbury in search of the Holy Grail.¹¹¹ In a 1983 interview he stated that he had been “incredibly interested” in Arthurian legend in the mid-1970s, including “the Englishness of the English and all that.”¹¹² Three years prior, he remarked

108. Cavanagh, “Changesfiftybowie,” 324.

109. Schapiro, “Afterword” in *Bowie: Photographs by Steve Schapiro*, no pagination given.

110. “Uncut Interviews.”

111. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218; Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279.

112. Thomas, “The Face Interview,” 145.

that he had conversations “about the Arthurian period, about the magical side of the whole Nazi campaign, and about the mythology involved” with the musicians he was associating with.¹¹³ Links between Nazism and occultism had attracted growing attention during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in part due to the 1964 publication of *The Morning of the Magicians*, an English translation of Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s *Le Matin des magiciens*. Several similar volumes followed: Wilhelm Wulff’s *Zodiac and Swastika: How Astrology Guided Hitler’s Germany* (1973), Trevor Ravenscroft’s *The Spear of Destiny* (1973), J. H. Brennan’s *Occult Reich* (1974), and Jean-Michel Angebert’s *The Occult and the Third Reich* (1974).¹¹⁴ As the historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke noted, such books “were typically sensational and under-researched,” promoting “wild claims” as fact.¹¹⁵ They were nevertheless influential and Bowie probably read at least one. Doggett claimed that Bowie gave copies of *Occult Reich* to various friends, although where he obtained such information is unclear.¹¹⁶ Bowie’s interest in Nazism’s links with the Holy Grail likely stemmed from Angebert’s *The Occult and the Third Reich*, the only one of these volumes giving significant attention to said connections, although in contrast to Bowie’s statement that the Nazis sent an expedition to Glastonbury, the Angebert book has them discovering the Grail in the Pyrenees.¹¹⁷ Pauwels and Bergier had previously mentioned a link, but only in passing, when claiming that the SS leader Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) organised an expedition to find the Grail – although not specifying where – during the war.¹¹⁸ Bowie’s 1993 notion of Nazis in Glastonbury may have been obtained in conversation or, perhaps likely, reflected a misremembering of his mid-1970s interests.

113. MacKinnon, “The Future,” 117.

114. Pauwels and Bergier, *Morning of the Magicians*; Wulff, *Zodiac and Swastika*; Ravenscroft, *Spear of Destiny*; Brennan, *Occult Reich*; Angebert, *Occult and the Third Reich*.

115. Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 224–25.

116. Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 230.

117. Angebert, *Occult and the Third Reich*, 44–45.

118. Pauwels and Bergier, *Morning of the Magicians*, 185.

1975 saw Bowie display an increasing interest in Nazism and the far right. In a series of interviews, he varyingly praised Hitler as “a marvellous morale booster” and “perfect figurehead,”¹¹⁹ welcomed the rise of a far-right dictatorship in Western countries,¹²⁰ and expressed the view that “I might have been a bloody good Hitler. I’d be an excellent dictator. Very eccentric and quite mad.”¹²¹ In his second interview with Crowe, conducted in February 1976, he declared: “I believe very strongly in fascism . . . Television is the most successful fascist, needless to say. Rock stars are fascists, too. Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars.”¹²² Amid this context, a photograph of Bowie’s arrival at London’s Victoria Station in 1976 led to press accusations that he was making a Nazi salute, although later footage suggested the photo merely captured him mid-wave.¹²³ It is difficult to ascertain to what extent his comments were meant seriously and on what level he was being deliberately provocative. Certainly, when read in context of the wider interviews, they sit alongside many incendiary and tongue-in-cheek statements – when Crowe ended his article by asking Bowie if he stood by his comments, the latter replied: “Everything but the inflammatory remarks.”¹²⁴

Bowie showed no sign of embracing Nazism’s racial theories – his friendships and relationships with Jewish and black individuals would render that difficult – and nor did he endorse far-right groups then active. What perhaps attracted his attention was the aesthetic of Nazism, its imagery, iconography, and art. The Führerprinzip may have held some fascination, for the idea of a single, bold man leading the crowd echoed both his longstanding Nietzschean interests and his status as trend-setting pop icon. There may also have been a deliberate desire to court controversy by identifying himself with one of the

119. Stein, “Flying Saucers, Hitler.”

120. O’Grady, “David Bowie: Watch Out Mate!”

121. Crowe, “David Bowie: Ground Control.”

122. Crowe, “David Bowie.”

123. Trynka, *Starman*, 252–53.

124. Crowe, “David Bowie.”

great bogeymen of post-war culture; the nascent punk movement was also using the swastika in this way. Many were concerned that Bowie was lending fascism greater respectability, but it would be misleading to view him as a fascist ideologue. Although attaching a political ideology to Bowie during the 1970s is difficult, his general attitude toward issues like gender roles was far from the reactionary, anti-permissive stances expected of the far right. Perhaps the Bowie of the 1970s is best understood as a cultural libertarian, an adherent of what Amedeo D'Adamo called “the brave libertarianism of the radical aesthete, ethically committed only to a freedom of play, expression and gender.”¹²⁵

It was not long before Bowie was back-peddalling. In a 1977 interview, he insisted that “I’m NOT a fascist. I’m *apolitical*.”¹²⁶ The following year, he suggested that his earlier comments had even contributed to opposing fascism: “the best way to fight an evil force is to caricature it.”¹²⁷ Within a few years, he was indicating a greater willingness to acknowledge culpability for his past. In 1980, he stated that living in Berlin forced him to confront the realities of Nazism, and that many of his friends in the city were “naturally extreme leftists”;¹²⁸ in 1983 he described his former statements as “incredibly irresponsible.”¹²⁹ As the 1990s approached, Bowie’s politics took on a left-leaning and less explicitly individualist direction. His 1987 track “Under the God” lambasts “right wing dicks” and “supremacist hate,” while in a 1993 interview, he referred to himself as a “liberal” and expressed views about race relations influenced by Black Power discourse.¹³⁰

Alongside the clear occultist influence Bowie came under in 1974 and 1975, these years witnessed an emerging interest in Christianity not evident in his earlier work. In 1980, he stated that the time spent on *Station to Station* was “the

125. D'Adamo, “Ain’t there One Damn Flag,” 121.

126. Jones, “Goodbye to Ziggy and All That . . .,” 67.

127. White, “Turn and Face the Strange.”

128. Mackinnon, “The Future,” 118.

129. Thomas, “The Face Interview,” 145.

130. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 227–28.

first time I'd really seriously thought about Christ and God in any depth," and that at that time he started wearing a crucifix.¹³¹ According to Lippman, "At one point we gave him a gold cross as a gift; He also asked to have a mezuzah up in his room because of his revival and belief in religion, and felt that it would create more security for himself."¹³² Discussing his wearing of the cross, Bowie told one interviewer that he "just felt I'd been pretty godless for a few years. It's no great thing, just a belief, or let's call it the usual force. Or God? Yes, sure. It's a lukewarm relationship at the best of times, but I think it's definitely there."¹³³ A little later, in 1984, he described that cross as "strictly symbolic of a terrible nagging superstition that if I didn't have it on I'd have bad luck. It isn't even religious to me – I've hardly ever thought of it as a crucifix."¹³⁴

As well as wearing Christian symbols, Bowie also brought in Christian imagery to the *Station to Station* album. The track "Word on a Wing" includes the lyrics "Lord, I kneel and offer you / my word on a wing," and later "Lord, Lord, my prayer flies / Like a word on a wing." In 1976, he related that the song was written as "a hymn",¹³⁵ and in 1980 added that it was designed as "a protection" that he "needed to produce from within myself to safeguard myself against some of the situations" occurring on the set of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.¹³⁶ As both his lyrics and use of material culture indicate, Bowie was not embracing Christianity as a "born again" believer, but saw it as having apotropaic significance; this could have derived from ideas found within occultism, although might just as easily have stemmed from fiction and popular stereotypes.

131. Mackinnon, "The Future," 115.

132. White, "Turn and Face the Strange."

133. White, "Turn and Face the Strange."

134. Murray, "Sermon from the Savoy," 169.

135. Hilburn, "Bowie: Now I'm a Businessman," 56–57.

136. Mackinnon, "The Future," 115.

“A Real Thrusting, Rampant, Spiritual Need”: Bowie’s Later Life

Any observable influence that occultism had over Bowie disappear around 1976, at which point he relocated to West Berlin to shake his cocaine addiction. The albums produced after that date, including his prominent “Berlin Trilogy” of *Low* (1977), “*Heroes*” (1977), and *Lodger* (1979), lack the obvious references to Crowley, Qabalah, or the Golden Dawn present in earlier years. This remained the case for the rest of his career. In the 1980s, Bowie reinvented his image, forging what biographer Marc Spitz called “Straight Bowie,” a figure shorn of its counter-cultural associations and whitewashed for the Reaganite era.¹³⁷ In this environment, it might have been commercially detrimental for Bowie to display clear links with occultism, and when asked upon the subject by later interviewers he was consistently negative.

In a 1995 interview, when asked if he believed that magic was a physical force in the universe, he explained the view that “all those things merely become symbolic crutches for the negative. It was all an adolescent state of mind, even though I wasn’t adolescent. I think drugs really perpetuate that adolescent state.”¹³⁸ When asked on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in 2004, he stated that after exploring Tibetan Buddhism, he went through “Nietzsche, Satanism, Christianity, pottery and ended up singing.”¹³⁹ Given the absence of any reference to Satanism elsewhere in his work it might be that here “Satanism” referred to his 1970s experiences with occultism. The tone of the interview is humorous and it may be that said reference to Satanism, juxtaposed as it is alongside pottery, is intentionally tongue-in-cheek. Conversely, it may reflect how negative his opinion of occultism had become by this period, so much so that he was prone to dismiss the whole topic as “Satanism.” Bowie nevertheless continued to discuss the issue in some contexts. In the early 1980s, Gary Lachman (b. 1955) of the

137. Spitz, *David Bowie*, 316.

138. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279.

139. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 23 April 2004. Clips available on YouTube.

band Blondie attended one of Bowie's parties, where the latter conversed about witchcraft and claimed that the author Colin Wilson (1931–2013) ran a witches' coven in Cornwall, something Lachman thought doubtful.¹⁴⁰ Bowie apparently had a deeper interest in Wilson, and later included his 1956 book *The Outsider* in a list of his top hundred reads.¹⁴¹

Christian imagery recurred in Bowie's lyrics from the 1980s until his death. References to God, the Devil, prayer, Heaven, Hell, angels, and demons all feature, with a Christian theme being particularly apparent in songs like "Bus Stop" (1989) or "Sex and the Church" (1993). Sometimes, these references contained subversive undercurrents and it is of little surprise that in a 1984 interview, he spoke very dismissively of "the Church," referring to "the awful shit" it has inflicted on society.¹⁴² At a 1992 tribute concert for Freddie Mercury (1946–1991), Bowie knelt on stage to recite the Lord's Prayer.¹⁴³ The following year, he revealed that one reason for doing so was because a terminally ill friend had fallen into a coma before the performance. He described the recitation as "a universal prayer" rather than a Christian one but added that he now had "an unshakeable belief in God. I put my life into his hands every single day. I pray every morning." At the same time, he dismissed the idea that he was religious, insisting that he was instead "spiritual" and had "never bought in to any organized religion."¹⁴⁴ He echoed this idea in ensuing interviews. In 1995, he described having "a real *thrusting, rampant, spiritual* need,"¹⁴⁵ and in 1996 related: "The lesson that I've probably learnt more than anything else is that my fulfillment comes from that kind of spiritual investigation. And that doesn't mean I want to find a religion to latch on to. It means trying to find the inner-life

140. Lachman, "David Bowie Colin Wilson Story."

141. "Special Feature: How to Read Like Bowie."

142. Murray, "Sermon from the Savoy," 169.

143. Trynka, *Starman*, 354–55; Spitz, *David Bowie*, 348–49.

144. Sinclair, "Station to Station," 247.

145. Wells, "Artful Codger," 280.

of the things that interest me.”¹⁴⁶ In this, Bowie was not dissimilar from many other baby boomers; the emphasis on “spirituality” as something distinct from religion was pervasive within the New Age milieu.

By the mid-1990s Bowie was exploring other religious traditions; in 1995 he referred to a growing interest in Gnosticism.¹⁴⁷ The music video of his 1995 track “The Heart’s Filthy Lesson”, directed by Samuel Bayer (b. 1962), features a Minotaur-like entity and images of body modification; Bowie told an interviewer that the “new cults of tattooing and scarification and piercings and all that” were forms of “neo-paganism” that reflected people’s “real need for some spiritual life,” something not adequately catered for by organised religion.¹⁴⁸ Further reflecting this interest in the non-Christian, Bowie titled his 2002 album *Heathen*. As specified earlier, Buddhist influences also resurfaced, through references in songs like “Little Wonder” (1997) and “Seven Years in Tibet” (1997), his performances at Tibet House’s benefit concerts, and his desire for Buddhist funerary rites.

Although occultist references remained absent from his work, there is some circumstantial evidence that in the final years of his life Bowie began to reassess occultism in a more positive light. In 2013, he revealed his hundred favourite books, an eclectic collection including *The Gnostic Gospels*, the historian of religion Elaine Pagels’s 1979 study of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual*, the 1896 book by the French occultist Eliphas Lévi, and Bulwer-Lytton’s 1842 novel *Zanoni*, a work far more explicitly occultist-oriented than *The Coming Race*.¹⁴⁹ In 2016 Bowie selected Johan Renck (b. 1966) to direct his music video for “Blackstar.” A confessed “huge Crowley fan,” Renck had unsuccessfully attempted to make a film about Crowley’s life, and while he noted that he only talked “a little bit” about Crowley with

146. Brown, “A Star Comes Back,” 313.

147. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 280.

148. Penman, “Resurrection of Saint Dave.”

149. “Special Feature: How to Read Like Bowie.”

Bowie, the link is intriguing.¹⁵⁰ Contra claims circulating the Internet, there are no unambiguous occultist references in the “Blackstar” video, although the second Bowie video directed by Renck, “Lazarus,” features Bowie wearing a dark bodysuit with diagonal silver stripes: the same outfit he wore in the 1975 Qabalah-themed Schapiro photoshoot.¹⁵¹ Nothing here demonstrates that Bowie had embraced a particular occultist tradition. However, that he was open to including two explicitly occultist texts in his hundred favourite books, employ a director known for his interest in Crowley, and dress in a manner alluding to his prior interests in Qabalah strongly suggest that he was no longer seeking to distance himself from occultism as he had been doing from the late 1970s through to the early 2000s. Something had changed. That he avoided giving interviews after 2004 means that we presently lack much insight into his developing personal interests during the last twelve years of his life. Unless more private information becomes apparent in future, it is possible that the reasons for this shift will forever remain a mystery.

Conclusions

Bowie is one of the seminal figures of Western popular music, a man who both shaped and reflected the times in which he lived. Like many of his contemporaries, he was dissatisfied with established Christianity but retained an interest in what he called the “spiritual.” During the latter half of the 1960s, he pursued this through various culturally alternative routes, most notably Tibetan Buddhism. As his career took off, in the early 1970s he sought to emulate other successful British bands like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin by alluding to his knowledge of occultism through brief references to Crowley and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the song “Quicksand” and possibly also in “After All.” There is no evidence to

150. “Behind ‘Blackstar’.”

151. Among those suggesting that this reflected Bowie’s commitment to Qabalistic beliefs was Crowley, “He may have been exploring it.”

suggest that at this point his knowledge of the subject extended beyond a passing awareness gleaned from reading one or two books on the subject. Between 1972 and 1975, at which point he became a major star in Britain and the U.S., references to occultism disappear from his work, only to return in 1976 with *Station to Station*.

At this juncture, Bowie was living in the U.S. and suffering from paranoia probably induced by heavy cocaine usage. He became convinced that supernatural forces were threatening him and turned to forms of esotericism to combat them. Much of his knowledge of the subject appears to have derived from his reading, although it is likely that this was supplemented by interactions with occultists in the Los Angeles area; unfortunately, their identities remain unknown. This resurgent interest in occultism also influenced his artistic work, becoming particularly apparent in the song “Station to Station,” the clearest and most sustained example of the occultist influence in his entire oeuvre. This appears, however, to have also been the last time he drew upon occultism in such a manner. Later writings – and interviews – reflect a continued interest in “spirituality,” sometimes demonstrated through reference to Christianity, Gnosticism, and pre-Christian belief systems, while at the same time distancing himself from what he called the “black magic” and “Satanism” he had encountered in 1974 and 1975. Bowie remained influenced by esotericism, even as he distanced himself from occultism.

Exploring Bowie’s relationship with occultism, and with religion more broadly, is a task that warrants greater attention than space here permits. Hopefully, archival material might surface revealing which Los Angeles occultists he contacted or which precise books he read. There is also room for further exploration of Bowie’s relationship with Buddhism, ufology, and Christianity, as well as with ideologies like Nietzscheanism and Nazism. It will be instructive to examine how Bowie’s artistic contemporaries drew upon occultism, in doing so further contextualising his place in history and deepening scholarly understandings of how occultism has influenced popular music. May this article serve as an encouragement for other scholars to take up this task.

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The Association of Jewish Theosophists in the Netherlands: The Efforts of Louis Vet and Others to Revive Judaism*

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Abstract

This article presents and analyses the activities of the Association for Dutch Jewish Theosophists (VJT), which was formed during the Order of the Star of the East congress in 1926. The VJT, which has never been studied before, helped in altering the perception of Judaism in the Netherlands. Dutch Theosophists began to see Judaism and its mystical Kabbalah as a religion with a long history comparable to Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Prior to the VJT, several Dutch Jewish Theosophists developed other initiatives to educate their brethren and others about Judaism. Although none of these activities were long lasting, they illustrate that Theosophy was an incentive for Dutch Jewish Theosophists to have a fresh look at their own religion. This may even have led them to develop an affinity with progressive Judaism. These developments came to a halt when Jews began to be transported to Camp Westerbork.

Keywords: Jewish Theosophists in the Netherlands; the Order of the Star of the East; Judaism; progressive Judaism; Kabbalah; Shoah

Introduction

The discovery of the existence of the “Vereeniging voor Joodsche Theosofen” (VJT), the Association for Jewish Theosophists in the Netherlands, has opened a new window on Theosophical appropriations and on Dutch Jewish history. The VJT became lost over time until Boaz Huss, initiator of the “Kabbalah and Theosophical Society” project, stumbled upon the Association of Hebrew

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Theosophists (AHT), and in its wake became aware of its Dutch branch, the VJT.¹ Huss tracked down several short articles by the VJT, but since they were in Dutch, he left them aside. By coincidence, I offered to translate these texts and do a quick search on its main author. This turned out to be the first step in unearthing the VJT. The next steps involved identifying the people who participated in the VJT, unravelling their activities, and making an inventory of Dutch Jews who joined the Theosophical Society between 1875 and 1942.² From the material collected it became clear that the VJT was a minor movement during the Interbellum, and lasted at most for seven years. Nevertheless, it had an influence on the perception of the Jewish religion among Dutch Theosophists. What's more, it turned out that several Dutch Jewish Theosophists – even before the formation of the VJT, and most likely inspired by Theosophy – had also undertaken activities to present Judaism in a more favourable light. These activities have to be seen against the background of the following.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews in the Netherlands had been drawn to the major cities, where towards the end of the century many had come to live in great poverty. Their dire living conditions were fertile soil for socialist ideals, boldly brought to the fore in the play *Ghetto* (1898), which was written by the liberal Jew and socialist writer Herman Heijermans (1864–1924). Yet *Ghetto* also had strikingly contrasted anti-Semitism with the petty-minded religiosity of Jews themselves. The play, highly criticized by orthodox Jews, had led to heated discussions among the public.³ The socialist movement, and Heijermans' work, had an impact on the self-awareness of Jews. During the first decades of the twentieth century, some had turned to Zionism, and many had assimilated into the Dutch society. The majority considered themselves first and foremost Dutch, then Jewish. Attendance at synagogues became less frequent, typical Jewish (religious) traditions were increasingly ignored and neglected. Nonetheless, most

1. Huss, "In Search of Jewish Theosophists," 17; *Id.*, "Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews," 137.

2. See Nagel, "Supplement."

3. Michman, Beem and Michman, *Pinkas*, 114; Lakmaker, "Herman Heijermans," 46–47.

Dutch Jews stayed in the same neighborhood, they didn't easily enter into mixed marriages, and they held onto a variety of Jewish customs.⁴

To counter this secularization process and the negative views of Judaism, it is most likely that the VJT informed their fellow Theosophists, through the lens of Theosophy, about Judaism's esoteric richness. This was done by the activities of the association's president, Louis Vet (1876–1963), who focussed on the Kabbalah. A decade earlier, a handful of Dutch Jewish Theosophists had been involved in the Association of Liberal Jews in the Netherlands ("Vereeniging van Vrijzinnige Joden in Nederland," VVJN). This association is considered a forerunner of the Dutch Progressive Jewish Congregation ("Liberaal Joodsche Gemeente," LJG) which came into existence in the early 1930s, and grew exponentially with the flood of German Jews after the Nazis had come to power.

This paper will show that the VJT offered the Dutch Theosophists, Dutch Jews and the Dutch in general, a different and more uplifting perspective on Judaism. Moreover, it not only unfolds a new case of "Theosophical appropriation," it sheds light on the religious dynamics of Judaism in the Netherlands during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The Association for Dutch Jewish Theosophists (VJT)

The "Vereeniging voor Joodsche Theosofen" (VJT) was the Dutch branch of the Association of Hebrew Theosophists (AHT). The AHT was launched by twelve Jewish Theosophists taking part in the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Theosophical Society (TS), at the headquarters of the TS in Adyar, India.⁵ Founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and others, the TS had developed into an esoteric religious movement largely based on Blavatsky's writings. Madame Blavatsky integrated ideas

4. Michman, Beem and Michman, *Pinkas*, 120, 152, 160–61; Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 24–26.

5. N.N., "Association of Hebrew Theosophists," 246; Huss, "Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews," 141–44.

from Occultism, Neoplatonism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Highly successful lodges sprouted worldwide.

The movement encouraged the comparative study of religion, philosophy and science. A core concept in Blavatsky's teachings concerned the revival of knowledge of an ancient global religion. Supposedly, such wisdom would come again and eclipse the current world religions. Imbued with such ideas, the Jewish Theosophists present at the fiftieth anniversary in December 1925 saw opportunities for both Jews and Theosophists to enrich one another. For that purpose they set up the AHT. The president of the TS at the time, Annie Besant (1847–1933), acknowledged the initiative of the group. She symbolically formalised the AHT by laying the foundation stone for a synagogue at the compound of the TS in Adyar on December 30, 1925, during “an entirely Jewish ceremonial in Hebrew.”⁶

Gaston Polak (1874–1970), an engineer from Brussels and dedicated Theosophist, was assigned as the AHT's president. He immediately announced the establishment of the association in the periodical *The Theosophist*.⁷ Soon after, national branches of Jewish Theosophists were set up in the United States, England, and India. In September 1926, the American group initiated the bulletin *The Jewish Theosophist*. News about this new branch on the tree of the TS also found its way into the Netherlands.⁸

The Dutch branch of the Theosophical Society, the “Theosofische Vereeniging Nederland” (TVN), was officially founded in 1892, seventeen years after the birth of the TS in New York.⁹ A periodical was launched straightaway to keep mem-

6. Perez, “A Short History of the Foundation of the A.H.T.,” 7.

7. Polak, “Appeal to Members of the T.S.,” 103–4.

8. At the end of January 1926, the Dutch public was informed that (at the compound of the TS in Adyar) a Hindu temple, a Buddhist temple, an Islamic mosque, a temple for the Parsees (Zoroastrians), and a chapel for the Liberal Catholic Church were in construction (Annelèn, “Mevrouw W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman over de Theosofie,” *Algemeen Handelsblad* on January 30, 1926). There was no mention yet of the construction of a synagogue. Presumably, this news followed later.

9. For an introduction to the development of the TVN see Bax, *Het web der schepping*, 94–167; Jansen, “... een kern van broederschap ...,” 11–44.

bers informed about the developments of the TVN and the TS abroad.¹⁰ The organisation and its periodical *Theosophia*—since 1948 spelled *Theosofia*—still exist, but the major growth of the movement took place during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when lodges were set up throughout the country. The most active members organized study meetings for lodge members, and lectures for the public in general. On the agenda were subjects like ancient wisdom, reincarnation and karma, the evolution of the soul, the power of thoughts, hypnotism and mesmerism, and the view of Theosophy on religion(s).

A milestone for the movement was the settlement in 1924 of the European headquarters of the Order of the Star of the East (OSE) at the estate of Philip Baron van Pallandt (1889–1979) in Ommen, the Netherlands. The leadership of the TS had installed the OSE thirteen years before, in 1911 in Benares, to prepare the world for the coming of a new religious world leader, the “Maitreya.” Annie Besant and other leading figures of the TS believed that Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) would become this new Messiah. And just as a Dutch branch of the TS had been set up, a Dutch branch of the OSE was set up: the “Orde van de Ster van het Oosten” (OSO).¹¹

As soon as the decision was made to settle the European headquarters of the OSE in Ommen, an international OSE congress was scheduled for the summer of 1924, in Arnhem. Those interested could afterwards attend the camp organised at the Baron’s estate. About half of the participants in Arnhem went to this event.¹² A major success, the OSE congress was organised as the “Star Camp”

10. *Theosophia* appeared first in May 1892. In 1905 a related yet different bulletin was published: *De Theosofische Beweging* (The Theosophical Movement). It appeared every month until 1940, and was incorporated in the 1931 and 1932 volumes of *Theosophia*.

11. Bax, *Het web der schepping*, 162. The initial meeting of the OSO took place in Utrecht on Sunday January 7, 1912. Towards the end of the year Cornelia Wilhelmina (Corrie) Dijkgraaf (1865–1955), the OSO’s president, informed her audience that the coming of the Messiah was reviving among adherents of all religions, including a Jewish sect in Arabia (“Gisteravond had in de bovenzaal van het Leesmuseum” in the *Apeldoornsche Courant* on December 12, 1912).

12. See “De Orde van de Ster in het Oosten” in the *Arnhemse Courant* on August 13, 1924, and in *Het Vaderland* on August 14, 1924. The first article estimates that 500 people went to Ommen, the second mentions 580.

for the next five years.¹³ Its celebrities were always Annie Besant and Krishnamurti. Even after Krishnamurti resigned as the (anticipated) religious world leader and disbanded the OSE during the 1929 Star Camp, the gatherings continued until 1938.

The third Star Camp, organised in July 1926, was attended by approximately two thousand people from various parts of Europe. The president of the newly formed Association for Hebrew Theosophists, Gaston Polak, was also present. He encouraged the Jewish attendants in Ommen to found regional branches of the internationally oriented AHT, and several Dutch-Jewish Theosophists present in Ommen responded by establishing the VJT.

The Dutch monthly *De Theosofische Beweging* (The Theosophical Movement) announced the formation of this group in a short article. Dated August 1926, it bears no author's name, but must have been written by Louis Vet, the man who had become the VJT's president. The notification addressed two issues. The first concerns the organisation's ideology. At the TS' fiftieth jubilee convention in Adyar, the Jewish attendants had realised, Vet explains, "that Judaism, illuminated by Theosophy, holds many treasures of wisdom that can contribute to the uplifting of humanity in general, but especially for the Jews, who nowadays lack this knowledge."¹⁴ To illustrate his point, Vet mentions the subject of the wisdom surrounding "death and thereafter." For many generations, fear of the unknown and the inability to understand serious loss, had affected people. This had not only led to physical repercussions, it had affected people's souls as well. Vet claims that everywhere in society, traces of special inner knowledge had always been present, including among Jews.

Only Jewish Theosophists could join the VJT: men and women known as Jews, and registered by the TS/TVN as members. However, non-Jews interested in the movement could participate in some way as well, presumably as associate mem-

13. See N.N., "Dr Annie Besant in 't theosofen-Ster-kamp" [photo shoot of the camp], 975–76; N.N., "Een onderhoud met Krishnamurti," 884–85; Cohen, "Association of Hebrew Theosophists," 259; "Het Sterkamp te Ommen" in *Het Vaderland* on August 7, 1938; Schreuder, "De Sterkampen in Ommen," 10–11, 25–33.

14. [Vet], "Vereeniging voor Joodsche Theosofen," 183, translated AN.

bers.¹⁵ The intention of the organisation was to illuminate Judaism through Theosophy, and Theosophy through Judaism. With that, Vet copied faithfully from the document compiled in Adyar by Gaston Polak and Sulman Samuel Cohen (1895–1980), a Jew from Basra, now Iraq, who was active at the TS in Adyar.¹⁶ The tools to reach this goal were, according to Vet, literature and unspecified other means.

Those drawn to the initiative could register themselves—and this leads to the second issue that Vet’s writing addresses. Soon a meeting would be organised to offer further information. Thereupon a list of names and, partly incomplete, addresses was to follow.

The VJT: Louis Vet and eight others

During the late 1920s roughly one hundred thousand Jews resided in the Netherlands. This was less than 2 % of the Dutch population.¹⁷ By 1927, the Dutch Theosophists totalled over 2,700 members.¹⁸ A slightly higher percentage of this group, namely 2,5 %, was Jewish. Their names have been filtered out of the TS General Register kept in Adyar.¹⁹ In total at least one hundred Dutch Jews, mostly either noted in the civil registration system as NI (“Nederlands Israëlich,” i.e. Ashkenazi) or PI (“Portugees Israëlich,” i.e. Sephardi), joined the TS between 1893 and 1938. By 1926 several had resigned, while others had passed away. Consequently, the potential number of registered Jewish Theosophists that may have been sympathetic to the cause of the VJT was limited to about seventy.

15. Louis Vet is unclear in his phrasing, but probably had the outline in mind as published in N.N., “Information to Prospective Members,” 7.

16. Here, Vet clearly cited from Polak, “Appeal to Members of the T.S.,” 4.

17. Michman, Beem and Michman, *Pinkas*, 128–31; Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 22–23.

18. Hofstra, “De nieuwere religieuze bewegingen in ons land,” 530.

19. It ought to be noted that my compilation of Dutch Jewish Theosophists most likely is incomplete. More Jews could have participated in the TVN, but for one reason or another may have never been registered in Adyar. Also, I may have overlooked certain names when screening the books. The people scrutinized have been scrutinized because I recognized their names as Jewish; when screening the books, I didn’t recognize for instance the name “Denekamp” (see note 27) as (possibly) Jewish.

It is a rather anonymous group, these seventy odd Jewish Theosophists. Only a handful of these men and women did at some point reach the news,²⁰ and another handful link to “more or less famous others.”²¹ The exception is José Vigeveno (1891–1943), who nowadays is still known by some as an influential entrepreneur, art collector, vice-consul of Nicaragua, and secretary of the Theosophical lodge in Amsterdam.²² Of the seven women and one man that Louis Vet listed in his announcement of the VJT, the following is known.

First listed by Vet was Cato Nijburg-Lorjé (1879–1959), a mother of three.²³ She had joined the TS in July 1919, lived in Amersfoort, and owned a stationary shop. She acquired the business knowledge from her favourite brother, Willem Lorjé (1870–1942), to whose wife, Rosa Lorjé-Wolf (1873–1942), she was akin in spirit.

Second on the list was the just mentioned Rosa Lorjé-Wolf. The Lorjés also had three children, and by 1926 owned two stationery shops in Amsterdam. Both shops had sold the entrance tickets for a public lecture in Amsterdam about the Dutch Order of the Star in the East, scheduled on February 9, 1921.²⁴ Besides being a Theosophist, Rosa Lorjé-Wolf was a feminist and politically active.²⁵ Furthermore, the Lorjés had been involved with the periodical *Het Oude Volk – voorheen en thans: maandblad voor vrijzinnige Joden* (The Old People – Then and Now: Monthly Magazine for Freethinking Jews).²⁶ Their bookshop had a

20. For instance, Esther Bekkers-Lopes Cardozo (1880–1943) reached the news as a European championships winner of floret-fencing (“Mevrouw Bekkers-Lopes Cardozo,” *De Telegraaf* on August 2, 1921; “Schermen,” *Algemeen Handelsblad* on February 27, 1912; TS no. 722770 in Nagel, “Supplement”).

21. See Karel A. van Gelder (1875–1972), registered as TS no. 10174; Joseph Toeman (1887–1956), TS no. 37330; Marie Calisch (1877–1964), TS no. 18131; Meijer Goldsmid (1886–1932), TS no. 46993; Leen Hamburger (1895–1964), TS no. 61856, and Jeannette de Vries, TS no. 79850 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

22. N.N., “Vigeveno, José,” 1535; TS no. 60281 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

23. See TS no. 77318 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

24. Advertisement in *De Telegraaf* on February 7, 1921.

25. See TS no. 64501 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

26. Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 29, 152–55. The purpose of this bi-monthly journal was to elevate the proletarian Jew, and to aid in bringing the “religious inner-life of the modern, liberal Dutch Jew” to fruition (Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 29, translated AN; see also the articles “Het Oude Volk,” in *De Maasbode* on June 14, 1917, and *Algemeen Handelsblad* on June 20, 1917). The VVJN existed for no more than two years. It intended to guide its members by assigning spiritual teachers

full-page advertisement on the back cover of every single issue of this magazine, which ran three volumes between 1917 and 1920.²⁷ This initiative had led to the establishment in May 1919 of the Jewish reform movement “Vereeniging van Vrijzinnige Joden in Nederland” (VVJN; Association of Liberal Jews in the Netherlands). Rosa Lorjé-Wolf had taken a seat on its board.

The third person mentioned by Vet was the secretary-treasurer of the VJT, Ré Levie (1865–1943). She lived in Bloemendaal, Haarlem’s border village, and made a living as a pianist and music teacher. A Theosophist since 1902, Levie had been quite active for the organisation during the earlier years of her membership.²⁸ For instance, she translated R.W. Emerson’s essay *The Over-Soul* (1841) into Dutch as *De overziel* (1904) for the Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij (the Dutch Theosophical Publishing Company). In December 1905 she had put out a call for a Kabbalah study group in Amsterdam, while the TS’ “encouragement for the comparative study of religion, philosophy and science” had ignited her desire to study “the Jewish religion, the Hebrew language, Hebrew scriptures, and most of all the Kabbalah.”²⁹ Since members and non-members of the TS, both Jews and non-Jews, occasionally had expressed the same interest, Levie had launched her idea. She hoped that such a group would elevate the opinion of Jews about their own religion, “especially the more generally developed youth, who now turn away from their religion with defamation and contempt, because they think it is inferior.”³⁰ It is unknown whether her call resulted in the formation of a group, but her private interest led to the presentation of a lecture on the systematic study of Kabbalah for Theosophists in June 1906, at the European TS Congress in Paris.³¹

capable of “deepening the spiritual life” and who would “bring the beauty to the fore that can be drawn from the ancient Jewish teachings” (Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 153, translated AN).

27. One of the three editors of *Het Oude Volk* was the Theosophist, and stationary bookshop owner, David I. Cardozo (1880–1944) (see TS no. 64500 in Nagel, “Supplement”). Another, Salmine Hermine (Minnie) Denekamp (1878–1944), had a sister-in-law who was a member of the TS lodge Apeldoorn.

28. See TS no. 22495 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

29. Levie, “Studie in Kabbalah c.a.,” 192, translated AN.

30. *Ibid.*

31. “Derde Congres van de Federatie der Theosophische Secties in Europa,” *Algemeen Handelsblad*

Ré Levie had a much younger half-sister, listed by Vet as his fourth: Phine Levie (1890–1943). She was the headmistress of a Montessori nursery school in Amsterdam. Just like her eldest half-sister, Phine Levie was single. Between 1926 and 1929, she was secretary of the Wahana lodge.³²

The fifth on Vet's list also lived in Amsterdam, and was also single. Gerarda Cohen (1875–1930) had worked as an office assistant, and had been the leader of an Order of the Star of the East group in The Hague.³³ Besides, her brother Isaac Th. Cohen van Straaten (1868–1931) — he had officially changed his surname by adding his mother's surname — had been an editor of *Het Oude Volk*, and presided over the VVJN.

Next came Bertha Cohen (1859–1943) from Arnhem, who was also single. She had joined the TS in The Hague, in 1902, and had organised a Theosophical study group at least twice.³⁴ Her sister-in-law was number seven on Vet's list. Until her marriage in 1921, Gertrude Themans-Godschalk (1875–1957) had been a brush manufacturer. Her husband, a nephew, and a sister-in-law were also Theosophists.³⁵

The only man in the group, whom Vet listed as number eight, was Bram Klein (1868–1943). Klein ran a hat shop in Amersfoort. His oldest son had joined the TS, and his sister had married a Theosophist.³⁶

Last but not least comes Louis Vet (1876–1963), single, who ran the bookshop “Firma M. Vet” (M. Vet Company) in Utrecht together with his sister Clara Vet (1873–1935), who was also single. Clara Vet's TS registration had taken place in May 1902; Louis' had followed a year-and-a-half later.³⁷ Prior to taking over their father's business in December 1906, the Vet siblings had worked as teachers. (Louis had been educated as a teacher of the Jewish religion.) Their mutual

on June 9, 1906; N.N. “From Divers Lands,” 275.

32. See TS no. 53827 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

33. See TS no. 58823 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

34. See TS no. 21030 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

35. See TS nos. 107304, 125481, and 62906 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

36. See TS nos. 92012, and 73732 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

37. See TS nos. 21698, and 24857 in Nagel, “Supplement.”

interest in Theosophy showed in their work, and traces back to 1911, when a notification in the local newspaper alerted readers to the fact that tickets for a TS lecture series at the Utrecht lodge could be obtained at Vet's bookshop.³⁸ In 1915, 1916 and 1918 similar advertisements informed the public that the Vet Company sold such tickets. Another indication of the Vets' involvement with the TS concerns the publication of a booklet written by an ardent speaker and writer of Theosophical subjects, Wilhelmina A.L. Ros-Vrijman (1875–1948).³⁹

Within the Dutch world of booksellers, Louis Vet was an engaged and appreciated colleague. His colleagues were aware of his Theosophical studies and knew they had his sincere devotion.⁴⁰ After the foundation of the VJT, this showed publicly through Vet's contributions in *De Theosofische Beweging*,⁴¹ his lectures presented to several lodges of the TS, and a radio broadcast.⁴² The subject of Vet's talks always concerned the Jewish religion seen through the lens of Theosophy.

38. Advertisement "Theosofische Vereeniging," *Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad* on October 18, 1911.

39. Advertisement and announcement in *Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel* 93, nos. 32 and 33 (1926): 390, 398. After her marriage in 1901, Mrs Ros-Vrijman began to lecture and write about Theosophy. She did so until 1940. Her husband, Johannes D. Ros (1875–1952), was president of the TS lodge The Hague. The booklet published by the Vet Company, *Nieuwe banen in de Vrijmetselarij* (April 1926; 20 pp.), was based upon a lecture Ros-Vrijman held for the Co-Masonry lodge in The Hague, of which she and her husband were also members.

40. J.B., "L. Vet," 497.

41. [Vet], "Vereeniging voor Joodsche Theosophen," 183–84; Vet, "De Theosofie een Secte?," 239–40; *Id.*, "Samenwerken van Joodsche Theosofen," 36–37; *Id.*, "Boodschap van Dr. Annie Besant," 73 (i.e. Vet's translation of Besant, "To Hebrew Theosophists," 4); *Id.*, "Samenwerking van Joodsche Theosofen," 98–99; *Id.*, "Vervolging van Joodsche Theosofen," 369–71.

42. So far, the references to Louis Vet's lectures that have been found are (date: subject, location): January 28, 1929: "A New(?) Reading of the Old Testament," TS lodge Het Oosten at the 2e van Swindenstraat 9, Amsterdam; March 30, 1930: "The Jewish Religion," TS temple at the Tolstraat 160, Amsterdam; January 14 and 28, February 25, and April 8, 1931: the course "What value does the Old Testament have in our modern time?," TS lodge Utrecht; April 16, 1931: "The unknown value of the Old Testament," TS lodge Bussum; November 15, 1932: "The World Bond between Jewish Theosophists and the Jewish people," HIRO radio broadcast; February 7, 1933: "Judaism in relation to our new society," TS centre Toewijding in Rijswijk; February 17, 1933: "The Caballa," TS lodge at the Witte de Withstraat 9, Amsterdam; March 28, 1933: "The Caballa," TS lodge The Hague; April 25, 1933: "The Cabbala," TS temple at the Tolstraat 160, Amsterdam.

Except for Louis Vet, and a single reference to Ré Levie, none of the names above have surfaced in documents or newspaper articles related to the VJT. The movement, therefore, must have been rather private and rather small. What is interesting to note, however, are the connections between various members of the VJT. They come across as a socially interconnected web of shopkeepers and independent, mainly unmarried, women. It is an image in accordance with Marty Bax's description of networks among Dutch TS members formed by family ties and friendships.⁴³ Such connections often lasted for many years and were passed on to the next generation. It is also an image in accordance with the observation that women "have played significant roles in founding and leading" the TS.⁴⁴

Reaction to the VJT

Louis Vet's announcement in the autumn of 1926 of the establishment of the VJT immediately sparked a response from the Jewish Theosophist Herman van Praag (1882–1942). "Again a new sect?" van Praag queried, all the while considering the creation of the VJT a sad development.⁴⁵ He elucidated his opinion by two more questions: "Haven't we Jews suffered enough from sectarianism?" and "Shouldn't we be happy that there is an organisation like the TS, which wants to form a nucleus of brotherhood without the distinction of race, religion, et cetera?"⁴⁶ The Jewish people have always sought unity, van Praag explained, while each religious Jew daily voices the prayer "Hear Israel the Eternal our God is One."⁴⁷ Van Praag considered the Jewish Theosophists to be better off demonstrating acts of unity towards their Christian Theosophical brothers and sisters than founding a new sect.

Vet replied to the critique by stating that the Theosophist had outgrown sects. According to the TS' beliefs, all religions would in the future become part

43. Bax, *Netwerken in de westerse esoterie*.

44. Wessinger, deChant and Ashcraft, "Theosophy, New Thought, and New Age Movements," 753–56.

45. van Praag, "Weer een nieuwe secte?," 214; TS no. 58413 in Nagel, "Supplement."

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

of what many Theosophists believed to be the World Religion. If this was the case, and it was the case from Vet's perspective, how could the VJT be viewed as a sect? Vet also explained that Theosophical wisdom would be a delight for Jews, and vice versa, Jews could contribute Jewish wisdom to Theosophists. To give an example, Vet referred to the prayer cited by van Praag. It was not properly translated, he argued. It ought to be "Hear Israel, J H W H our Elohim is One," which Vet considered distinctly different for it contained a singular (J H W H / Jehovah) and a plural (our Elohim) for the Godhead.⁴⁸

In addition to Vet one other Theosophist responded to van Praag's critical remark in *De Theosophische Beweging*. Johannes H. Kengen (1884–1976) from Utrecht. Kengen had a Christian background, and had been a regular speaker for the TS since 1916. Over the years Kengen developed a great interest in religion, so much so that in 1927 he became ordained a priest for the Liberal Catholic Church.⁴⁹ In his response to van Praag, Kengen, careful in his wording, first acknowledged van Praag's pure intention, then described how he noticed a parallel with Roman Catholics who had exchanged their original church for the Liberal Catholic Church. Some of these converts had really struggled to leave the "old" Roman Catholic tradition behind. The remnants of this struggle had caused a sincere resistance toward a new religion, church and rituals, which some, however, had been able to set aside through their "higher insights." Presumably these former Roman Catholics, now Liberal Catholic Church members, had gleaned such insights from Theosophy. Be that as it may, to evolve to the World Religion – here Kengen referred to Annie Besant's

48. Vet, "De Theosofie een Secte?", 240. Vet's plea for precise translations and a proper understanding of Judaism can be linked to Justus Tal (1881–1954). Appointed Chief Rabbi in 1918 in Utrecht and a prolific writer, Tal wanted to bring Jews closer to their people and their religion, but strongly opposed Zionism and Reform Judaism (Hagedoorn, "Tal, Justus").

49. Kengen, "Geachte Redactie!," 238. Kengen, employed by the State Railway Company, engaged in activities ranging from local (social) politics to astrology, and from the TS, beginning in 1911, to the "Religieus Socialistisch Verbond" (Religious Socialists Alliance). He knew the Vets since 1912 or even earlier. In 1912 Kengen and Clara Vet were on the board of the Utrecht department of the "Rein Leven Beweging" (Pure Life Movement).

Evolution and Man's Destiny (1924) — it was necessary to first purify, deepen, and spiritualize the existing religions and their rituals. From this point of view Kengen observed a beautiful terrain to be cultivated by Jewish Theosophists:

There is a great awakening [taking place] among the Old Folk [the Jews] that can be illustrated by the reconstruction of their civilization in Palestine.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, for the time being this is still just a national awakening. It is waiting for the fruitful blessing of religion that cannot come from the circles of Orthodox Jews. For there the same phenomenon is happening as in official Christianity: on the one hand orthodoxy, too tied to the old and believing too much, on the other hand modernism, quite apart from the old, with little or no belief; and both lack the light of Occultism.⁵¹

When the Jewish Theosophists would prepare their people for a new, pure, occult religion, so Kengen opined, the Jews would perhaps be sent a “Great Occultist,” similar to the Christians and Hindus, who had been “given” Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934) and J. Krishnamurti respectively. With that Kengen gave a different twist to the idea of the coming of *one* religious world leader: he suggested that each religion could “receive” its own new leader.

Judaism as a major world religion

After this brief, yet serious discussion, *De Theosofische Beweging* published three short updates about the AHT in 1927. A fourth, longer piece followed in 1931. These updates were mainly translations of news Vet had read in *The Jewish Theosophist*. In the first, he was sloppy and unclear in his writing. For instance, Vet agreed that the movement of the Hebrew Theosophists was effective in England, Adyar, the United States and Egypt, and then cryptically added: “In our country presumably the least, because the Jews in all other countries have

50. So far no obvious connections have been noticed in the Netherlands between Dutch (Jewish) Theosophists and Zionists. This contrasts the situation in the Dutch East Indies where Zionists' activities took place at addresses housing TS lodges (“De opbouw van Palestina,” *De Sumatra Post* on February 14, 1921; “Bandoeng: Poerimfeest,” *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* on March 13, 1930; “De Toekomst van Palestina,” *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* on June 8, 1938).

51. Kengen, “Geachte redactie,” 238–39, translated AN.

received more resistance in their development.”⁵² Considering that the VJT was less effective compared to the AHT branches established elsewhere, Vet probably tried to explain this “fact” through a mechanism of resistance. Jews in the Netherlands supposedly had encountered hardly any opposition; therefore, Dutch Jews lacked incentives to study Judaism or Theosophy. With that, Vet indirectly criticized the secularisation process taking place among Jews.

Vet himself remained passionate about the Jewish Theosophical cause. He quoted in agreement “a brother from Adyar” – most likely S.S. Cohen – who had said that the movement had “the extraordinary opportunity to create a strong chain around all Jewish Theosophists” and that it was important to arouse “a strong passion” among them so it could affect their non-Jewish TS members as well as their “non-Theosophical religious brothers around the world.”⁵³ Vet’s global commitment becomes even more apparent in his last update, a letter to the editor. This writing contains the translation of a circular signed by three rabbis in Bagdad that was published in English in *The Theosophist* of June 1931. The Jewish Iraqi clergy had judged the TS “to hold a new belief which in some respects differs from the Jewish faith.”⁵⁴ Consequently, they had advised the Grand Rabbi of the Basra congregation to have the lodge of the TS “removed away from the vicinity of the Grand Synagogue and to notify all who bear the name of Israel to keep away from this religion which is against the belief of Israel since its foundation up to now.”⁵⁵ Deeply concerned about the discrimination and persecution of his fellow brethren in Basra, Vet had passed on this news also to the chief rabbis in the Netherlands; his letter to them was copied in his letter to the editor.

The news about the AHT and the VJT must have awoken, or stirred further, the interest of Dutch Theosophists for the Jewish religion, and led to

52. Vet, “Samenwerken van Joodsche Theosofen,” 36, translated AN.

53. Ibid. Concerning S.S. Cohen, see Huss, “A Jew Living in an Ashram,” 21–29.

54. N.N., “The Persecution of Hebrew Theosophists,” 363–64.

55. Ibid. Vet, “Vervolging van Joodsche Theosofen,” 369–70. See also Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews,” 144.

their belief that Judaism was one of the religions that could be viewed from the Theosophical perspective. After all, the Theosophist Johannes J. Poortman (1896–1970), Dutch but not Jewish, compiled a file entitled “Bibliographical Notes on Judaism and Theosophy.”⁵⁶ And the TS lodge in Amsterdam organized a course — more likely a lecture — on a Sunday in February 1927 about the Jewish religion. Presumably Louis Vet was not the organizer of the course; it must have happened too quickly for him to prepare, given the limited spare time he had. But by January 1929, Vet was ready to present a talk entitled “Een nieuwe(?) vertolking van het Oude Testament” (A New(?) Interpretation of the Old Testament). The question mark between brackets indicates that Vet would not offer a *new* reading of the Old Testament, but return to older, more authentic readings. When the Dutch TS (TVN) organised a series of teachings during the first months of 1930 about the “Great Religions and their Synthesis in the New World,” Vet was scheduled to cover the Jewish religion (fig. 1). Evidently, Judaism was now incorporated within the TVN’s narrative of the great religions; it had cemented its place next to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

There is another example to illustrate that Judaism gained its place in the Dutch Theosophical narrative. On Tuesday November 15, 1932, the Humanitarian Idealistic Radio Broadcast devoted the Theosophists’ airing time of twenty minutes to Vet, who then talked about the “world bond” between Jewish Theosophists and the Jewish people.⁵⁷ The broadcast was announced in *Het Vaderland* as: “4.10 pm. Lecture by Louis Vet about ‘The World Bond of Jewish Theosophists and the Jewish People.[.]’”⁵⁸ The announcement appeared in

56. Poortman, “Bibliographical Notes on Judaism and Theosophy,” 15. The file is announced in *The Jewish Theosophist* 1, no. 2 (1926): 17. Involved with the TS since 1915, Poortman became a member of the Dutch Association for the Theosophical World University (TWU), and took part of the TWU-meeting in London in June 1927. Just like Kengen, Poortman was a member of the Liberal Catholic Church, which he joined in 1924 (Vandekerkhove, “Johannes Jacobus Poortman,” 105–10).

57. Members of the TVN launched the “Humanitaire, Idealistische Radio-Omroep” in 1929 (N.N., “De H.I.R.O.,” 121–22; Jansen, “. . . een kern van broederschap . . .,” 139–40).

58. “Radionieuws: H.I.R.O.,” *Het Vaderland* on November 12, 1931, translated AN.

many other newspapers as well, indicating that the broadcast may have reached a substantial audience.



Figure 1. Announcement for a TVN lecture series on world religions in *Algemeen Handelsblad* on January 17, 1930.

Two months later the bookseller from Utrecht began to lecture about Kabbalah — a recurrent subject within Blavatsky’s writings⁵⁹ — presented by Vet as a mystical method to read the Bible. A journalist summed up the presentation delivered at the TS lodge The Hague:

After stating that the Western and Oriental worldviews are so different that it is impossible for Westerners to understand Oriental wisdom if they do not completely detach from their usual point of view, the speaker pointed out that the Jews originally came from India and from there had taken with them the ancient wisdom. On their wanderings they arrived in Egypt, where wisdom was also to be found. The Egyptians had laid out the great

59. Chajes, “Construction Through Appropriation,” 32-68; Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah,” 157-63.

laws in sizes and numbers in their mighty edifice, the great pyramid. Moses, who was privy to this knowledge, passed it on to his people and put it down in writings that we find in the Bible. These writings, the Mosaic books, contain stories, but the remarkable thing is that behind the words a deeper, hidden meaning is laid down, because the letters are at the same time numbers, and so the words can form numbers. If we want to read the Bible in a cabbalistic manner, we must have the key that reveals the hidden meaning behind the outward story through those numbers. And then we will see that the world events are explained, that certain relationships and laws are revealed. Aided by lighted images, that showed several cabbalistic facts and letters next to each other, these ratios were explained further and it was argued how also here the ancient wisdom gets confirmed.⁶⁰

Even though the “ancient” wisdom passed on by Vet about Judaism may be historically incorrect and altered to fit his Theosophical perspective, it resembles contemporary ideas of non-Jewish, and Jewish Theosophists alike.⁶¹

Interest in the mysterious Kabbalah had been low-key in the Netherlands.⁶² It was mainly known as a secret science (with letters and numbers) to discover the essence of things (and to forecast events). But when the magazine *De Tempel* (The Temple) was founded as a platform in 1923 for diverse, liberal (free) religious movements, “Kabbalah” became included in its subtitle.⁶³ What is more, the series of articles published about that subject were separately published in the bundle *De Qabbalah* (1925).⁶⁴ The interest of Jews in Kabbalah certainly increased. So

60. “Theosophische Vereeniging,” *Het Vaderland* on March 29, 1933, translated AN.

61. See Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews,” 144 ff.

62. Between 1900 and 1930 only three books with Kabbala in the title were published. Two involved the Dutch translations of Erich Bischoff’s *Die Kabbalah: Einführung in die jüdische Mystik und Geheimwissenschaft* (1903; *The Kabbalah: Introduction to the Jewish Mysticism and Secret Science*), and Sepharial’s *The Kabala of Numbers* (1914). For the third, see note 64.

63. The full title of the magazine is on volume 1, no. 1 (April 15, 1923) (the subtitle varies in later issues): *De Tempel: tijdschrift gewijd aan vrij religieuze stroomingen: vrijzinnige godsdiensdienst, oostersche- en westersche religie, occultisme, spiritisme, theosofie, astrologie, kabbalah, vrijmetselarij, anthroposofie, rozekeuzers-cosmologie, mystiek, psychical research, wetenschap, architectuur, kunst, religie en wijsbegeerte* (*The Temple: Magazine Devoted to Free Religious Movements: Liberal Religion, Eastern and Western Religion, Occultism, Spiritism, Theosophy, Astrology, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucian Cosmology, Mysticism, Psychical Research, Science, Architecture, Art, Religion and Philosophy*).

64. These articles appeared under the heading “De Qabbalah,” or “De praktische Qabbalah,” in

when the Society for Jewish Scholarship invited in February 1929 Dr Hermann Morath from Leipzig to speak about “The Science of Kabbalah” for the Dutch Israeli Seminary in Amsterdam, the hall was packed.⁶⁵

A year later *Theosophia* enlightened its readers on the Kabbalah from a Theosophical point of view. This was followed in 1933 by an article in *De Theosofische Beweging*.⁶⁶ It goes beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the content of these articles, and to explore how Kabbalah was interpreted by the Dutch Theosophists. All that can be said here is that Kabbalah, as the mystical tradition of the Jewish religion, had become incorporated into the Dutch Theosophical discourse by the early 1930s.

In the 1933 summer issue of *Theosophia*, an article was devoted to the recent persecution of Jews. The author, Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875-1953), tried to find an answer to the question of why Central Europe (Germany) carried “the terrible hate bacillus in its organism” and how to tackle the hatred towards their Jewish brothers.⁶⁷ By 1939 this problem had intensified. The flood of Jewish refugees and immigrants, and the anti-Semitic German politics concerned members of the TVN. A committee was installed to aid in finding the Theosophical point(s) of view on this complicated, troubling matter.⁶⁸

De Tempel 2 (1924): 125-27, 160-61, 176-78, 194-95, 210-11, 253-54, 270-71, 355-59. *De Qabbalah (Joodsche geheimleer)* (1925; The Kabbalah (Jewish Secret Science)) was published in the “Tempel-series” by De Vrij Religieuze Tempel, Amsterdam, and was advertised in *De Tempel* volume 3.

65. Notwithstanding the interest of the public, the host of the evening and president of the Society for Jewish Scholarship, Professor Jehuda L. Palache (1886-1944), was so disappointed with Morath’s lecture that he didn’t leave time for discussion. Morath had talked about the “Bar Tanjoh,” also named “Bal-Schem Tow” and “Rabbi Löw and the legendary Golem in Prague,” but had not reached the academic standards Palache anticipated (“Joodsche Wetenschap” in *Algemeen Handelsblad*, and “De wetenschap der Kabbalah” in *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, both on February 26, 1929; see also “Genootschap voor de Joodsche Wetenschap in Nederland: Jaarverslag” in the *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad* on June 7, 1929).

66. Dijk, “De Kabbalah,” 372-79, 413-21; Gomperts-van Embden, “Kabbalah en Sefiroth,” 62-67.

67. Jinarajadasa, “Jodenvervolgung,” 246-67, translated AN. The original text appeared in *The Theosophist* (June 1933): 257-58.

68. N.N., “Jodenvervolgung,” 26; *Id.*, “Martin Buber over de levenstaak van de Joden in deze tijd,” 58; *Id.*, “De Joden in Polen,” 58-60; Schimmel, “Het Joodse vraagstuk,” 139-47.

Earlier activities of Jewish Theosophists

The founding of the VJT comes across as an immediate response to the plea of Gaston Polak to fellow Jewish Theosophists during the Star Camp in 1926. There may have been, however, more at play. According to Dan Michman, in his thorough study of the founding years of progressive Judaism in the Netherlands, the publication of *Het Oude Volk* (1917–1920) and the formation of the VVJN in 1919 was an early liberal Jewish reform movement that disappeared without a whimper.⁶⁹ Overlooked by Michman is the fact that this movement was initiated by Theosophists, namely David I. Cardozo and Willem and Rosa Lorjé, and two others who were closely related to Jewish Theosophists — Isaac Cohen van Straaten and Minnie Denekamp, who was the main editor of *Het Oude Volk* until May 1919.⁷⁰ Michman also overlooked, or neglected, the fact that the VVJN participated in the conference organized by the preliminary committee of the “Federatie van Vrije Religieuze Groepen en Organisaties” (FVRGO; Federation of Free Religious Groups and Organisations).⁷¹ Participants in this event, organised in Amsterdam on May 29, 1919, ranged from Theosophists to members of Christian movements, Freemasonry lodges, and the Spiritist’s Brotherhood Harmonia. At the end of the conference the preliminary committee under the leader of the Dutch Order of the Star in the East was set up to make further preparations for the official instalment of the FVRGO. By January 1921, the Theosophist José Vigeveno had become the federation’s secretary.⁷²

69. Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 30.

70. See note 27. After her editorship, Minnie Denekamp became a “spiritual teacher” and the coordinator of courses in liberal education about the Jewish religion to children aged ten to sixteen (see the advertisement for the VVJN in the *Israelietisch Weekblad* on December 20, 1918; see also “Vereeniging van vrijzinnige Joden in Nederland” in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* on December 12, 1918).

71. “Congres Religieuze Federatie,” *Algemeen Handelsblad* on May 30, 1919; N.N., “Federatie van Vrij-Religieuze Groepen en Organisaties,” 82–85.

72. “Federatie van Vrij-Religieuze groepen en organisaties,” *Algemeen Handelsblad* on January 17, 1921. The article states also that the VVJN had manoeuvred itself into a state of decay and had withdrawn from the federation.

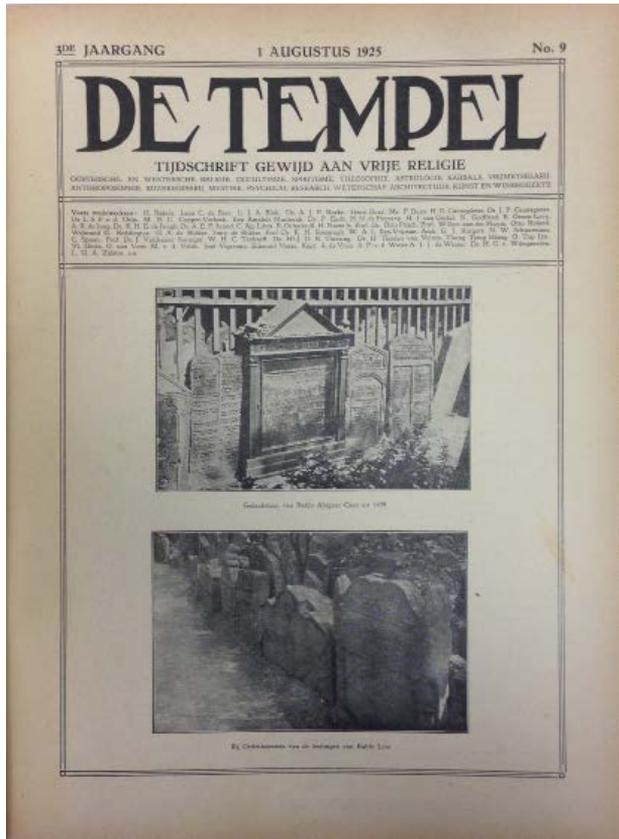


Figure 2. The cover of *De Tempel* 3, no. 9 (1925).

The FVRGO established the periodical *De Tempel*, i.e. the magazine carrying “Kabbalah” in its subtitle. Together with forty others, Vigeveno had a seat on the editorial board of this extraordinary, religiously multifaceted, bi-monthly magazine. On a regular basis *De Tempel* carried a variety of Jewish subjects which informed its audience about the richness of Judaism (fig. 2).⁷³ After three volumes, the publication had come to a halt at the end of March 1926 – only a few months before the VJT was founded. Perhaps *De Tempel* and its “death”

73. These articles were mostly written by Jewish journalist Nico Salmon Godfried (1890-1932).

had prepared the ground for Louis Vet, and the eight other Jewish Theosophists to get involved with the VJT? Perhaps the VJT was in some way a restart of the VVJN, an organisation that operated solely from a Theosophical perspective?

These are open questions. And there is yet another open question. As said, Dan Michman identified the VVJN as an early progressive Jewish movement, but didn't notice it was ideologically driven by Theosophy. Might there have been more connections between Jewish Theosophists and members of the “*Liberale Joodse Gemeente*” (LJG, Progressive Jewish Congregation) in the Netherlands?

The World Union of Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), founded in London in 1926, had targeted countries where large groups of unorthodox Jews had not yet parted from their orthodox religious institutions. The WUPJ considered the Netherlands a perfect target, because both the Portuguese-Israeli and the Dutch-Israeli congregations had remained orthodox in nature, whereas many members of their declined numbers had privately become quite liberal. Consequently, the president of the WUPJ, Lilian Helen (Lily) Montagu (1873–1963), initiated contact with a few Jewish families in the Netherlands in the beginning of 1929.⁷⁴ This was just a few months before the Federation of Free Religious Groups and Organisations was abolished in May 1929,⁷⁵ and Krishnamurti renounced the role that he had been expected to play as the new religious world leader on August 3, 1929.

The first LJG was installed in The Hague (October 1931), followed by a second in Amsterdam (January 1932). Both congregations grew in number, especially in Amsterdam, where German Jews settled after Hitler had been sworn in as Chancellor on January 30, 1933. In the meantime many Theosophists had left the TVN. Accordingly, the very modern building known as “The Free Religious Temple” – built by the TVN at Tolstraat 160 in Amsterdam and officially opened by Annie Besant on July 9, 1927 – became too expensive to maintain (fig. 3a & b). To cut costs, the TVN decided to refurbish the interior of the building into an audito-

74. Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 36–37.

75. “De federatie herdacht: 1919 - 29 Mei - 1929,” *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* on May 29, 1929.

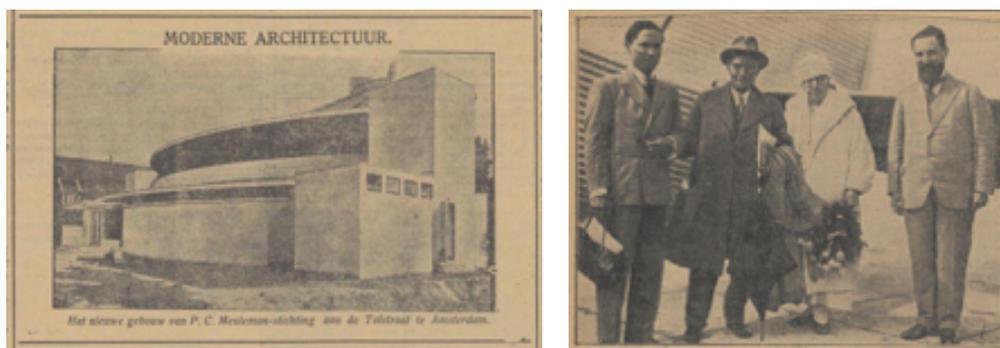


Figure 3a & b. Left, the Free Religious Temple (*Nieuwe Venlosche Courant* on July 12, 1927). Right, from left to right, Y. Prasad, C. Jinarajadas, Annie Besant, and José Vigeveno (*Algemeen Handelsblad* on July 11, 1927).

rium in 1933, and to rent it out to others.⁷⁶ The LJG began to make use of this facility. Most likely José Vigeveno was involved in the negotiations with members of the LJG about the agreement. In 1937 the TVN allowed the LJG to convert the building at Tolstraat 160 into a synagogue.⁷⁷ It is unknown whether Jewish Theosophists may have been attracted to the LJG. Yet with most Jewish Theosophists living in Amsterdam, and their former temple having become a synagogue, it is very likely that connections between members of both groups were not uncommon.

Aftermath of the Dutch Jewish Theosophists

The LJG in Amsterdam thrived until the early 1940s with an estimated, but probably exaggerated number of nine hundred families.⁷⁸ The synagogue at

76. N.N., “De vrij-religieuze tempel te Amsterdam,” 598; Heijdra et al., *Kroniek Cinétol*, 38; Jansen, “... een kern van broederschap . . .,” 68–71.

77. Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 122–23; Heijdra, *Kroniek Cinétol*, 39; Schreuder and Van Kessel, *Community Cinétol*, 44–47. In 1934 “Mrs Vigeveno” stepped down as a board member of the LJG in Amsterdam (Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 115). Perhaps she was the wife of José Vigeveno, Ilse Vigeveno-Benario (1899–1950).

78. Based on the figures of 1938 (ca. 180 families in Amsterdam, and ca. 230 in total in the Netherlands), Michman estimated the number of 900 too high (Michman, *Het Liberale Jodendom*, 142).



Figure 4. Louis Vet during a meeting of bookshop owners on July 4, 1939.

Tolstraat was in use until 1941. That same year the German invaders forced the TVN to dissolve and confiscated their properties. The synagogue became transformed into a cinema to feature many Nazi propaganda films.

The last reference found concerning Louis Vet's Theosophical activities is dated April 1933. The abrupt halt to his lectures for lodges of the TVN may be related to his sister. After a long illness, Clara Vet died on September 1, 1935. Vet may have needed to put in more hours running the shop (fig. 4).⁷⁹ An equally plausible explanation for his disappearance from the public eye as Theosophist may be connected to Hitler's politics. Many people with alternative views on life were sensitive and careful not to stir up controversy. In any case, Vet remained an active, critical, passionate bookseller until August 1941, when due to the government's instalment of anti-Jewish regulations in March 1941, the company was assigned an administrator.⁸⁰

79. J.B., "Mejuffrouw Clara Vet †," 594.

80. N.N., "Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels," 464, 467; "Nieuwe

In June 1942, the grounds of the Star Camp in Ommen were rebuilt into a prison camp. The following month, Jews began to be transported from Camp Westerbork to Poland. By the end of April 1943 Louis Vet went underground. He survived. Two other members of the VJT survived also, as did twenty of the one hundred people listed as Jewish Theosophists, in contrast to the thirty-five on the list that were murdered.

Three months after the war Vet resumed his business at Oudegracht 261 in Utrecht. “ARISEN!” he happily announced in newspapers.⁸¹ In 1958, Vet, aged 82, stepped back from his life’s work. A young man took over and changed the name of the shop. The last five years of his life, the old bookseller, small and slender, spectacled and a bit eccentric, lived in the home for elderly Jews in Amsterdam, where he participated in religious festivities.⁸²

Conclusion

The Dutch Association for Jewish Theosophists (VJT), existing between 1926 and 1933, and perhaps mainly embodied by its president, Louis Vet, was in sync with the outlines developed by the Association of Hebrew Theosophists. Theosophy enabled Jews like Ré Levie, Rosa Lorjé-Wolf, and Louis Vet to look anew and with pride at their own religion. Vet presented Judaism to his (Theosophical) audience as a major, rich, world religion having its own ancient, mystical tradition (Kabbalah).

Before the VJT, the periodicals *Het Oude Volk* (1917–1920) and *De Tempel* (1923–1927) had informed their readers about Judaism. Both periodicals and the organisations behind them, the Association of Liberal Jews in the Netherlands (VVJN) and the Federation of Free Religious Groups and Organisations (FVRGO), were intimately linked to Jewish Theosophists, but had less of a Theosophical lens on Judaism. Nevertheless, due to the influence of Theosophy, Dutch Jews and non-Jews alike gained a different, more positive view on Judaism.

beheerders en bewindvoerders,” *De Tijd* on October 1, 1941.

81. Advertisement in *Het Parool* on July 11, 1945, and in *Irene* on July 27, 1945.

82. “De Joodse Invalide,” *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad* on September 20, 1958.

Taking into account the small number of Jews who joined the TS after 1926, the conclusion is that the VJT may have raised the interest among Dutch Jews about the teachings of the Theosophical Society, but certainly didn't lead to an increase in the number of Jewish Theosophists. On the other hand, the activities of Jewish Theosophists surely paved the way between the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands (TVN) and the Progressive Jewish Congregation (LJG) in Amsterdam: when in 1933 the latter needed a building for worship, they were given permission to use their Free Religious Temple and to convert it, in 1937, into a synagogue.

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The Concept of Human Self: George Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson**

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Abstract

The Greco-Armenian spiritual master George I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949) has remained an important figure in twentieth-century Western esoteric thought. Gurdjieff claimed that people do not have a stable self-identity or, more radically, a soul, but instead comprise a set of personalities. There is only an opportunity for further gradual and conscious development of the highest parts of human existence. Depending on personal effort and choice, this opportunity can be used or not. However, being under the influence of different personalities, people do not live but involuntary react to external events. Such automatism, according to Gurdjieff, is the result of abnormal conditions for human existence, which in turn are the outcome of a lack of knowledge of biological and cosmic laws. This article studies Gurdjieff's discourse on the human self, initiated in his book *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, which was published in 1950 as the first part of the trilogy *All and Everything*. This study is not only a useful tool with which to illuminate Gurdjieff's understanding of spiritual progress in the frame of Western esoteric thought but also a means to approach his concept of the self within so-called "self-spirituality."

Keywords: Western esotericism; George Gurdjieff; spiritual progress; the self; self-spirituality

Introduction

The notion of the self has been a significant and wide-ranging aspect of modern socio-cultural discourse.¹ Some scholars argue that Western modernity began (outside of exact timing and strict definitions) when everything began to be measured and viewed from the perspective of the individual self. Philosophically

1. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 2.

* I am grateful to Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh for careful reading drafts of this article and Aren Roukema for his patience and comments, that helped me refine my text.

or theologically detached from external authority, the self became its own authority. Anthropocentric ideology came about in different forms.² Discourses on spirituality, mysticism, and mystical/religious experience have necessarily included reference to human selfhood. As a result, in the twentieth century, the significance of the self in spiritual development reached its apex. The development of the self, based on a belief that there is potential in every person that is seeking an opportunity to be realized,³ has become a requirement in various New Age religious groups.⁴ From this perspective, the self has been described as an active agent, which necessarily implies a process of becoming; the view of the human self as a process dominated and was rarely questioned.⁵ Despite such an optimistic and progressive perspective on the human self, in the history of the Western esoteric tradition in the twentieth century there were teachers who were not very enthusiastic about human potential and suggested other approaches. One of these figures was George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949).

Gurdjieff's teaching was described in numerous diaries and works of his students as pointing to the significance of work on the self and spiritual transformation. But in spite of the important place occupied by his teaching in the history of the spiritual culture of the twentieth century, and an increasing academic interest in his intellectual heritage,⁶ his approach to the human self has not been studied sufficiently. One of the reasons for such a situation is the unsystematic and intricate style of Gurdjieff's works and teaching, which has contributed to a plurality of interpretations and a neglect of internal consistency of various parts of his works. Western discourses on spirituality and esotericism in the twentieth century influenced the reception and interpretation

2. Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, 5.

3. Shils, *Tradition*, 10–11.

4. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 18.

5. Kusserow, "Crossing the Great Divide," 546.

6. Needleman, "G. I. Gurdjieff and His School," 359–60; Hunt, *Lives in Spirit*, 232–58; Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 176–80.

of his message in two ways. Firstly, it has drawn the interest of people from different backgrounds, resulting in a mass of interpretive literature.⁷ Secondly, these interpretations prepared the way for his teaching to enjoy wider acceptance and more influence.

Gurdjieff's ideas have been the object of commentary primarily by his students and adherents who endeavored to explain and justify them according to their own understanding and arrange them in a more structured way.⁸ Two dominant tendencies in the study of religion or mysticism – essentialist and constructivist approaches – can be found in interpretations of his works. In the first tendency, a system is compared with other systems to identify universal structures and essential meanings within. This approach was particularly elaborated in the works of William James and Rudolf Otto.⁹ In the second approach, developed in the works of philosophers and anthropologists, a great deal of prominence was given to concrete socio-cultural factors thought to have resulted in dissimilarities between systems.¹⁰ In Gurdjieff's case, these approaches are combined in attempts to identify the origins of his system, which has produced a lot of speculation on the subject.¹¹

The reading of Gurdjieff's works demonstrates the need for analysis of his system in line with elements found within his own oeuvre to minimize reductionist and essentialist approaches applied to his legacy. However, that does not mean that contextual analysis of the socio-political and intellectual en-

7. See works about Gurdjieff or connected with him: Shah, *The Sufis*; Perry, *Gurdjieff*, 1-2 and Osho, *Meetings*.

8. Among others see, for example, Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 9; Nott, *Teachings*, 3; Bennett, *Gurdjieff*, 11; Claustres, *Becoming Conscious*.

9. James, *The Varieties*; Otto, *West-östliche Mystik* and Stace, *Mysticism*.

10. Hick, "Mystical Experience as Cognition," 422-37; Wainwright, *Mysticism* and Katz, *Mysticism, Comparative Mysticism*.

11. Among advocates of the affiliation of the Gurdjieffian system to a concrete tradition, John G. Bennett advocated a Gurdjieff-Sufism connection. In more recent studies the opinion that it was a mix of traditions of Neoplatonic, Orthodox Christian, and Asian origins prevails. See Bennett, *Gurdjieff*, 26, and Azize, "Solar Mysticism," 18-26.

vironment in which Gurdjieff developed his ideas is unimportant, since it could well help to identify the role of his system in the history of twentieth-century esoteric thought. It is important to keep in mind that Gurdjieff endeavored to represent his teaching in a specific location — that is, Western Europe of the 1920s and 1930s.¹² It is also important to recognize the influence of philosophical and cultural trends that were appearing and flourishing in the period. Gurdjieff was not alone in his cosmic orientation and criticism of the human species. His teaching can be contextualized within emerging Western occultism, particularly within the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, or with the Traditionalist School concerned with criticism of Western modernity,¹³ or with Russian cosmism, which paved the way to space exploration. These currents shared a pessimistic perspective on human nature and history. As such, this article does not assume Gurdjieff as *sui generis* phenomenon. Nevertheless, the analysis of historical, intellectual, and social contexts in a study of his system should be complemented and balanced by structural and conceptual readings of original texts, in order to discern the complexity and integrity of his teaching.

The attempt of this article is to sketch Gurdjieff's concept of the human self — a basic notion in the Gurdjieffian system — through textual analysis of his magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. The *Tales* are crucial for the evaluation of Gurdjieff's system. This text of 1,238 pages — divided into three books and forty-eight chapters — can be interpreted as the most complete and advanced expression of Gurdjieff's views on human culture, history, and, most importantly, spiritual development. Moreover, the *Tales* were perceived as a proposal for a new perspective on the human self.¹⁴ The plot of the story is organized around an extraterrestrial creature, Beelzebub, who travels with his

12. Although in the current paper Orientalism is not used as a theoretical lens, for further reading about Orientalist approach see Said, *Orientalism*.

13. Perhaps most fruitful would be a study comparing Gurdjieff with René Guénon (1886–1951), a key figure in the Traditionalist School. See especially Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World (La crise du monde moderne)*.

14. Bennett, *Talks*; Challenger, *Philosophy*, 10.

grandson, Hassein, and an old servant, Ahoon, on a spaceship. During this trip, he narrates his travels to Hassein, most of which are to the planet Earth. The framework of the *Tales* is therefore structured around Beelzebub's journeys, which he undertakes in order to understand men's inclination to kill each other. The result of this attempt is formulated in the tone of his remarks about human beings and the peculiarities of their existence: Gurdjieff's criticism of humans is conveyed through mockery and irony, which is expressed in Beelzebub's witty remarks, parody, anecdotes (particularly in his continuous references to Mullah Nassr Eddin), and dialogue (between Beelzebub and Hassein) throughout the story.

Methodologically, this article follows the systematization of concepts by identifying their characteristics, as used, for example, in the works of Jerrold Seigel for exploring the human self.¹⁵ It explores the notion of human self by identifying the objective and subjective reasons for the “deplorable state” of human life, as illustrated in the *Tales*. Following this task, the article consists of three parts. The first part describes the events closely related to the establishment of the context (abnormal conditions of life) – that is, the objective reasons for man's wretched situation. The second part formulates a range of phenomena created by people and inherent only to them. They explain further establishment of abnormality of human existence, clarifying the subjective reasons for human calamity. The final part focuses on the “ideal self,” represented in personal and collective models, showing the potential of the human self for spiritual growth.

External Reasons for the “Deplorable State” of Humans

The criticism of modern civilization is implied in the second part of the book's title, which is usually omitted: *An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*. As it is written on the first page of the book in reference to all three series, the *Tales* accomplish one fundamental task: “To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs

15. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, 5.

and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world.”¹⁶ Accordingly, the goal of the first series is the recognition of the abnormality of human existence.¹⁷ The purpose of Gurdjieff’s teaching is to confuse and provoke the reader, and make him forget about his fixed habits.¹⁸ For this reason, Gurdjieff created his own model of the universe, elaborated in the “Ray of Creation.” It contains eight levels, corresponding to Gurdjieff’s Law of Octaves, which states that everything in the world changes. Every process increases or decreases in its scope, depending on the current position in the octave. Gradually as it descends, the Ray decreases – only a minimal amount of the divine energy reaching the Earth can be used by humans. Gurdjieff puts the planet Earth (in the solar system Ors) on the periphery of universe (in comparison to other systems, it is maximally removed from the Sun Absolute – the assumed center). Yet, as James Moore notes, despite such a remoteness, Gurdjieff’s anthropological model takes a radical approach to Cartesian dualism by establishing an ultimate connection between creature and transcendent Creator.¹⁹

Gurdjieff, by means of a cosmic genre, establishes a context which allows him to take a distant and critical perspective on humanity. In doing so, he employs a variety of tools, including alternative cosmic organization, neologisms, and heroic personages. Human beings, according to the *Tales*, live in conditions not suitable for their nature.²⁰ There are external reasons for this situation, specifically three catastrophes that happened to the planet Earth.²¹ The central, and first, among them is the

16. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, preface [n.p.]. Hereafter abbreviated as *Beelzebub*.

17. Gurdjieff does not explain what is meant by abnormality in one single place: it is mentioned through the whole text. In some chapters, he places emphasis on one or another thing. For example, in chapter 27 he mentions that “alcoholism, cocainism, morphinism, nicotinism, onanism, monkism, Athenianism” were invented by people (*Beelzebub*, 382), which can give a general picture of what is meant.

18. Bennett, *Talks*, 9.

19. Moore, “Moveable Feasts,” 3.

20. Gurdjieff particularly underlines this abnormality in chapters 32, 34, and 37.

21. Gurdjieff also mentions an earthquake and a flood (*Beelzebub*, 180–81), and a sand storm (*Beelzebub*, 252) as the second and third catastrophes.

collision of the Earth with the comet Kondoor, which occurred because of an error made by a concrete sacred individual responsible for calculating their orbits. The subsequent problem was how to keep two broken-off pieces of the Earth on their orbits without endangering the universe, and the first decision made by the Highest Commission of angels and archangels was to keep them by the “special sacred vibrations ‘askokini’,” which is a result of independent “deflection” of two sacred laws (Heptaparaparashinokh and Triamazikamno) in cosmic units of the Earth.²²

As for the cosmic units of the Earth, their development went naturally and harmoniously: “there began gradually to be crystallized in the three-brained beings there the corresponding data for the acquisition of objective Reason.”²³ Ironically, according to the plot of Gurdjieff’s story, this harmonious development would lead unavoidably to the understanding by future people of the reason for their existence: the maintenance of detached fragments and the production of “askokin.” As Gurdjieff supposes, creatures of the planet Earth would not stand this enslavement.²⁴ And here Gurdjieff twists the plot of the *Tales* and introduces the events crucial for understanding his mysticism. So, the second decision made by the Highest Commission of angels and archangels thereafter was “to implant into the common presences of the three-brained beings there a special organ with a property such that, first, they should perceive reality topsy-turvy and, secondly, that every repeated impression from outside should crystallize in them data which would engender factors for evoking in them sensations of ‘pleasure’ and ‘enjoyment.’”²⁵ This special organ was named Kundabuffer, a term coined by Gurdjieff most likely in mockery of the widespread and popular idea among Western audiences of the concentration of female energy (*kundalini*) in the lumbar spine. However, Gurdjieff’s term has an opposite meaning to the positive and desirable energy which can be activated.

22. *Beelzebub*, 81–84.

23. *Ibid.*, 87.

24. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

25. *Ibid.*, 88.

Kundabuffer is about “the engendering properties of which they [people] might be protected from the possibility of seeing and feeling anything as it proceeds in reality.”²⁶ In other words, it is an obstacle to spiritual growth.

In establishing context for his interpretation of Gurdjieff’s discourse on the soul, Michael Pittman interprets the special organ as a “fall of man story.”²⁷ He assumes that the organ Kundabuffer can be correlated with human ego or directly with egoism.²⁸ However, despite the obvious identification with human egoism, the meaning of the Kundabuffer is not as evident as it seems. In the first place, egoism is mentioned as a unique property of – and an essential part of – the human psyche. Egoism was formed after the implantation of the special organ.²⁹ Secondly, the Kundabuffer was implanted somewhere in the lumbar area to prevent an accurate perception of reality, and to promote the manifestation of pleasure sensations. Even though the organ was installed for three years, its consequences remain forever: some new traits of the human psyche (among which egoism can be listed) were formed *after* an extraction of the organ but still under its harmful influence.³⁰ Thus, the function and usage of the Kundabuffer relate to the question of reality, which occupies a key position in connection with spiritual perfection. The importance of a clear perception of reality is expressed as a special command of God: “Always guard against such perceptions as may soil the purity of your brains.”³¹ This perception is possible with the knowledge of basic cosmic laws and the structure of the universe.

Here, we come to the brief description of the basic cosmic laws and the human connection with the cosmos. First, Gurdjieff connects the need for self-development with a concept of time. Along with divine love, time remains

26. *Ibid.*, 1220.

27. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 78.

28. *Ibid.*, 81.

29. *Beelzebub*, 375–76.

30. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

31. *Ibid.*, 144.

beyond any influence or control.³² Time itself does not exist, and can be understood only by means of a comparison with other phenomena; yet, for people, as for other beings, every period of their life is limited.³³ Second, in chapter seventeen, Gurdjieff connects the mechanism of the physical universe with a proper sense of reality. The false perception of the universe's structure is a result of a lack of "the instinctive sensing of reality."³⁴ Moreover, he introduces a cosmic Trogoautoegocratic process (the "exchange of substances" or "reciprocal feeding"). The theory of reciprocal feeding, central for understanding the anthropological picture of the *Tales*, can be described as follows: "Man exists for a purpose not his own. This includes all beings — animals, birds, insects and bacteria. Each species is designed for a certain cosmic use. The norm of man is the discharge of the design for which he was created — like a machine designed to do a bit of work."³⁵ As Moore observes, such a design is "astounding and frightening" because it suggests a human factory using various kinds of fuel to produce another type of energy that is needed by "Great Nature."³⁶

Together with this process, two fundamental cosmic laws, Heptaparaparshinokh (the law of seven) and Triamazikamno (the law of three), are the bases of the function of the universe.³⁷ Together with these two laws, the substance called "etherokrilno" (an elemental substance filling the whole universe³⁸) is the reason for the emergence of everything in the universe. Human beings have three centers (thinking, feeling, and moving) or brains.³⁹ These cen-

32. *Ibid.*, 124.

33. *Ibid.*, 125–26.

34. *Ibid.*, 134.

35. Alfred Orage, as quoted in Nott, *Teachings*, 194.

36. Moore, *Gurdjieff*, 54.

37. *Beelzebub*, 750. The Law of Seven and the Law of Three can be better explained through Gurdjieff's enneagram, which was first published by Ouspensky. See Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 294. See also Bennett, *The Intelligent Enneagramm*.

38. *Beelzebub*, 137.

39. Ouspensky points to the number of centers being unclear (Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 55). Gurdjieff mentions (not in the *Tales*) at least two more centers: instinctive and

ters influence both physiological and psychological processes of human life. They exist as a result of the crystallization (actualization) of three holy forces (affirming, denying, and reconciling).⁴⁰ The difficulty with these centers is that they operate separately and constantly compete. As Gurdjieff explains, the situation when one center is more active than others can be compared with the three spiritual ways created by humans. The way of the *fakir* (Islam) relates to the moving center; the way of the *monk* (Christianity) connects with the feeling center; and the way of the *yogi* (Hinduism) relates to the thinking center.⁴¹ The problem is that people do not properly use these centers and as a result shorten their life duration.⁴²

Therefore, the collision of the planet Earth with the comet Kondoor and the implantation of the special organ Kundabuffer can be identified as the external factors which affected the formation process of the human self and its further development. In fact, these events explain reasons for a false perception of reality resulting in abnormal conditions of life, such as a shortened lifespan. Yet, Gurdjieff also points to factors exclusively connected with people.

Internal Reasons for the “Deplorable State” of Humans

Gurdjieff emphasizes that the main characteristics of human beings are the same as other three-brained creatures. They perceive reality with the three-brain system. Gurdjieff makes the development of the highest parts (*kesdjan*-body and soul) of human being dependent on perception of reality (including impressions, emotions, and reactions).⁴³ This process can be adjusted by Partkdolg-duty — Gurdjieff’s neologism for his method based on a correct perception of reality, which can be attained through conscious work and intentional suffering.⁴⁴

sexual; for a more detailed hierarchy of centers, see Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff*, 33–35.

40. *Beelzebub*, 143–45.

41. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 50. Ouspensky calls Gurdjieff’s teaching the “Fourth Way,” describing it as “more exact and perfect.”

42. *Beelzebub*, 131–32.

43. *Ibid.*, 104.

44. *Ibid.*, 409.

As previously mentioned, Gurdjieff suggests that some external events are crucial in the development of human beings. However, he connects other events with the responsibility of people themselves. Among the phenomena that have the most influence on this development, Gurdjieff names two as the most maleficent: religion and education. These two things affect the further manifestation of the properties of the Kundabuffer. The process of education has been reduced, according to Gurdjieff, to establishing a number of diverse artificial customs and traditions in the minds of children. The problem is that these artificial perceptions are detached and have no connection with reality: they are not experienced, but merely automatically manifested. As a result, children become “living mechanical puppets”:⁴⁵ any new information or impression is perceived by them automatically without attempting to think distantly and objectively. Consequently, “they are satisfied with that alone, which someone once consciously or unconsciously put into them.”⁴⁶

As for religions of the planet Earth (called *havatvernoni* in the *Tales*), their necessity and usefulness are determined by their ability to overcome the destructive effects of the Kundabuffer.⁴⁷ Here, the criticism of religions and religious institutions allows Gurdjieff to remain outside of the official discourse on religion and of any group or movement.⁴⁸ Under critique are five traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Lamaism. Chapter thirty-eight describes religion as an “obstruction” and one of the causes of the attenuation of three-brained beings on the planet Earth.⁴⁹ One can identify within this chapter some concrete reasons for, as Gurdjieff suggests, the misinterpretation of religious teachings: the notion of *good* and *bad* (and the creation of the ideas of heaven and hell), the immediate splintering into multiple groups

45. *Ibid.*, 1028–29.

46. *Ibid.*, 687.

47. *Ibid.*, 700, 715, 724–25.

48. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 76.

49. *Beelzebub*, 694.

(“sects”), and the incorporation of religion into political affairs. However, the five aforementioned religions (particularly Christianity and Islam) can serve as support for the activation of inner divine impulses, such as love, hope, and faith.⁵⁰

Along with religion and education, the fragmentation of human personality is another internal reason for the deplorable state of human existence.⁵¹ As previously mentioned, Gurdjieff believes that man does not have a stable self-identity (“the centre of gravity”)⁵² but comprises various categories in his intellectual, emotional, and physical existence,⁵³ which are formulated in the *Tales* as thinking, feeling, and moving centers.⁵⁴ Without awareness of this multiplicity, personal development is problematic.⁵⁵ Gurdjieff provides a set of peculiarities of the human psyche that created the conditions for the further abnormal development.⁵⁶ These peculiarities are numerous and are spread throughout the whole story, which make them hard to scrutinize. Nevertheless, five of them seem specifically important in understanding Gurdjieff’s approach towards the human self. They to one degree or another have received more attention in Gurdjieff’s text. These features can be formulated as suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, pride, and adulation.

The first trait, suggestibility, is described in chapter thirteen. It is a human’s inability to draw conclusions independently, since this “strange trait of their general psyche, namely, of being satisfied with just what Smith or Brown says, without

50. *Ibid.*, 732–33.

51. Fragmentation of human personality as an essential part of modern readings of human selfhood was strongly articulated in sociological and psychological approaches to the human self in the beginning of the twentieth century. For construction of the modern self see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, and of the psychological self, King, “Asian religions and mysticism,” 106–23.

52. *Beelzebub*, 31–32.

53. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 72.

54. Although Gurdjieff uses the term “three-brained” from the beginning of the novel, he first mentions “three centers” only in chapter 17. See *Beelzebub*, 164.

55. See, for example, “Breakfast with idiots.” This ritual was introduced by Gurdjieff in 1922. For further reading see Beekman, *Gurdjieff and Toomer* and Nott, *Journey*.

56. For example, chapter 11 is named “Piquant trait of the peculiar psyche of man.” Gurdjieff also uses different examples of human traditions, described in *Beelzebub*’s six visits to the Earth, to show the absurdity of human life.

trying to know more, became rooted in them already long ago, and now they no longer strive at all to know anything cognizable by their own active deliberations alone.”⁵⁷ However, here Gurdjieff makes clear that this trait is neither a result of the implantation of the organ Kundabuffer, nor its manifest consequence. It is a result of the conditions that people established, and they alone should be blamed for it.⁵⁸

The second trait is described in chapter eleven. It is a kind of punishment to “anathematize” someone who insulted you, usually in a religious context,⁵⁹ and can be understood as human fanaticism. Without doubt, this process of “anathema” is described with irony, yet this trait is crucial, since it naturally leads to something more dangerous – the third trait of the human psyche. This trait, according to Gurdjieff, is the same among all people: the “process of the destruction of each other’s existence,” or human cruelty, which is a result of an incorrect perception of reality.⁶⁰

The fourth trait, human pride, can be found in the idea that all human beings should consider only one place as the “centre of culture” for the whole of planet Earth.⁶¹ Beelzebub names it as the “one great secret of their psyche” and advises Hasein to pretend that he wants to learn something from people if he wants to succeed among them.⁶² The final trait, human adulation, which is intrinsically connected with the fourth trait, is described when Beelzebub, during his third trip to Earth, faces a tradition of “sacrificial offerings,” or destruction of other forms of beings in honor of the gods. This custom is based on the idea that in return for human offerings, “gods” and “idols” would support and help them.⁶³ In addition to these qualities one might also list egoism, self-love, vanity, conceit, and credulity, which are spread among all people regardless of where they

57. *Beelzebub*, 104.

58. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

59. *Ibid.*, 95.

60. *Ibid.*, 319.

61. *Ibid.*, 186.

62. *Ibid.*, 1075.

63. *Ibid.*, 182.

live or were born.⁶⁴ Thus, education and religion, along with the peculiarities of human nature such as suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, pride, and adulation, are proposed as the internal reasons for the abnormal human existence.

The “Ideal Self”

Represented by the image of ancient Asia in his works, or by an idea about the harmonious development of three centers, the “ideal” is a key aspect of Gurdjieff’s teaching.⁶⁵ According to the *Tales*, humans, as three-brained creatures, can use the localization of holy forces (centers) not only for the transformation of energy but also for personal development. However, one of the biggest mistakes of humanity is to think that the human soul exists from birth. The sacred forces are latent within humans, but their acquisition depends on personal effort.⁶⁶ In the *Tales*, the message is that one can realize one’s divine potential only by means of individual effort. This process can be achieved in two ways: collectively or personally.

As for a collective way, there is an example of an equipage consisting of a passenger, a carriage, a horse, and a coachman, which, perhaps, aptly represents Gurdjieff’s perspective. Despite the lack of originality — which Gurdjieff probably never claimed — this image seemingly points not to the plurality of human self but rather to the necessity of working as a group. The carriage corresponds to the body, the horse is compared to feelings, the coachman represents “consciousness” or mind, and the passenger sitting in the carriage is the human “I.” It is through successful work with all his parts that man may progress spiritually.⁶⁷ In this manner, Gurdjieff places a clear emphasis on the importance of group work and the transmission of knowledge.⁶⁸

64. *Ibid.*, 107.

65. In 1922 Gurdjieff established the Institute for Harmonious Development of Man in France; for a more detailed analysis of the ideal in Gurdjieff’s teaching see Tamdgidi, *Mysticism and Utopia*, 535–53.

66. *Beelzebub*, 226.

67. *Ibid.*, 1092–93.

68. On the account of community life see De Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* or Webb, *The Lives*.

An ideal collective model can be identified with the Society of Akhaldan, which originated on the continent of Atlantis.⁶⁹ This society is founded on the initiative of a person named Belcultassi, who has succeeded in the development of his highest being-parts. Belcultassi devotes himself to understanding the reasons for impulses such as self-love, pride, and vanity, which create the illusion of his “I.”⁷⁰ Moreover, one can also name the brotherhood of Olbogmek,⁷¹ or the club of adherents of Legominism⁷² as examples of ideal collective organisations.⁷³ The goal of all these groups can be stated as the comprehension of the laws of nature and their proper transmission in different forms.

As for a personal, non-collective model of the “ideal-self,” one can distinguish between human and non-human examples. Gurdjieff presents Beelzebub as a non-human model; a human model might be identified in the character of the Bokharian dervish Hadji Asvatz Troov. The figure of Beelzebub, as Anna Challenger suggests, can be read as relating to Gurdjieff himself,⁷⁴ or to the Islamic prophet Muhammed.⁷⁵ Yet, in my opinion, crucial moments of Gurdjieff’s life – the death of a young wife, travels to Central Asia, and a search for the laws of nature – can be found in the stories of other characters.⁷⁶ In this regard, a reader who tries to identify the author of the *Tales* with one concrete character could understandably become confused. One may assume, however, that a number of characters represent Gurdjieff’s personality and teaching, rather than a single personage.

69. *Beelzebub*, 294.

70. *Ibid.*, 294–95.

71. *Ibid.*, 349.

72. *Ibid.*, 453–54.

73. For a more elaborated account of group work and community life see, for example, Cusack, “Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching,” 159–78.

74. For example, chapter 33, dedicated to the work of Beelzebub as a hypnotist, may strengthen this argument. For the Gurdjieff-hypnotism connection see Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis*.

75. Challenger, *Philosophy*, 94–95.

76. For a better understanding of the storyline of the *Tales* one can read the second part of the trilogy. See Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

Beelzebub, an extraterrestrial creature from the planet Karatas, around whom the narrative of the *Tales* is structured, possesses, like humans, a three-brained nature. He has succeeded in the development of his highest parts and has reached the highest level of spiritual development possible for three-brained beings.⁷⁷ But which facts about Beelzebub's life and personality does Gurdjieff emphasize in this spiritual development? Firstly, Gurdjieff points to Beelzebub's rebellious character, which was probably a reason for his exile. Secondly, he has spent many years far away from his homeland, but due to his efforts he was pardoned. Thirdly, and as can be seen throughout the story, despite various troubles during his journeys Beelzebub retains a good sense of humor, constantly making jokes and sharp remarks. Perhaps this style helps to avoid a didactic tone in the *Tales*.⁷⁸ Moreover, Gurdjieff avoids a preachy style by introducing Mullah Nassr Eddin,⁷⁹ a character from Central Asian folklore famous for his witty remarks, as a teacher of Beelzebub.⁸⁰ The style of Mullah's jokes allows without a didactic tone to show realities of a human life, with which the audience of the *Tales* (in Central Asia, Caucasus, Russia) was familiar. Gurdjieff even makes Mullah a character in chapter thirty-four, where he describes different national groups, including Russians. He describes them as: "Half-with-a-quarter-plus-three-quarters."⁸¹ This playfulness can also be recognized in Beelzebub's remarks. One of the examples can be found in words for two types of religious groups, that are "Orthodoxhydooraki" and "Katoshkihydooraki," which make clear the author's intention ("doorak" is a fool in Russian).⁸² In this

77. *Beelzebub*, 1078.

78. Pittman, *G. I. Gurdjieff*, 13–14.

79. See, for example, Nasr-ed-din Khoja, *Tales of Nasr-ed-din Khoja*.

80. The reference to Mullah is often interpreted as a sign of Gurdjieff's affiliation to Sufism (Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 87–88). However, in his anecdotes and stories, as represented in the *Tales*, one can hardly find direct instructions that are of Sufi origin. In my opinion, it is rather the usage of a collective image which helps Gurdjieff to reveal, by means of humor and irony, the less attractive sides of human nature.

81. *Beelzebub*, 601.

82. *Ibid.*, 258.

manner, the use of numerous neologisms and terms within the text reinforces the importance of the ironic style in Gurdjieff's language.⁸³

Another component of Beelzebub's personality which should be mentioned is his "egoism." After a careful reading of the text, one may conclude that Beelzebub always puts his own interest first. For example, in chapter forty-one, when Beelzebub is asked to discuss his real nature, he waits for an appropriate moment in order not to harm himself. Such behavior, however, is connected with a "being-property of sensing the inner feeling of similar beings in relation to oneself."⁸⁴ Moreover, at the end of the *Tales* Beelzebub's creator mentions an ancient wisdom which states that "in order to be a just and good altruist one must first of all be an out-and-out egoist."⁸⁵ The goal of personal perfection from this perspective is the full use of given opportunities. In other words, one should strive to become a master of one's own feelings and desires.

An example of the human "ideal self" and the concrete characteristics of a developed person can be also found in the description of Hamolinadir, an educated man whom Beelzebub meets in Babylon. This character appears only episodically, yet significant components of a developed personality are mentioned in relation to him: "At the age he was when I first met him he already had his 'I' – in respect of rationality directing what is called the 'automatic-psychic-functioning' of his common presence – at the maximum stability for three-centered beings of the planet Earth at that time, in consequence of which during what is called his 'waking-passive-state' he very definitely expressed being-manifestations, as, for instance, those called 'self-consciousness,' 'impartiality,' 'sincerity,' 'sensitivity of perception,' 'alertness,'

83. The *Tales* were originally written in Russian and Armenian. Gurdjieff plays with different languages to create his neologisms. For example, the word "Partk-dolg-duty" is a repetition of the word "duty" in Armenian, Russian, and English (see *Beelzebub*, 143–44; 409). Another example is Gurdjieff's word for religion: "Havatvernoni" (*Beelzebub*, 182). This neologism consists of two words *havat* and *vera*, both meaning "faith" in Armenian and Russian.

84. *Beelzebub*, 876.

85. *Ibid.*, 1236.

and so forth.”⁸⁶ Here, Gurdjieff points to two important components of a developed personality — self-awareness and self-control — both of which relate to human intellect. In fact, human intellect occupies a significant place in Gurdjieff’s system, which may point to some similarities, for example, with the importance of self-discipline in the Sufi tradition. The significance of an intellectual approach is emphasized through the story, whether it is in the case of Hadji Asvatz Troov or in chapter forty-seven which concerns the inevitable advantages of impartial thinking. As for human reason itself, “this is only the sum of all the impressions perceived by him [human], from which there gradually arise in him data for comparisons, deductions, and conclusions.”⁸⁷

Another character that serves as a prototype for the “ideal self” is the dervish Hadji Asvatz Troov. This character can be analyzed as a model for a “perfect man” and as a spokesman for Gurdjieff’s affiliation to Sufism. Despite the implications of this character for Sufism, as in the case of Mullah Nassr Eddin, the Bokharian dervish appears rather to be an example of *dānesbmand* (a scientist or sage in Iran and Central Asia) or the perfect man.⁸⁸ What is more important about Hadji is that by means of hard (conscious) work he has reached the knowledge of two cosmic laws: the law of seven (Heptaparaparshinokh) and the law of three (Triamazikamno).⁸⁹ As for his representation as Sufi, even though the whole of chapter forty-one is dedicated to him, and he is often mentioned and cited in relation to the Sufi influence on Gurdjieff,⁹⁰ there is no concrete reference to Sufi teachings or rituals, except for the two details that Hadji had entered a “dervish order” and had a “shaykh.” Pittman also argues that Hadji’s Sufi identity is a secondary fact, and that Gurdjieff uses him as a universal model of

86. *Ibid.*, 332–33.

87. *Ibid.*, 344.

88. On the problem of a Gurdjieff-Sufism connection see Sedgwick, “Sufism and the Gurdjieff Movement,” 129–48.

89. *Beelzebub*, 901.

90. Challenger, *Philosophy*, 13.

spiritual transformation.⁹¹ However, a prior or secondary usage of a set of symbols — Sufi or not — shows the mobility of Gurdjieff's system and his ability to create his own discourse, rather than to maintain an affiliation to one specific tradition.

Thus, the importance of the ideal to which man should strive is an essential part of the *Tales*' concept of the human self. One can identify the following features of the personal and collective “ideal-self”: self-control and self-awareness, based on a recognition of wrong and undesirable impulses and the automatism of human life; a work with these undesirable elements; an activation of a proper/natural existence by means of intellectual efforts and knowledge of cosmic laws and, more crucially, one's own nature.

Conclusion

This investigation has attempted to demonstrate how the systematization of concepts through identifying their characteristics can be used fruitfully for a clearer understanding of Gurdjieff's method oriented toward personal perfection. It helps to consider various aspects of the system in question by identifying its central themes and features. Taking into account the inner structure and logic of the system, this strategy, on the one hand, prevents the oversimplified identification of concepts and ideas, and, on the other, suggests a more structured picture of the subject.

To sketch the concept of the human self and its meaning for Gurdjieff's approach to spiritual development, the objective and subjective reasons for the deplorable human state are highlighted. Using a fairy tale genre, or “mythologized world-historical narrative,”⁹² Gurdjieff suggests that both external and internal influences are at play in the process of the formation of the human self. The collision of the Earth with the comet Kondoor and the implantation of the special organ Kundabuffer, which changes the perception of reality and establishes the pleasure impulses, have been identified in this

91. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 101–2.

92. Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis*, 104–5.

article as the external causes of the deplorable state of human existence. In fact, even though these events are described as relatively independent and beyond human control, they are not the only reason for such a situation. Gurdjieff uses them to prepare the ground for further criticism of human nature – the focal theme of his teaching. First, under criticism are two phenomena created by humans: education and religion. They are blamed for the atrophy of rational thinking and the replacement of reality. Second, Gurdjieff describes different features of human nature, showing a colorful picture of the human character. Among them, suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, adulation, and pride are listed. Thus, education and religion along with peculiarities of human nature were identified as the internal reasons for the deplorable state of human existence.

However, despite this criticism, the way in which human beings are described and the place they occupy suggest that changes to their lamentable situation may be possible. The leitmotif of the story is that humans are three-brained beings. Although humans have lost many conventional qualities of the three-brained system, they have retained some of the advantages of this kind of creation, specifically an ability to use sacred forces for personal needs. In contrast to modern discourses on individuality, Gurdjieff presents a place of gradual and collective work in spiritual advancement. Although receiving different emphasis, both individual and collective efforts play a pivotal role. The image of the “ideal self” in both collective and individual forms is identified. This image is based on self-control and self-awareness, a recognition of the undesirable elements of human existence, working with these elements, and knowledge of cosmic laws and one’s own nature. Thus, Gurdjieff’s mosaic of the human self consists of various elements connected to a natural world (external reasons), specific human realities (internal reasons), and opportunities (the ideal) to overcome them.

While avoiding overemphasis on the question of the origins of Gurdjieff’s teaching, this study has presented a short outline of his concept of the self, identifying the objective and subjective reasons for the “deplorable state” of

human life, which are illustrated in the *Tales*. As above, such an approach could well be complemented by a contextual analysis of the socio-cultural environment in which Gurdjieff created his texts. Nevertheless, it is hoped that further studies will address the question of the self in Gurdjieff's work by taking into consideration the inner structure and logic of the texts they focus on, rather than merely through studying his background.

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J. Jeffrey Franklin. *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. xx + 264 pp. ISBN: 9781501715440. \$49.95/£38.00.

In his influential re-evaluation of the relationship between religion and modernity, philosopher Charles Taylor characterizes existing accounts of the secularization process as “subtraction stories.”¹ Such stories depict spiritual explanations of reality as superfluities that are “subtracted” or sloughed off as they jostle with nascent, usually scientific and rational, alternatives. One example is the Victorian “crisis of faith” purportedly triggered when the cultural supremacy of the Established Church was challenged by nineteenth-century forces of progress. Following correctives issued by Taylor and others, scholars have begun to reappraise the Victorian response as a religious diversification rather than decline. J. Jeffrey Franklin contributes to this effort with *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*, telling what perhaps may be called an “addition story.” He argues that, by incorporating elements from the materialist and imperial discourses with which it was buffeted, nineteenth-century Christianity prepared the way for “an unprecedented proliferation of new and often hybrid religions and spiritualities” (1).

Franklin reconstructs the vigour and complexity of religious debate in Britain between 1830 and 1920 with case studies drawn predominantly from literary fiction. Acknowledging that *Spirit Matters* has “only brushed the surface” of the religious implications of the “tremendous cultural and social upheaval” represented in this span (xvi, 18), he nonetheless justifies the book’s broad scope by deftly tracing connections among his examples that illustrate an evolution of spiritual syncretism across the century.

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.

The work opens by identifying three cultural strands that made it increasingly difficult for Victorians to define the boundary between orthodox Christianity and heterodoxy. Readings of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862) demonstrate that scientific methods and scientifically inflected spirituality were often engaged to buttress Christian faith against the perceived threat of materialism. A chapter devoted to Anthony Trollope's Anglicanism and his novel *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870) emphasizes the variance in latitudinarianism among the factions that existed within British Protestantism and, more narrowly, within the Church of England. While some believers condoned doctrinal disparities in order to preserve the authority of a generalized Christianity, others branded rival denominations non-Christian, even pagan. Victorians' understanding of "orthodoxy" was also blurred as a result of increased exposure to what Franklin terms "world religions" (1). Noting the Buddhist influences in Matthew Arnold's efforts to revise and thus "save" modern Christianity (especially as expressed in *Literature and Dogma* [1873]), he suggests that the nineteenth-century development of comparative religious studies prompted a systematic reassessment of Christian tenets and values.

Further attention is paid to the ways in which Victorian faith was shaped by non-Western religions in the second section of *Spirit Matters*. Revisiting themes explored in his *The Lotus and the Lion* (2008), Franklin considers Christian responses to imperial encounters with Buddhism and its concepts of reincarnation and compassion. Here, he advances his argument with chapters analyzing the travelogue-novels *Forest Life of Ceylon* (1854) by William Knighton and *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) by Anna Leonowens. In both works' evaluations of Buddhism, Franklin finds Christian doctrine to be represented in heterodox terms. Whereas Knighton modifies orthodox creeds to ensure Christianity compares favourably with Buddhism as an equivalently fair but less superstitious religion, Leonowens rejects the dogmatism typical of missionaries and instead emphasizes the similarities between Christianity and the Buddhism she deeply respected.

In the penultimate section, entitled “The Turn to Occultism,” Franklin’s focus is the intensification of religious debate in the fin de siècle. His claim that by the end of the nineteenth century “science had become only more authoritative . . . and institutional Christianity had become more embattled,” is evidenced with readings of two Gothic romances: H. Rider Haggard’s *Cleopatra* (1889) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) (142). With *Cleopatra*, Franklin discusses the conflicted responses to the developing science of Egyptology. Archaeological discoveries that seemed to corroborate biblical accounts of historical events were celebrated as vindications of Christian faith. However, those that revealed the pre-Christian monotheism of Akhenaten, for example, contradicted the understanding of God gleaned from scripture. *Dracula*, Franklin suggests, prompted a similarly ambivalent reaction insofar as it regards scientific and economic materialism as both advantageous and disadvantageous to Christian belief. The vampire, enacting an immortality and a pattern of consumption antithetical to Church doctrines, functioned simultaneously as a scapegoat for the century’s failing spirituality and a stimulant for the rehabilitation of enervated Christian faith.

Franklin’s work culminates in a discussion of the hybrid religions that developed out of the nineteenth-century ferment of spiritual, material, and imperial discourses. He unites the diverse examples of heterodox Christianity presented in earlier chapters by recognizing their influence on the formation of a “new occultism,” particularly in the self-consciously syncretic Theosophy designed and built by Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant (185). Combining emphasis on empirical epistemologies, Buddhist and ancient Egyptian beliefs, and evolutionary progression through spiritual states, they created what Franklin calls a “spiritual science” that succeeded in “dismantling the perennial Western dualism of spirit and matter, soul and body” (186). The effects of this dissolution are seen, he concludes, in the New Age spiritualities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Spirit Matters is a fascinating and original study of how Victorian efforts to reconcile an inherited Christianity with unprecedented cultural influences yielded

decidedly non-Christian “alternative religions.” Rather than valuably locating these positions on a continuum, however, Franklin insists on their disjunction, positioning his case studies as examples of “nonmainstream or heterodox religious and spiritual beliefs” distinct from the “orthodox Protestant Christianity, of which the large majority of British citizens would have claimed to be adherents” (xi). This interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, the identification of heterodox Christianity with the “occult beliefs, alternative religions” of Franklin’s subtitle may confound readers expecting extended analysis of spiritualities more conventionally classified. Secondly, but more critically, “orthodox Protestant Christianity” is reduced to a cohesive and static set of doctrines impervious to materialist and imperial discourse. As Janet Oppenheim and Georgina Byrne have demonstrated, some quarters of the Church of England responded to the debates Franklin discusses by liberalizing their theology.² *Spirit Matters*, despite implying the possibility of a clear demarcation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, offers welcome insight into the evolution of Victorian Christianity – an area that, in comparison to more “alternative religions,” has suffered from recent scholarly neglect.

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2. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850–1939* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010).

Donald A. Westbrook. *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xi + 332 pp. ISBN: 9780190664978. £29.99.

During its relatively short history, Scientology has been the subject of little academic study. While the number of publications (particularly edited volumes and journal articles) concerning Scientology is on the rise, only a handful of monographs on the topic exist.¹ Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* is therefore a much-needed contribution to the scholarly study of Scientology. Drawing heavily from ethnographic methods, Westbrook provides both a historical account of the Church of Scientology (CoS) and a contemporary analysis of the beliefs and practices of its members in the twenty-first century.

Observing that “remarkably little *qualitative* attention from scholars of religion” (4) has been dedicated to Scientology, and more specifically ethnographic research, Westbrook seeks to distance his study of the CoS from former research by concentrating on the lived reality of CoS membership. While former scholarship on the CoS has concerned the movement as an institutional organization, Westbrook positions his research to ask “what does ‘lived religion’ look like for a Scientologist?” (5). To this end, this monograph is based upon Westbrook's extensive ethnographic research with CoS members at churches across America. This fieldwork is significant for a number of reasons, perhaps most notably the level of access he received at the CoS for a scholar of religion. Throughout the course of his research, Westbrook was able to secure 69 formal interviews with CoS members of various levels of Scientological development and training. Furthermore, he received an immersive fieldwork

1. Notable monographs on the topic of Scientology include: Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); J. Gordon Melton, *Studies in Contemporary Religion: The Church of Scientology* (USA: Signature Books, 2011); Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

experience, during which he was able to attend CoS holiday celebrations, undertake courses created by L. Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology), and take part in Scientologist practices including auditing and the Purification Rundown. Altogether, Westbrook’s ethnographic data provides a rich bed of knowledge through which both the history of the CoS and the lived experience of Scientologists can be understood, whilst also sparking conversation regarding methodological approaches to engaging with the CoS in the field.

One of the most daunting challenges in the academic study of Scientology is engaging with L. Ron Hubbard’s specialized nomenclature, frequently referred to by Scientologists as “Scientologese.” Such esoteric language appears not only in Hubbard’s written texts and bulletins to CoS staff members, but also in everyday conversation between practising Scientologists. Fortunately, *Among the Scientologists* excels in clarity, treading the fine line between offering an in-depth study of the CoS for scholars of Scientology on the one hand, and providing an accessible (yet detailed) introduction to those new to the subject on the other.

Assisting this accessibility, Westbrook outlines his conclusions towards the beginning of the monograph accordingly: (i) Scientologists view their practice as *knowledge over faith*. (ii) Hubbard is not a divine being to Scientologists, but is the model Operating Thetan (an advanced Scientologist). (iii) Scientologist development is codified in Hubbard’s Bridge to Total Freedom (the “Bridge”). (iv) Documents concerning the Operating Thetan levels (the higher levels of the Bridge) are copyrighted and intended to be kept confidential within CoS spaces, however (v) most practising CoS members are on the lower levels of the Bridge. (vi) Progressing the Bridge involves investing money and time. (vii) The CoS is “theoretically all-denominational but functionally sectarian — at least most of the time” (40), and finally (viii) most CoS members are everyday people, not staff members or Hollywood celebrities. While some of these conclusions may already be apparent to those familiar with Scientology, they serve as a useful introduction to those new to the topic. Unlike these preliminary conclusions, however, the main thrust of Westbrook’s argument is methodological.

The book is structured through an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Beginning with a chapter outlining Westbrook's aforementioned preliminary conclusions, the book moves on to present the history of Scientology in four core chapters. Beginning with a chapter documenting the origins of Scientology in Hubbard's Dianetic theory (the "science of the mind" upon which much of Scientology is based), and culminating with a chapter on significant CoS events and practices following the death of Hubbard, the reader is guided through the history of the CoS, ranging from Hubbard's early work on Dianetics in the 1940s to contemporary CoS practices.

Historical analyses of the CoS are not uncommon in scholarly studies of Scientology, yet Westbrook's account is enriched by his fieldwork interviews. For example, his interviews with two "Founding Scientologists" (early members of Scientology) add a valuable insight to the ways in which Hubbard's theories appealed to initial members of the "Dianetic community." Further to this ethnographic approach, Westbrook engages with Hubbard's often complicated writings on Scientology. For example, he examines Hubbard's "The Factors": the incorporation of religious elements to his theory of the mind. The fifth chapter, concerning the years following Hubbard's death in 1986, places a focus on Hubbard's successor and the current leader, David Miscavige. This chapter also benefits from Westbrook's emphasis on ethnography, allowing Miscavige's status as leader of the CoS to be framed amongst the perceptions and opinions of practising Scientologists. Indeed, testimonies from everyday Scientologists on contemporary CoS affairs offer refreshing avenues through which the lives of CoS members can be explored, distancing Westbrook's work from the focus on the institution that has dominated the scholarly study of the CoS to date.

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of Westbrook's study concern the beliefs and practices of Scientology. Chapter Three considers its "systematic theology" (95). It documents the years that Hubbard spent in East Grinstead, UK, in the 1960s, during which he developed much of his Scientological ideas and systems that would become CoS policy. The chapter explores a number of Hubbard's

works, including *Study Tech* (Scientologist pedagogy) and the *Bridge to Total Freedom*, but places a particular emphasis on “Keeping Scientology Working” (KSW), a ten-point policy written by Hubbard in 1965 outlining the orthodoxy of belief in the CoS in direct opposition to the “squirrels” (Scientologists practising Scientology outside the CoS). The purpose of KSW is to ensure that Scientologist practices are applied across all CoS Orgs precisely as Hubbard is believed to have intended. Describing KSW as “the crown jewel of Scientology’s systematic theology” (124), Westbrook outlines a paradox between the orthodoxy of KSW and Hubbard’s encouragement of subjective approaches to Scientology. Despite this contrast, Westbrook argues that a conflict between a Scientologist and the CoS would ultimately be resolved in favour of the church, due to the institutional nature of KSW.

Building upon this exploration of how the CoS regulates its belief system, the fourth chapter moves on to consider the Sea Org, an elite organization consisting of highly dedicated and trained CoS members, distinguished by their use of naval imagery, uniforms, and titles. Westbrook’s account of the Sea Org is particularly fascinating for two reasons. Firstly, he draws from his fieldwork to provide a case study of the daily life of a Sea Org member, something hitherto unexplored in the study of Scientology. Secondly, Westbrook situates the origins of the organization in Hubbard’s work on the esoteric Operating Thetan (OT) levels, which the CoS attempts to keep confidential from public circulation. Rather than focusing on the specific contents of the OT levels, he explores the role of the Sea Org in administering and delivering confidential teachings to Scientologists that have sufficiently progressed across the *Bridge*. This approach highlights the centrality and (in some cases) confidentiality of much of the Scientologist belief system to the overall goal of the Sea Org, as well as the methods with which the CoS continue to attempt to protect these teachings through administrative procedures.

It must be noted, however, that the esoteric elements of Scientologist beliefs result in a barrier between the CoS and the scholar seeking to conduct a study of Scientology as a lived religion. As Westbrook himself states, “for members of

the Church of Scientology, discussion of the specifics of *any* [Operating Thetan] level is a high crime . . . that is worthy of excommunication” (132). Coupled with the CoS’ rigorous control of its public image amongst outsiders, scholars (including Westbrook) are highly unlikely to be able to examine the advanced stages of CoS practice from the perspective of “lived religion.” Rather, they must turn to ex-member testimonies and leaked documents, which involves the careful triangulation of sources and data. However, this does not hinder Westbrook’s efforts, particularly due to his observation that most Scientologists are on the lower stages of the Bridge (and are accordingly unfamiliar with the confidential aspects of Scientology), and to the approval he gained from the CoS’ Office of Special Affairs, which allowed a “level of comfort and trust” (12) between himself and his fieldwork participants. Notwithstanding the confidential aspects of CoS practice, Westbrook has been largely successful in providing a comprehensive history of the CoS as an organization, in addition to Scientology as a belief system, that draws from the lives and experiences of everyday CoS members.

Westbrook concludes his monograph by expressing hope that the scholarly study of Scientology will continue to grow through a variety of interdisciplinary methods, observing that the combined efforts of scholars to examine the contemporary Scientologist landscape could result in a rewarding and nuanced picture. Indeed, as Westbrook himself observes, the increasing number of Scientologist groups emerging in the “Free Zone” (Scientology *outside* the institutional CoS), and questions arising around the succession to Miscavige, demonstrate that Scientology continues to be a rich field of study for scholars of contemporary religions. Westbrook’s ethnographic and historical approach to the CoS not only provides a highly valuable contribution to this continuing conversation, but will hopefully encourage other scholars to also turn their attention to Scientology as a topic for study.

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Dan McKanan. *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. xvi + 289 pp. ISBN: 9780520290068. \$29.95/£24.00.

When I began putting applications together for my undergraduate degree many years ago, I had a secret motivation for applying to the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Olympia was the home of Wolves in the Throne Room, a heavy metal group that I admired very much. The members of the band lived together on an organic farm in Olympia called Calliope, where they practiced the techniques of biodynamic agriculture derived from the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). As an eighteen-year-old, I envisioned apprenticing myself to the members of Wolves in the Throne Room not only to learn the mysteries of heavy metal, but to better understand the life-forces contained in a seed. As chance had it, I did not end up attending Evergreen or joining a group of Anthroposophist farmer-metalheads, but this personal anecdote is suggestive of the unusual popularity and influence that the philosophy of Steiner has enjoyed since his death in 1925. The depth and breadth of his influence on environmentalism generally are the subject of Dan McKanan’s excellent new book, *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*.

McKanan weaves a deft narrative of the interrelation between two complex and unwieldy cultural formations: the environmental movement, “a vast ecosystem” that is hardly reducible to any single set of political concerns, religious beliefs, or cultural values; and anthroposophy, the philosophy and teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophy and environmentalism are both massively distributed cultural formations whose interrelation is so complex that it is not always clear where one has influenced the other. McKanan has done a tremendous service for the study of esotericism and the history of environmentalism by untangling this dense web of relations, and the result is the first full scholarly examination of anthroposophy’s role in the history of environmentalism.

In the introduction, McKanan lays out his methods, some of the theoretical implications of his work for the study of religion and ecology, and some justification for the thesis of the book, that “one cannot fully understand the environmental movement today without taking into account anthroposophy’s multifaceted contributions” (xv). Ultimately, in accounting for his estimation of the importance of anthroposophy for the history of environmentalism, McKanan asserts that his conclusion is a “pragmatic” assessment of the environmental initiatives that were directly inspired by anthroposophy, including organic agriculture and the movement to ban DDT (xv). McKanan utilizes the writings of Steiner, the broader historical context of anthroposophy and environmentalism throughout the twentieth century, and ethnographic interviews with contemporary environmentalists and anthroposophists. The result is a satisfying synthesis of contemporary fieldwork, historical analysis, and hermeneutic attention to the ideas of Steiner and his followers.

As McKanan notes, *Eco-Alchemy* is “not, primarily, a book about Rudolf Steiner” (1). In the first chapter of the text, however, McKanan offers a sketch of Steiner’s thought which will be invaluable to the reader without a background in the study of anthroposophy. McKanan outlines three major intellectual currents in which Steiner traveled: Western esotericism, evolutionary thought, and the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seeing Steiner in the intersection of these three cultural trajectories is helpful in understanding the stamina of his writings up through the present day.

In the second chapter, “Biodynamics and the Roots of Organic Agriculture,” McKanan outlines the history and influence of Steiner’s agricultural vision, which he called biodynamics. Put very simply, Steiner’s biodynamics conceptualized various agricultural systems like livestock agriculture, soil quality, and plant growth as ecological and spiritually related. Biodynamics theorized these material and spiritual connections through a series of prescribed techniques and practices, many of which became foundational to organic agriculture as a whole.

McKanan is careful not to overstate his case by asserting that biodynamics represents the origin or source of the organic agriculture movement; rather, he suggests that it “was the earliest and best-known component of this movement” (23). McKanan helpfully arranges the popularizers and practitioners of biodynamics into three groups: “evangelists,” committed students of Steiner’s with a dedication to spreading his message and ideas, “translators,” who were committed to certain ideas from anthroposophy but less dedicated to Steiner or his work as a whole, and “allies,” those who had little to do with anthroposophy but collaborated with the prior two categories out of common cause. This taxonomy is helpful for understanding the scaled nature of participation in anthroposophy and esoteric groups in general. Chapter two concludes with the most surprising and fascinating episode of the entire book, in which McKanan outlines how Rachel Carson relied on evidence from legal battles between biodynamic farmers and nearby pesticide users for her 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Carson’s book is, as McKanan notes, “the founding text of contemporary environmentalism,” and Carson’s reliance on biodynamic legal cases is a stunningly convincing component of McKanan’s overall argument (67–68). Unfortunately, this crucial story is squeezed into three short pages of McKanan’s book, leaving the reader wanting much more detail about this particular cultural transaction.

Chapter three, “Anthroposophical Initiatives,” explores the ways in which anthroposophy interacted with the environmental movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. McKanan argues that this was a period of widespread cultural bridge-building between anthroposophical ideas like biodynamics and the broader environmental and agricultural movement.

Chapter four, “New Economies for Environmentalism,” explores the role of anthroposophical banking and finance in the history of environmentalism. McKanan outlines Steiner’s economic ideal of “social threefolding,” the belief that “economics, politics and culture represent three distinct social spheres” that overlap and correspond with one another (122). These ideas led to the estab-

lishment of alternative banks and financial institutions that, in different ways, understand the role of economics and finance as “cultivating human associations,” deliberately supporting communal interdependence and flourishing (121).

Chapter five, “The Broader Ecology of Camphill,” turns to the human side of anthroposophical environmentalism. Here McKanan focuses on the Camphill Movement, “a second generation anthroposophical initiative” of intentional communities that provide economic and personal opportunities for people with disabilities (153). As McKanan outlines, environmental engagement is a core component of practice at Camphill communities, and his analysis of Camphill is focused on their environmental and agricultural aspects.

Chapter six, “The Boundaries of Anthroposophy,” explores the limits of anthroposophy’s connection to environmentalism. McKanan’s discerning analysis is evident in this chapter, in which he takes pains to ensure that his argument is not mistaken for a simple one-to-one equation of anthroposophic and environmental thought. He explores some of the tensions between anthroposophy and environmentalism generally before turning to some of the incongruities between anthroposophy and “mainstream science” (179), and then anthroposophy and the “antihierarchical left” (191).

In the final chapter, “Anthroposophy’s Gifts to the Environmental Movement,” McKanan synthesizes his argument by putting forward four main *conceptual* contributions of anthroposophy to environmentalism. These are “cosmic holism,” “a homeopathic model of social change,” “appropriate anthropocentrism,” and “a vision of planetary transmutation.” McKanan’s book ends on a resoundingly optimistic note, suggesting that we should “look to the biodynamic farm as an emblem of our future” (245).

Eco-Alchemy is a rare study in the *practical* influence of esoteric thought in a variety of cultural domains. McKanan’s main point, that an understanding of anthroposophy is essential for understanding the history of environmentalism, is carefully but impactfully made and well-taken. Indeed, McKanan’s book is sug-

gestive of much more work to be done in the study of esotericism in its practical, popular, and cultural influence. My only disagreement with McKanan does not amount to a criticism of his erudite and careful scholarship; rather, it is with his enthusiasm for biodynamics as a model for the future of environmentalism. In his conclusion, McKanan notes that the anthropocentrism of Steiner's thought gives the anthroposophy movement a more optimistic attitude towards the concept of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch marked by the dominance of *homo sapiens* on the geology, ecology, and climate of Earth: "While many environmentalists see the advent of the anthropocene era as a cause for mourning, students of Steiner are able to embrace it with joy and hope" (244). The reason for this optimism, McKanan reasons, is the "simple fact that the practice of farming lies at the heart of anthroposophical environmentalism." Anthroposophists have been working *with* nature for nearly a century, McKanan argues, and the outsized role of human beings in their environment does not present a problem for them. In this concluding gesture, McKanan's enthusiasm for biodynamics as a model for the future is unconvincing: the Anthropocene is not a *conceptual* challenge to be met by greater and greater cultural integration with some construct called "nature"; rather, it is a term of art for an unprecedented threat—mostly but not entirely attributable to the burning of fossil fuels—to the persistence of a biosphere that supports all life on earth, including *sapiens*. Biodynamic farming, for all its benefits, does not specifically address or resolve the roots of anthropogenic global warming and mass extinction.

Brief moments like this do not at all detract from the overall value of McKanan's book. *Eco-Alchemy* is a welcome contribution to the study of esotericism and the history of environmentalism, both for its unique insights and for his attention to the influence of esoteric thought and practice on popular culture.

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Susan Byrne. *Ficino in Spain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 364 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-5056-5. €75.77.

Susan Byrne is currently a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Nevada. She worked at Yale University (2008–2016), the State University of New York (2006–2008), and Fordham University (2004–2006). She published *Law and History in Cervantes' Don Quixote* (University of Toronto Press, 2012) and *The Corpus Hermeticum and Three Spanish Poets* (Juan de la Cuesta, 2007).

In her most recent monograph, *Ficino in Spain*, Byrne, interested in the history of ideas, literature, and the Italo-Hispanic cultural exchanges in early modernity, is invested in a precise historiographic debate. Byrne recalls it was Jacob Burckhardt who, in his vision of the artistic and intellectual developments of the Renaissance, excluded Spain from the general process (he did so based on the long tradition of the “Black Legend”),¹ and argues that subsequent Spanish scholarship that addressed the Hispanic letters of the period continued this idea. Subsequently intellectuals emphasized that Spanish culture developed in isolation in relation to the developments deployed in Western Europe, thereby defending a “purist” vision of the Hispanic world. In this process, the influence of the ideas of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) in early modern Spain was minimized, or directly denied.

Relying primarily on the extensive scholarship of Michael J.B. Allen on the “profound impact” of Ficino’s work on European Renaissance culture as well as on the studies of Christopher Celenza and Brian P. Copenhaver on the history of Renaissance philosophy, but going deeper into the specific case of Spain, Byrne’s central objective is to demonstrate the imprint of Ficinian thought (expressed in its translations, books, letters and treatises) among the most important referents of the Spanish letters of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

Byrne focusses particularly on the sixteenth century, where she states that Ficino's influence was significant among Spanish scholars who considered him, along with Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, as an "orthodox" author in the context of the Counter-Reformation and the Inquisition. Since the Ficinian *corpus* was not challenged in terms of heresy, the authors of the Spanish letters adopted and adapted his thoughts to use as a starting point for their own representations of the culture of Spain. This influence was long-lasting and can also be traced in the next two centuries. Thus, Byrne emphasizes that her analysis of Spanish contribution (based on the influence of Ficino's hermeticism and neoplatonism) to the early modern European general culture, contradicts and challenges the current dominant interpretation of the Renaissance.

To make this argument, Byrne meticulously discusses a heterogeneous spectrum of Hispanic sources (dialogues, stories, poetry, legal and miscellaneous compilations), structuring her book with an introduction, six chapters, and conclusions, followed by indexes of notes and bibliography (the book also contains 20 images with very representative reproductions of vintage texts by way of illustration).

In chapter 1, "Ficino in Spanish Libraries," the existing volumes of Ficino's works in the most important libraries and documentary reservoirs of present-day Spain are listed (Historical Library of the Complutense University, Columbine Chapter Library of Seville, Royal Library of the Monastery of *El Escorial*, Historical General Library of the University of Salamanca). In this highly detailed chapter, each of the texts, the number of preserved specimens, and their precise registration is indicated. Here Byrne demonstrates the presence of not only Ficino's famous *De triplici Vita* (1489), but also his short treatise on the plague (*Epidemiarum antidotus*) in Latin, together with his translations into Spanish from 1553, 1564 and 1598; his *De Christiana religione* (1476) as well as his annotated translation of Plato's works, *Platonis Opera omnia* (1484), which circulated extensively in Spain since the end of the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth, both in copies and in

printed manuscripts; and lastly, *Opera omnia* of Ficino itself (published in 1561 for the first time), appears referenced as well as its *epistolae* which the Florentine began to compile in the 1470s (and were published in 1495).

In chapter 2, “Ficino as Authority in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Letters,” Byrne exhaustively identifies references to the authority of Ficino that were made by Spanish scholars in diverse areas of knowledge, thereby demonstrating his importance in and for Spanish letters. Among the many examples highlighted are the representations of the *De triplici vita* on the magical stones that were expressly consigned by the imperial chronicler Pedro Mexia in his *Silva de varia lección* (1540) and also in the *Diálogos familiares de la agricultura cristiana* (1589) of Juan de Pineda, while the medical-astrological-curative conceptions of the *De Vita* are mentioned, albeit critically, in *La conservación de la salud del cuerpo y del alma...* (1597) by the doctor Blas A. Miraval.

In chapter 3, “Ficino as Hermes Trismegistus: The Corpus Hermeticum or Pimander,” Byrne focuses on Spanish literature that cited Ficino’s translation into Latin of the *Corpus Herméticum* (1463), which was published under the title of *Pimander* (1471). She also discusses the Ficinian translation itself, thereby noting that it was in turn translated into Spanish by Diego Guillén de Ávila (1485). Perhaps one of the most critical points of the analysis is reached when the Latin text of Ficino is carefully compared with that Castilian translation (120–29), finding important similarities and differences for further academic research.

In chapter 4, “Persistence and Adaptation of Hermetic-Neoplatonic Imagery,” Byrne elaborates on the resonances of Hermetic-Neoplatonic imagery in the Spanish letters of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, regardless of whether Ficino or Hermes Trismegistus is explicitly mentioned. Byrne believes she finds echoes of Florentine thought expressed in his *De Sole* in *Don Quijote* by Miguel de Cervantes (152–54). Although this argument about Ficinian influence in *Don Quijote* is not convincing (Cervantes wrote his famous text in a ridiculous sense), her analysis of the case of Lope de Vega is more acceptable. Here Byrne shows that the represen-

tations of fire understood as the end of mortal life, as expressed in the *Pimander*, are found in some verses of Lope de Vega's *La Dama Boba* (1613); furthermore, Ficino is explicitly quoted in a letter written in 1624 as a source of authority for his own sonnets to Pico de la Mirándola's *Heptaplus*. Finally, when Lope de Vega represented the "Divine Mind" in his *La calidad elemental resiste*, Ficino is specifically quoted in "*Marsilio Ficino*" and "*Mercurio en el Pimandro*" (156–59).

In chapter 5, "Ficino as Plato," and chapter 6, "Persistence of Political-Economic Platonism," the influences of the Ficinian translations of Plato's dialogues in Hispanic literature are studied. Here Byrne points out similarities between the Platonic thought commented by the Florentine and the verses of the mystic San Juan de la Cruz (180–84), as well as in the production of the real chronicler Antonio de Guevara, the jurist Arce de Otálora, the political philosopher Fox Morcillo (192–98), *Don Quixote* by Cervantes (206–8), and Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, among others (209–10).

During the last decade, I repeatedly demonstrated that: 1) in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*—published in 2005, but still the richest record in the history of Western esotericism to date²—the treatment of esotericism in early-modern Spain is marginal or absent, and, 2) specialized international scholarship on this same period that was published in the last twenty years focused on the German, English, French, Italian, Scandinavian and Eastern European cases, thus likewise generally excluding the Spaniards or addressing them only tangentially.³

2. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, et al., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden, Brill, 2005).

3. "Esoterismo y religión en la España del Siglo XVI. Stanihurst, de Santiago y la defensa de la alquimia," *Reflexão* 42, no. 2 (2017): 199–211; "Apologética de la alquimia en la corte de Felipe II. Richard Stanihurst y su 'El Toque de Alquimia' (1593)," *Magallánica. Revista de Historia Moderna* 2, no. 4 (2016): 95–117; "Arte separatoria e hijos del arte en las prácticas y representaciones de Diego de Santiago (Sevilla, 1598) y el lugar de España en el Esoterismo Occidental," *Annales de Historia Antigua, Medieval y Moderna* 49 (2015): 79–103; "Magia y polémicas antimágicas en la España bajo medieval. Enrique de Villena, su Tratado de fascinación o de aojamiento y los límites de la ortodoxia cristiana," *Revista Prohistoria* 17, no. XV (2012): 1–24; "Esoterismo y política de Felipe II en la España del Siglo de Oro. Reinterpretando al círculo esotérico filipino en El Escorial: Juan de Herrera, Giovanni Vincenzo Forte, Diego de Santiago, Richard Stanihurst," *Veredas da História* III, no. 2 (2010).

In this current state of the field, Byrne's book is thus significant, particularly in two of its chapters. Chapter 1 is an important reference to find texts, manuscripts, and books linked to esotericism that are preserved in Spanish repositories. The third chapter is an excellent platform to continue expanding the appropriations of Ficinian representations and the tradition of "*Hermes Trismegisto*" in Renaissance Spain. Therefore Byrne's book, with its own methodology that draws from the history of ideas, literary studies, and comparative literature, emerges as an important contribution for those who are interested in the cultural history of esotericism in Spain, and indeed in Western Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries more generally.

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Mary-Jane Rubenstein. *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xxi + 294 pp. ISBN: 9780231189460. Hardcover. \$35.00/£27.00.

In the conclusion to his 2012 book, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Wouter J. Hanegraaff cited Frances Yates's description of the religion of hermetic literature as a "religion of the world."¹ For Yates and for Hanegraaff, hermetic literature and the European esoteric traditions that sprang up from it in the Renaissance and the early modern period described a divinity that was present in, and perhaps even synonymous with the material cosmos: it was a cosmology "based upon the fundamental assumption that the divine is at home in the world."² This immanent religious posture was not easily superimposed onto the dominant monotheisms of the time, in which a lone transcendent God creates the world *ex nihilo*. Indeed, as Hanegraaff argues, the intractable tension between these two religious worldviews has been the primary source of the entire cultural phenomenon that scholars would later call Western esotericism:

I suggest that the emergence of what we now call Western esotericism was made possible by a deep structure of conflict between the dynamics of these two mutually exclusive systems and all that they imply. In short, the logical incompatibility of monotheism and cosmotheism has led to an endless series of creative attempts to resolve it.³

This "religion of the world," which has been so significant to understanding the referential corpus of the study of esotericism, is the subject of Mary-Jane Rubenstein's new book *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters*.

Rubenstein describes the inspiration for the book in her previous work on multiverse cosmologies and the contemporary (dis)engagement between science and

1. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 371.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

religion. Rubenstein notes how she kept coming across what she calls “pantheologies” in the history of science. These pantheologies are scientific and secular theories of the cosmos that often took on a theological valence in their narratives. In these scientific stories, depictions of cosmic creation, cohesion, and destruction are portrayed in utterly immanent and material terms. Despite their secular context and scientific purpose, these narratives still produced ethical and cultural implications in keeping with the religious cosmologies they purportedly left behind (xix).

In attempting to trace the conceptual history of pantheism itself, Rubenstein notes, she realized that “there is no real conceptual history of pantheism” (xx). At least in the intellectual history of Europe, “pantheism” is merely a polemical term, a conceptual bugbear to level against a philosophical opponent. In a critical position that scholars of esotericism can certainly appreciate, Rubenstein’s book asks two major questions: first, what is pantheism? Second, what is the problem with pantheism?

In so doing, Rubenstein marshalls an array of historical and theoretical tools: readers will be led through such diverse terrain as the early engagements in continental philosophy over the problems of pantheism, pantheistic thought in Albert Einstein’s writings on religion and science, and contemporary theories of immanence such as new materialism, posthumanism, and Amerindian perspectivism. Perhaps most interesting to readers of this publication is Rubenstein’s careful engagement with Giordano Bruno, whose pantheistic opinions (which Rubenstein attributes to his reading of Lucretius [78]) are presented as the beginning of pantheist controversy in Europe.

Throughout the book, Rubenstein argues that what makes pantheism so repulsive – indeed, so *monstrous* – to so many throughout history is its implied upending of many hierarchical patterns that have shaped Western thought through the centuries. Binary formations of hierarchical difference in race, gender, and even humans and nonhumans are not erased but profoundly reconfigured in the pantheist rejection of the fundamental separation of God

and world. Rubenstein’s argument proceeds in four chapters. In the opening chapter, “Pan,” Rubenstein addresses G. W. F. Hegel’s challenge that Baruch Spinoza’s pantheistic thought submerges all the world in an “abyss” of indifference. Rubenstein’s assessment of Spinoza’s position and Hegel’s critique sets up her own articulation of a pluralist pantheism, a monad composed of many, rather than a Hegelian abyss of indifference. As mentioned above, *Pantheologies* is a theological call for a pantheism that embraces rather than erases difference, upending rather than ignoring hierarchies.

Chapter two, “Hyle,” should be of special interest to *Correspondences* readers for its focus on Giordano Bruno. In this chapter, Rubenstein takes up the issue of matter, asking why European theological and philosophical traditions have so strictly and nervously denied any manner of animacy or divinity in the material. The earliest major outlier in this trend is Bruno, who Rubenstein interprets as a critic of Aristotle’s emphasis on form over matter. Chapter two continues its analysis of theories of animate matter by looking at indigenous cosmologies of animate matter — precisely the kind that the intellectual descendants of Bruno’s critics encountered on their subsequent colonial and imperial excursions. Finally, Rubenstein turns toward the contemporary world of microbiology via the work of Lynn Margulis, whose work on symbiosis and bacteria illuminated a new dimension of material animacy in twentieth-century science.

Chapter three, “Cosmos,” turns to the concept of “world” and more precisely what it means to not only associate but also identify the concept of divinity with it. Readers of Carolyn Merchant will be familiar with Rubenstein’s description of the mechanistic or “clockwork” cosmos of the European seventeenth century, in which a nascent science and capitalism collaborated to drain the conceptual life out of the physical world. Rubenstein again directs these early modern trends to their contemporary analogues in the sciences, by outlining the controversy over James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s “Gaia Hypothesis.” Simply put, Lovelock and Margulis argued that the scientific data points towards an under-

standing of the planet Earth as an organism unto itself; sustaining, regulating, and being sustained by the organisms within it. Much as in the early modern period, the Gaia hypothesis was the subject of severe criticism and even ridicule by mainstream professional scientists in the late twentieth century.

Chapter four, “Theos,” builds on and concludes the book by looking directly at the pantheistic elements in Einstein’s theoretical physics and in his writings and public statements on religion. Einstein found himself torn between a “rational,” Newtonian cosmos of reliable consensus reality and the endlessly perspectival and relational world that his theories of relativity suggested. Chapter four, and the book, conclude with a bracing critique of nothing less than the problem of evil from a pantheological perspective and a convincing response to the charge that any pantheism would be indistinguishable from atheism.

In Antoine Faivre’s well-known delineation of Western esotericism’s “six fundamental characteristics,” the second, “Living Nature,” begins with the line: “The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical.”⁴ For all the ways in which *Pantheologies* corresponds with the study of esotericism, readers will note important differences as well. Rubenstein’s own articulation of “living nature” (which she might call animate matter) firmly retains the complexity and plurality of Faivre’s category while fundamentally destabilizing the hierarchical organization of the persons (human and nonhuman) therein. As Rubenstein points out, both matter and nature itself have been constructed in racialized, gendered, and classist formations throughout the history that she outlines. Perhaps some of the hierarchies in Faivre’s cosmos will unravel if they are subjected to a similar analysis. Indeed, Rubenstein’s book poses both a challenge and an opportunity to the field of esotericism: to consider the meaning of this “religion of the world” more deeply, and in so doing, to scrutinize the hierarchical patterns that have shaped the history of esotericism itself.

4. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 11.

Rubenstein's book takes on a project of sweeping scale and historical breadth, and she successfully demonstrates that pantheist thinkers and pantheism itself have been a remarkably consistent intellectual punching bag in Western thought since at least the seventeenth century. Of course, with such a broad scope packed into a relatively short book, the author's choice of subjects can read as somewhat idiosyncratic: in the hopscotch from Spinoza to Einstein, we land only for a moment on Bruno, Hegel, and the American literary sources from the nineteenth century. This choice of subject matter does not detract from the overall quality of the book or the efficacy of the argument. *Pantheologies* is a work by a theologian with an interest in religion and science, rather than an attempt at a complete history of pantheism.

As a work of philosophy of religion which leans heavily on the history of early modern Europe and the study of religion and science, *Pantheologies* represents a critically relevant text for the contemporary study of esotericism. Giordano Bruno is far from the only figure in the referential corpus of esotericism to espouse pantheist opinions, and there remains much more work to be done in sorting out what, precisely, has made both pantheism and esotericism, Frances Yates's "religion of the world," so simultaneously exciting and revolting to so many throughout the modern history of Europe.

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Markus Altena Davidsen, ed. *Narrative and Belief: The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. xi + 126 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-55966-0. £120.00.

The relevance of fiction has become a hot topic in the study of religion.¹ A special place in these debates belongs to the investigation of how fiction transforms into religion, or in other words, how and why a text of fiction affords to be read as a religious text. In order to scrutinize the methodology for analysing these “fiction-based,”² “invented,”³ or “hyper-real” religions,⁴ Markus Davidsen invited scholars in his field to a symposium at the University of Leiden in 2014. Two questions guided their research: “1) Can a distinction be drawn at all between religious narratives and supernatural fiction? 2) Can we determine which textual features it takes for a fictional narrative to afford religious use?” (2f).

Five different perspectives, by Carole Cusack, Markus Davidsen, Laura Feldt, Dirk Johannsen, and Anders Petersen, were published in the special volume “Thematic Issue on Religion and Fiction” of *Religion* in 2016, edited and introduced by Davidsen. Recently, Routledge republished these articles under the title *Narrative and Belief: Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction* in a high-quality hardcover edition. Compact in its 126 pages, the reader encounters five high-level reflections, which together spearhead a discussion on the intricate relations between factual, fictional, and religious realities, and thereby open new frontiers in historical, cognitive, and narratological domains. Davidsen’s introductory

1. See for example: *Aries* 7, no.1 (January 2007), special Issue “Esotericism and Fiction: The Horror of Disenchantment”; Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 119–41, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30ff.

2. Markus Altena Davidsen, *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu* (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2014), 47ff.

3. Carole Cusack, *Invented Religion: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

4. Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal-Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005).

and editorial work provides helpful access to the articles. It becomes thereby quickly apparent that there is not one single answer or argument presented in the book, but a variety of innovative and sometimes contradictory solutions and approaches that all have to be judged on their own merit.

Davidson argues in his contribution, “The Religious Affordance of Fiction: Towards a Catalogue of Veracity Mechanisms in Supernatural Narratives,” that fictional narratives afford a religious reading by essentially imitating the rhetorical strategy of religious narratives to present supernatural agents as real beings and potential interactive partners (41). In order to find out how an “aura of factuality” is constructed around these agents, Davidson identifies 10 “veracity mechanisms,” and differentiates them into two types: 1) “evidence-mechanisms” that assure the reality of supernatural agents in the story world, and 2) “anchor-mechanisms” that imply that the story world speaks about the actual world (52).

In his introductory article, “Fiction and Religion: How Narratives about the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue,” Davidson sets out the main arguments of his contributors and evaluates them in the context of his own findings. As an answer to the first of the initial questions, whether an analytical distinction can be drawn between a text of fiction and a text of religion, Davidson declares a “stalemate” in the argument. He then refracts the problem by historicising that split and opts for differentiating between our contemporary situation in the “Western world,” in which a fiction/religion distinction is “culturally entrenched,” and other times and places, in which it is not applicable (6). If we also consider other discussions about the ambiguity of the religion/fiction split, this step in Davidson’s argument should be strongly emphasised as it hopefully opens the discussion further for more historical studies on the transitions between “facts,” “fiction,” and “religion.”⁵

5. See Marco Frenschkowski, “Der Begriff des Phantastischen – Literaturgeschichtliche Betrachtungen,” in *Phantasmen: Robert N. Bloch zum Sechzigsten*, ed. Marco Frenschkowski (Gießen: Lindenstruth 2010), 110–34. Antoine Faivre also discusses the relationship between religion and fiction in “Occultism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsey Jones (Farnington: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6780–83.

Davidson responds to the second question—which textual features of a fictional narrative afford religious use—with a system of “three levels of affordance.” The contributors found various textual features and mechanisms that 1) offer “cosmological belief” (i.e. belief in supernatural agents without belief in the actuality of the story), 2) inspire religious practice, and 3) offer belief in the actual historicity of the story. Mechanisms that afford historical belief are more powerful and enhance the effect of the lower levels of affordance as well (7). This structure, while only briefly outlined, seems to be so innovative and valuable for his general argument that a clearer presentation in the form of a figure or graph would have been helpful.

Johannsen’s article, “On Elves and Freethinkers: Criticism of Religion and the Emergence of the Literary Fantastic in Nordic Literature,” offers erudite insights about the relations between religion and fiction from a historical perspective. Johannsen illustrates how a lasting affinity between fiction and religion was established at the beginning of the twentieth century through the academic study of folklore and a Left Hegelian literary circle (118). This circle criticized Romantic storytelling by portraying the social life-world realistically and by portraying “religion” as a conflict-topic that had to be overcome or set in a naturalistic context (108). During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the folktale had been rediscovered as a valuable oral-tradition, which was now dealt with at the same level as religion. Whether a story was classified as religion or poetry became only a question of cultural consolidation (111). In this context, the religiously ambiguous poem cycle *Haugtussa: a story* (1895) by Arne Gaborg (1851–1924) had great impact, not only by explaining religion psychologically, but by leaving it up to the reader to side either with a naturalistic or a supernatural interpretation (115). For Johannsen, this kind of freedom to decide individually what to believe and how to live had a lasting influence on modern religiosity. In Davidson’s systematization, Johannsen thereby provided a convincing analysis to answer the first of the initial questions with a historical approach (6).

In her contribution, “Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth and Magic in *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter*,” Feldt argues that both book series form and reflect contemporary religiosity by indicating a general cultural shift towards partial engagements with the “field of religion” (63, 68).⁶ In this shift, fantastic narratives increasingly become important to mediate and explore sensations, beings, or powers that traditionally belong to that “field,” according to Feldt (66). Hence, fantastic narratives should be included as source material by scholars of religion. In that shift away from an understanding of “religion” as merely “belief,” practical interpretation of narratives is the decisive criterion to be taken up religiously, rather than the veracity mechanisms as described by Davidsen (67). Feldt’s argument enables Davidsen to classify her analysis as providing an example of Level 1: religious affordances that facilitate “cosmological” belief (7).

In “Fiction into Religion: Imagination, Other Worlds, and Play in the Formation of Community,” Cusack thematises the importance of narratives as a basic building block for identity, and as a crucial part in the “cultural product” approach to religion, to enable imaginative participation in other-worlds (88).⁷ Basing her argument on Oberon Zell-Ravenheart’s “Church of All Worlds,” Cusack describes how playful and repeated immersion in the narrative of Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) spawned a religious community. This happened especially because the values and rituals in the portrayed social milieu were meaningful enough to be repeated in the actual world of the readers (87, 99). Cusack thereby agrees with Davidsen that affordances extend the human need for communion

6. Feldt uses the term “field of religion” in reference to Ingvild S. Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson (*Kulturens refortrylling: nyreligiositet i moderne samfunn* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005]) “as a field of concentric circles with porous boundaries.” Feldt defines its inner circle as institutional religion, while the outer circle consists of a large group with partial and shifting engagement with “religion” (64).

7. Cusack follows Judith Kovach in “The Body as the Ground of Religion, Science, and Self,” *Zygon* 37, no. 4 (2002): 941–61, and Maurice Block in “Why Religion is Nothing Special but is Central,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biology Sciences* 363, no. 1499 (2008): 2055–61, and argues that religion “arises” from the structure of the psyche and embodied experience as a cultural product, and is thus one outcome of human participation in explanatory narrative (88).

to religious and fictional figures (90, 99). For Davidsen, Cusack is thus a case in point for affordances of Level 2: mechanisms that afford “ritual use” (8).

In Petersen’s article, “The Difference between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature: a Matter of Degree Only,” strong emphasis is put on the relative autonomy of textual features in regard to their later interpretations, and the investigation of these features in reference to models of the evolution of cognition. For Petersen, “religion” and “fiction” are basically interchangeable and underlie the same logic: people are cognitively prone to seek meaning in signs and structure their lives through narratives. Yet, a text is especially prone to be interpreted religiously if the people, places, and times of the story-world refer to the actual world. Counterintuitive abilities of characters enhance this process, especially if these abilities have a benevolent effect and invite readers to mirror themselves in the characters of the story-world (23f). In Davidsen’s hierarchy, Petersen’s article thus provides material to be included as Level 3: mechanisms that afford historical belief, in the sense that the fictional story-world becomes blended with our actual world.

The strength of each of the contributions makes the collection fruitful beyond its thematic scope. Together they demonstrate the unquestionable relevance of narratives and textual affordances in the study of religion. I am certain that this book deserves a position among the crucial publications in the study of “fiction-based” religions. Davidsen’s introductory systematization, and the discussions between the writers within the articles, make it clear that the authors developed their position in awareness of each other. Yet, important questions and the relations between their positions often remain only briefly touched upon or are left open. For instance, if a fictional text also affords religious use due to its emotional value and practicality (98), how does this stand in relation to textual mechanisms that influence the reader due to subtle cognitive mechanisms? Furthermore, tensions seem to remain between approaches that stress the agency of readers who *choose* a text to be taken up religiously (67, 118), and con-

tributors that rather focus on mechanisms that give agency to the text (16, 35). Combined with differing initial understandings of how to categorize “religion” or “fiction,” the book can give the impression that the interdisciplinary study of “fiction-based” religions resembles an intricate patchwork of various schools that strongly push in contrasting directions. As a collection of articles that had already appeared in *Religion*, a focus on stronger unifying links between the approaches would have perhaps been useful, instead of evaluation only in context of Davidson’s cognitive and textual agency-based model. This leaves it ultimately to the reader’s choice with whom to side.

The study of “fiction-based” religions is young and promising, and with this contribution I am sure that it will gain momentum, and spread broader awareness of textual affordances and fictional narratives in the study of religions. This book is recommended for scholars of religion, if only to get an overview and to become aware of the state of the discussion.

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Julie Chajes. *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xii + 215. ISBN: 978-0-19-090913-0. \$99.

From Victorian times to the present, the question of reincarnation in Helena P. Blavatsky's Theosophy—in particular, in what type of body or form of existence an individual might return to life after death—has occasioned fierce debate. Much of the controversy centers around a perceived shift in the portrayal of reincarnation between Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and her second, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

With *Recycled Lives*, Julie Chajes has produced about as helpful and concise a history of this debate as one could hope for. Upon this history she builds her own proposal for how to think about early and late Blavatskian reincarnation. It is high time for the publication of a complete work devoted to Blavatsky's scattered statements on reincarnation, including the changes in her teachings over time, and the social and theological imperatives that may have driven these shifts. Chajes successfully performs this task.

Reincarnation deals with the future of the soul and body, and is entwined with soteriology. In explaining Blavatsky on reincarnation, Chajes necessarily explores many facets of Theosophical thought. In fact, *Recycled Lives* could well serve as an introduction to Blavatsky's Theosophy for the uninitiated, written as it is in succinct and accessible prose, and referencing much recent scholarship. Particularly helpful are the chapters on spiritualism and science.

The development of Blavatsky's soteriology and her consistency about future lives (or lack thereof) is central to Chajes's work. She elaborates on a scholarly consensus that began to develop in the 1990s which argues that Blavatsky's teachings can be better understood through the lens of the politics of spiritualism, the milieu of many early Theosophists. However, spiritualism is not the only influence, and Chajes describes Blavatsky's mature reincarnation system as

a syncretic one, influenced by, among other sources, “Platonic and neo-Platonic accounts, diverse contemporary scientific theories of evolution, and modernizing interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist thought” (41).

In *Isis*, Blavatsky makes contradictory statements about reincarnation, either denying it or declaring it rare. However, she also promotes elements of a system that Wouter Hanegraaff has called “ascendant metempsychosis,” or the reincarnation of worthy individuals in progressively more refined bodies on other worlds besides earth.¹ According to the *Isis* version of ascendant metempsychosis, only elite souls can survive death; the fate of most people is uncertain and does not necessarily include reincarnation on earth, but possibly in “lower” worlds.² In her 2012 treatment of this topic, Chajes refers to early Blavatskian reincarnation as “a specific version of ascendant metempsychosis,” the “primary doctrine” of the *Isis* system, following Hanegraaff’s use of the term to describe a progressive, evolutionary and elitist system that emerged in eighteenth-century Christian theosophy.³ In *Recycled Lives*, Chajes no longer uses “ascendant” to modify “metempsychosis,” but simply describes the same Theosophical formulation as “metempsychosis.”

Chajes follows a proposal by John Patrick Deveney that Blavatsky’s early system mirrors that of the nineteenth-century occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph.⁴ Her association of the *Isis* system with Randolph, who came out of the milieu of American spiritualism, dovetails with the consensus that holds that Blavatsky initially rejected universal systems of reincarnation because they were repugnant to many spiritualists who were uncomfortable with the notion that

1. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 478.

2. See Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1960), 345-46.

3. Julie Chajes, “Metempsychosis and Reincarnation in Isis Unveiled,” *Theosophical History* XVI, no. 3-4 (July-Oct. 2012): 128.

4. John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: Nineteenth-Century Spiritualist, Rosicrucian and Sex Magician* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 279-80.

humans might “regress” into animal forms. Among such spiritualists were the noted trance speaker Emma Hardinge Britten, a prominent founding member of the Theosophical Society. Scholars have noted that Blavatsky shifted her position on reincarnation only after other spiritualists who supported it, such as followers of Anna Kingsford and Alan Kardec, began to promote progressive schemes incorporating many lifetimes on earth.⁵

The shift began in 1882 when Blavatsky presented a more developed treatment of reincarnation as a universal system (not just for elite souls) via *The Theosophist*, a monthly journal she edited from the Theosophical Society’s Indian headquarters. Blavatsky was immediately challenged by C. C. Massey, a prominent British Theosophist, to explain this apparent shift. Her responses—in 1882 and again in an 1886 article republished as an appendix to later editions of *Isis*—failed to convince many critics. She justified herself primarily by complexifying her anthropology such that the human was seen as having ever more bodies and layers of soul stuff.

At least some of the confusion around Blavatsky’s teachings on reincarnation can be blamed on her rambling style and interchangeable employment of *reincarnation*, *metempsychosis* and *transmigration*, which do not have stable meanings in her work. She did, however, try for consistency in her 1889 *The Key to Theosophy*. Chajes’s thesis is that “Blavatsky changed her mind about rebirth, tried to cover up the change, and failed” (185). Chajes supports her position with new evidence from Blavatsky’s letters that favors ascendant metempsychosis as the primary system of *Isis* (56-61). In one letter, Blavatsky declares that immortality is not available to all, but “must be won” (60).

The recycling from which *Recycled Lives* takes its title occurs in the ascendant metempsychosis formulation when the less spiritual (i.e. the vast majority of humans) go through a sort of cosmic degaussing in which their individuality is erased and their soul stuff returned to a cosmic pool from which new souls

5. See Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994), 334-42; Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker, 2012), 130-43, 188-94; Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 464-73.

are continually being fashioned. As Chajes puts it, “the body and the soul of one who had failed to achieve immortality disintegrated. Its ‘atoms’ would be recycled back into the elements of physical nature and the ‘atoms’ of the soul would return to the ‘more sublimated elements’” (60).

According to a social constructivist perspective of Blavatsky’s theology, her early denial of an afterlife for most people also permitted her to elevate her teachings above séance communications by limiting the after-death existence of a personality. But her greater exposure to Hindu and Buddhist thought in India later led her to understand the importance of both karma and reincarnation in a well-rounded soteriology and theodicy.

But some Theosophists are not convinced that a shift took place or was motivated by social concerns. Pablo Sender, for example, argues in favor of a continuity in Blavatsky’s teachings on reincarnation, though he acknowledges differences between early and late teachings.⁶ The argument for continuity rests on the difficulties with interpreting *Isis*, which also confusingly provides exceptions to the recycling scenario and implies that all humans may approach perfection through cyclic transmigration. Chajes argues that despite the confusion over language, Blavatsky’s dominant early position can be identified and labeled as *metempsychosis*, or the rebirth of elite souls on better planets accompanied by the “recycling” of all other souls, and distinguished from her later position, which Chajes calls *reincarnation*, the progressive perfection of most people through reincarnation on earth and other planets (65). But Chajes also adds that “Blavatsky’s ideas were consistent, if not always perspicuous,” and blames “terminology” for the confusion (63). She goes on to state that her own “detailed reading... makes sense of her [Blavatsky’s] sometimes apparently contradictory statements” (64).

Although Chajes has achieved remarkable clarity concerning some of the murkier aspects of the debate, I do find her strategy of assigning *metempsychosis*

6. See Pablo D. Sender, “*Isis Unveiled* on Metempsychosis and Transmigration: A Reply to Julie Chajes’ Paper,” *Theosophical History* XVIII, no. 1-2 (January–April 2016): 11-23.

to the *Isis* system and *reincarnation* to the post-1882 system to be confusing. In *Recycled Lives*, Chajes has dropped her earlier association of “ascendant” with “metempsychosis” and simply argues that “metempsychosis was the main rebirth doctrine of *Isis Unveiled* and it was associated with the indestructibility of spirit and matter, progressive evolution, human effort, and cyclicity” (63). My concern is not that there is not evidence of two separate doctrines—there is—but that the use of *metempsychosis* and *reincarnation* to describe them implies both that the doctrines were complete formulations and that these terms have distinct stable meanings outside the Theosophical purview. In fact, metempsychosis and reincarnation have been used interchangeably in Western esotericism. Classical Greek versions of metempsychosis do incorporate human return to life on earth in both human and animal forms. Chajes’s argument, while compelling, would have been easier to understand had she kept her 2012 formulation of Blavatsky’s early system as “a specific version of ascendant metempsychosis,” which would remind the reader of the elitist and progressive (not on earth, no return to animal form) bent of Blavatsky’s early work.

In addition, while Chajes has provided a strong argument for the primacy of ascendant metempsychosis in Blavatsky’s early period, she also identifies a variety of exceptions to this framing. Theosophists have also used these exceptions as proof of her consistency. The exceptions include Blavatsky’s citation of other Hellenistic and Kabbalistic formulations that imply the appearance of human souls in a series of human lives on earth.⁷

My concerns over Chajes’s terminology differ from those offered by Sender in 2016, who critiques Chajes by arguing that there actually is consistency between *Isis* and Blavatsky’s later work, which can be seen in “a natural and gradual development of Blavatsky’s presentation of the teachings.”⁸ Though he admits that Blavatsky “was generally not very systematic in the use of her terms,”

7. See Sender, “Reply to Chajes,” 17.

8. Sender, “Reply to Chajes,” 21.

he harmonizes through interpreting the *Isis* version as both “fragmentary” and allegorical, and viewing later renditions of her theology as more complete.⁹ Although I am more skeptical about Blavatsky’s consistency, I agree that *Isis* presents an embryonic theology, and that there are both continuities and discontinuities between her early and later work, a point which Chajes also accepts. “It would be a mistake to ignore either the continuities or the discontinuities at the expense of each other; both are there” (185). By applying a metempsychosis (early)/reincarnation (late) dichotomy to Blavatsky’s thought, Chajes reifies a system that was, in fact, under development. I hope that Chajes’s usage, if adopted, is clarified by those building on her work if only because a reified view may obscure the creative process. The construction of theology is neither always consistent nor clear, as demonstrated by the multiplicity of reincarnation concepts in later Theosophy and its offshoots.

Elsewhere, Chajes does provide a convincing demonstration of the social process of the construction of Theosophical soteriology. For example, she identifies additional reasons why ascendant metempsychosis failed to take hold and reincarnation was more attractive. She notes that the recycling version of human destiny, which implies that the dead could not be contacted and that spiritual progress for most people was unattainable, was elitist and uncomfortable. In contrast, reincarnation in the fully developed system of Theosophical soteriology was “consoling and democratic” and appealed to “middle class and well educated” audiences (187, 189). Here, Chajes provides additional foundation for developmentalist approaches to Blavatsky’s work, which, of course, undermine Blavatsky’s claim to have received these doctrines from an unchanging ancient tradition.

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9. Sender, “Reply to Chajes,” 14, 20.

Emily Ogden. *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. xiv + 267. ISBN: 9780226532165. \$82.50.

The history of mesmerism in the United States has been a topic of historical research before. However, it has always been either in an attempt to write a bigger history¹—in which mesmerism is but a stage—or within the framework of a small case study, such as of a specific mesmerist actor.² This led to the situation in which we still lacked a monograph dealing exclusively with American mesmerism. With *Credulity*, Emily Ogden finally fills this peculiar gap. In it, following the subtitle, Ogden traces the history of U.S. mesmerism from Paris in 1784 all the way to the American 1850s, where it almost completely merged with other traditions such as Spiritualism and New Thought. Moving beyond the descriptive, Ogden also builds a thesis centered around her title concept of “credulity”: namely that many American mesmerizers saw themselves as disenchanted, rational men using enchantment to manipulate the credulity of others into (often economically) useful ends.³ By doing this, she aims not only to further our understanding of American mesmerism as a cultural phenomenon of its own, but also to contribute to current models of secularism.

Ogden starts her historical narrative with an extensive look at the French 1784 Faculty of Medicine commission report (34–40), and with good reason. The scientific commission, of which Benjamin Franklin was a part, denied the

1. For example, the history of psychology: e.g. Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); or American religion: e.g. Robert Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

2. E.g. Eric Carlson, “Charles Poyen Brings Mesmerism to America,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 15, no. 2 (1960): 121–32; Sheila Quinn, “Credibility, Respectability, Suggestibility, and Spirit Travel,” *History of Psychology* 15, no. 3 (2012): 273–82.

3. The emic definition of credulity as an insult is given in the introduction of the book: “credulity . . . is deception and thrall to false magic”, or simply “excessive belief” (9). As will be elaborated on later, Ogden also uses the term credulity as an analytic concept, but she does not discuss this usage theoretically.

existence of an animal magnetic fluid, instead ascribing the curative effects to the imagination. Ogden argues that this led to two interconnected developments, which would ultimately shape the history of mesmerism in the United States. Firstly, she shows in the latter part of Chapter One (46–54, 61–67) how this dismissal of mesmerism reached the United States in 1784, half a century before the actual practice would successfully follow suit in 1836. Being the first to extensively describe these 52 years, aptly under the title “Animal Magnetism Before It Was True” (25), Ogden convincingly shows that Americans readily cultivated the link between mesmerism and quackery. For them, it was an easy (i.e. absent) “other” to denounce as irrational in order to prove their own rationality.

Secondly, following Jessica Riskin,⁴ Ogden shows that by transferring mesmerism’s alleged power to the imagination, the commission inadvertently turned the latter into a powerful force, one that was, as of yet, little understood and in need of management (40). Here the main thesis of the book comes to the fore: Ogden argues that American mesmerists saw their practice as a continuation of superstitions of old, but sought to rationally repurpose it into the power of controlling credulity for enlightened ends (usually in very economic and pragmatic ways: raising efficiency of workers, highspeed information transfer, etc.). In other words, *mesmerism* would perform the task of managing the imagination (70). In this regard, Ogden asserts that the commission report turned out to work in mesmerism’s favor in the case of the United States (e.g. 47, 67). The utilization of mesmerism was first proposed by its importer into the country, Charles Poyen (Ch. 2). Ogden sees in his introduction of mesmerism to factory owners a tool to increase the punctuality and efficiency of their workers (90–100). She views this as consistent with his ties to and dependencies on slavery, for which she provides newly found archival evidence from Guadeloupe. In doing this, Ogden casts a new light on Poyen, who is often described as an abolitionist in earlier works.⁵

4. *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of French Enlightenment* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 209–25.

5. E.g. Carlson, *Charles Poyen*, 123, 126; Sheila Quinn, “How Southern New England Became

However, this vision of a utilized mesmerism soon had to make room, as Ogden describes in her third chapter, for a new sort of mesmerism: one in which spectacle, with only the promise of utility, took center stage. Soon after its arrival in New England, a new form of clairvoyance was tied to mesmerism: travelling somnambulism, or spirit travel. It weighted the power-dynamic of mesmerizer-somnambulist more in the balance than Poyen's vision of mesmerism. Ogden describes this new form of mesmerism as "mutual storytelling" (105), as, for example, captured in the interaction between skeptical William Stone and blind somnambulist Lurena (or Lorraina) Brackett as they 'flew in imagination' to New York in 1837. Just who the credulous one was became more difficult to assess. Ogden uses new archival material, including letters to and from Brackett, to give a nuanced version of the role Brackett played. Often skipped over as little more than Stone's somnambulist, Ogden paints, in line with some earlier research,⁶ a nuanced picture of a struggling woman with disabilities who at every turn in her life had to choose between different dependencies. In the case of mesmerism, the dependency left Brackett with some control of her own, and any embellishment of her talents and disabilities should be read in light of necessity rather than malice or naivety (136–55). Consistent with this, Ogden argues that it is helpful to focus not only on the empowering aspects of mesmerism and similar phenomena, but also on the consequences of its disempowering qualities (229–31).

With the advent of phrenomesmerism (the combination of phrenology and mesmerism) during the 1840s, the power balance between mesmerizer and somnambulist looked restored. Ogden argues in Chapter Four that the credulous somnambulist was once again utilized to serve a modern purpose: to increase knowledge of the brains of specific persons, as well as in general

Magnetic North: The Acceptance of Animal Magnetism," *History of Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2007): 234.

6. The only other discussion on Brackett's role is by Quinn, who emphasizes the possibility that mesmerism may have had a positive therapeutic effect on the woman: "Credibility, Respectability," 279–81. The two theories definitely do not exclude each other, and Quinn, too, leaves room for occasional "fraudulent" behavior on Brackett's part.

(e.g. 159–60, 169). Of special interest to the mesmerizers and customers was the confirmation somnambulists could give, through such a brain-reading, that the person being read was rational (160)—just like mesmerism was debunked before 1836 in order to make the debunker seem rational. She then shows, however, that this balance was once again upset with the advent of the reading of letters or autographs rather than persons. As the subject was no longer present to deny the somnambulist’s interpretations, theatrical performances based solely on the agency of the latter became possible (192–97).

Around the 1850s, after the advent of Spiritualism, the last mainstream version of animal magnetism, electrobiology, arose. This version, Ogden shows in Chapter Five, once again resumed control of the somnambulist, who now could be anyone rather than only those deemed extraordinarily credulous (e.g. women and enslaved people). The idea of utility, however, had to—again—make place for “mere” entertainment, as electrobiologists used stage shows (reminiscent of the later hypnosis shows) to display that almost anyone could be convinced that they were actually certain animals or in specific situations. Eventually though, partly due to in-fighting, mesmerism had to make way for the more popular phenomenon of Spiritualism, itself heavily influenced by mesmerism. Ogden argues that just like mesmerists claimed to update old superstitions, Spiritualism now claimed that mesmerism was the more “primitive” practice, and that Spiritualists were the actual modern users of its techniques—techniques which were once again utilized, this time in order to contact spirits (224–26).

The history of U.S. mesmerism as described in this book is highly valuable. Ogden not only uses new material that provides informative ways to look at key characters such as Charles Poyen and Lurena Brackett—she also shows that the United States, in the period between 1784 and 1836, contained a mesmeric presence even though it was not yet practiced. Moreover, Ogden readily makes use of her disciplinary background (in literary studies) to draw parallels between fiction and mesmerism and to give new analyses of popular novels by authors such

as Hannah Webster Foster, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, even though these often seem to stray from the main argument. Her decision to look extensively at key figures, rather than trying to deal with all mesmerist actors, clearly paid off. All in all, this book builds on previous histories of U.S. mesmerism, but ultimately surpasses them by synthesizing existing and new knowledge into a whole that provides a more up-to-date view.

However, the credulity-centered analytical framework, while often thought-provoking, seems to miss a solid theoretical and evidential underpinning. The exception is the argument that the 1784 commission cemented a link between mesmerism and quackery, and that this link was gleefully cultivated in America before 1836, which is completely convincing. On the other hand, the claims that 1) this same commission was ultimately helpful for mesmerism's reception in the United States, and that 2) the mesmerists saw themselves as repurposing old superstitions in order to enchant and manage somnambulists through their credulity, are, while interesting, problematic. Regarding the first point, the direct link that Ogden draws between the commission's empowerment of the imagination and Poyen's repurposing of magnetism as its manager seems to forget the more obvious explanation for mesmerism's transformation into a popular practice, the development of somnambulism under Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825) and its subsequent development by mesmerists such as Joseph Philippe François Deleuze (1753–1835) (although this development is discussed in itself: 68, 77–79). In this alternative—but not mutually exclusive—reading, the commission's report is seen as solely detrimental due to its influence on American perception of mesmerism during the fifty years prior to Poyen's arrival, instead of it being awkwardly positioned as both a curse (pre-1836) and then a blessing (post-1836). This does not necessarily rule out Ogden's argument, but without a more conscious reflection on the influences of both the commission *and* the Puységurian tradition, it is enough to cast reasonable doubt on her interpretation.

With regards to the second point, a confusion of several terms seems to take place, which together appear to lead to the argument that mesmerists used credulity to manipulate somnambulists for their own gain. Firstly, Ogden argues repeatedly that mesmerists saw themselves as appropriating old superstitions made by false priests, but one shouldn't forget that mesmerism was first and foremost seen as a science, and was only subsequently used to rewrite the "miracles and superstitions" of history in a rational way. Secondly, "credulity" is used uniformly throughout the book, both as an insider term and as a theoretical category, but with little elaboration. Because of this, the reader cannot adequately judge the analytical value of the term. Thirdly, a similar confusion seems to be at play in Ogden's two different usages of the term "enchantment": it presents a worldview when talking about disenchanted mesmerists, but a distinct state of mind when dealing with enchanted somnambulists. Finally, the book makes little mention of the multiple statements by mesmerists that it was especially the healing aspect that attracted them to mesmerism—an aspect that itself is barely covered in the book. Together, these issues make it hard to accept the credulity thesis as it currently stands, but perhaps a more theoretically advanced view could have dispelled the same clouds of reasonable doubt that fog the previous point. Lastly, a more extensive look at the role of skeptics and their role within the history of mesmerism, as was promisingly started by Ogden in her discussion of William Stone (117–21), would have had the potential of putting the phenomenon in an even broader cultural perspective.

These points notwithstanding, Ogden has written a highly eloquent book providing new material and raising intriguing questions. The quality of the historical part alone would have been enough to merit the reading of the book, but the novel way of rethinking the aims of both mesmerists and somnambulists is definitely worthy of being considered carefully and discussed further.

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