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Chapter 1

Western Esotericism and the Orient in the First Theosophical Society

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Almost everybody knows that the Theosophical Society was founded in Helena P. Blavatsky's apartment in New York in 1875, but few people are aware of how little this original society resembled the international organization that began to operate from India in 1879.¹ My argument in this chapter is that Theosophy began as a specifically Western² esoteric current that became "entangled"³ with Indian religions only *after* Blavatsky and Olcott arrived in Bombay on February 16, 1879. Prior to that event, Theosophical understandings of India and its religious traditions were dominated by the deeply ethnocentric Orientalist imagination typical of nineteenth-century European scholarship and popular literature.⁴ This means that if we wish to "disentangle" the global history of Theosophy, we must first of all obtain a clear picture of what it looked like prior to 1879.

None of the above is meant to suggest that the arrival of Olcott and Blavatsky in Bombay caused them simply to move from a Western and merely "imaginary" vision of the Orient toward an "authentic" understanding of Indian religion.⁵ Not only did they bring their Orientalist perspectives with them to India, but perspectives and assumptions quite similar to their own were already present among colonial elites and educated Indians well before their arrival. As far as their own ideas are concerned, there is no doubt that in their sincere efforts to give a voice to Buddhism, the founders ended up promoting what *they* believed Buddhism should be all about—whether Buddhists agreed or not. As formulated by Stephen Prothero,

When it came to constructing his understanding of Buddhism, [. . .] Olcott relied not on the living example of Asian Buddhists but on the scholarly works of academic Orientalists, most of whom were committed Christians. This key decision to attend to the bookish Buddhism of Orientalists rather than the lived Buddhism of Buddhists tilted Olcott's imaginative construction of Buddhism in a decidedly Protestant direction.⁶

It has been noted that Blavatsky's and Olcott's Theosophy reflected "a never-before-seen degree of admiration of non-Western culture and religion,"⁷ and this is correct at least as far as Western Theosophists are concerned. However, what they found so admirable in India was largely what they had *already* been admiring before they ever arrived there. The "positive Orientalism" to which they adhered is a European invention with roots that reach far back in history;⁸ and while this perspective highlighted certain dimensions of "the Orient" as emblematic of a "universal" ancient mystical wisdom,⁹ such idealizations required the simultaneous suppression or marginalization of everything that did not fit the picture—notably the traditional *bête noire* of "idolatry."¹⁰

But Theosophy was more than just another example of colonialist "encompassment"¹¹ of Indian religion within a Western framework, for the lines of influence went in both directions. The Theosophical Society grew with stunning rapidity (as early as 1891, it had 258 branches on six continents¹²), and as more and more Indians joined its ranks, it was inevitable that they would begin to interpret Theosophy from *their* own perspectives. The result was a great variety of local variations and interpretations, all participating in a movement that may have been unified in theory, but was bound to become far more complex than anything Olcott or Blavatsky had in mind. Because of its great importance both from a historical and a theoretical perspective, I find it important to clarify my position on this point. In some of my earlier work, Theosophy is described as an "essentially Western movement" rooted in Western-esoteric rather than Eastern traditions;¹³ and more recently I wrote about the larger context of esotericism as "an inherently Western domain of research."¹⁴ These statements have received some criticism,¹⁵ as the formulations could seem to suggest a residual East/West essentialism and a refusal to acknowledge esotericism as a global reality. Nothing could be further from my intentions, so I have tried to sharpen my formulations and clarify my position in a recent publication.¹⁶ Interestingly, my critics seem to have

overlooked a much more problematic statement that I made in 1996: “To my knowledge, there is no evidence to support the [. . .] idea that modern theosophy eventually came to interpret esotericism, occultism or western science from perspectives that are distinctly oriental and have no precedent in the west.”¹⁷ *That* statement was certainly mistaken! Today I realize that there is plenty of evidence indeed, but one will have to look for it in the writings and activities of Theosophists with *non*-European/American cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds.¹⁸ It is in this regard that I expect the present volume will be able to break new ground and contribute to a truly global understanding of Theosophy.

Rather than framing the history of Theosophy in the simplistic terms of a confrontation between Western Orientalist “fantasies” and Indian “realities,” then, we should focus on the extremely complicated historical processes of imaginal construction and reconstruction that took place in a variety of specific local contexts and on all levels of the Theosophical hierarchy. Such a project should start at the very beginning and at the very place of origin, *before* the moment of “first contact” on Indian soil. In other words, we need to travel back to New York City in 1875.

The First Theosophical Society

In studying early Theosophical history, it is crucial to resist the temptation of reading earlier developments in the light of later ones. If we try to imagine for a moment that Blavatsky and Olcott had died tragically in 1878 and never embarked for India: how—if at all—would we then remember the “Theosophical Society” today? From surviving sources, we might discover that on the evening of September 7, 1875, about seventeen people¹⁹ gathered in the parlor at 46 Irving Place, the apartment of a recent immigrant from Russia, a certain Helena P. Blavatsky, where they established what some contemporary observers saw as “a school for sorcery” devoted to “the Practice of Witch-Craft.”²⁰ Those who knew Blavatsky at the time were generally impressed by her mysterious and charismatic personality, but she was not yet famous as an occultist or writer. Since her arrival in the United States two years earlier, she had been sending letters to popular newspapers and Spiritualist magazines;²¹ and her first real article on occultism, “A Few Questions to ‘HIRAF,’” had appeared in one of those journals just a few months before.²² With her powerful, passionate, and somehow authoritative style of writing, she had begun

to be noted in Spiritualist milieus, and the popular press was fascinated with her. Still, nobody could have predicted in September 1875 that she would soon produce a spectacular best seller and become the world's most famous "occultist"—let alone that she would spearhead an international revival of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Blavatsky's understanding of occultism at this time is evident from an important letter she wrote on February 16, 1875 to Professor Hiram Corson,²³ who had contacted her about an article she had written in the Spiritualist paper *Banner of Light*.²⁴ Blavatsky was still presenting herself as a Spiritualist at this time: she wrote that "for the sake of Spiritualism" she had left her home and "become a wanderer upon the face of the earth," and when she sailed from France to the United States, she did so "with feelings not unlike those of a Mohammadan approaching the birth-place of his prophet."²⁵ But once having arrived in the Promised Land, she was sorely disappointed by what she found, and was soon lashing out at fraudulent practices and the "deplorable lack of accord between American spiritualists."²⁶ Clearly she had something different in mind: in her letter to Corson (the second one after an initial letter dated February 9, 1875), she explained that Spiritualism should be understood as part of a much larger tradition, unknown to most Spiritualists. The passage is of such importance to our concerns in this chapter that it must be quoted here in full:

When I became a spiritualist, it was not through the agency of the ever-lying, cheating mediums, miserable instruments of the undeveloped Spirits of the lower Sphere, the ancient Hades. My belief is based on something older than the Rochester knockings, and springs out from the same source of information that was used by Raymond Lully, Picus della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Fludd, Henry More, et cetera, etc., all of whom have ever been searching for a system that should disclose to them the "deepest depths" of the Divine nature, and show them the real tie which binds all things together. I found at last, and many years ago, the cravings of my mind satisfied by this theosophy taught by the Angels and communicated by them that the protoplast might know it for the aid of the human destiny. The practical, however small knowledge of the Principle, Ain-Soph, or the Endless and the Boundless with its ten Sephiroths or Emanations, goes more towards opening

your eyes than all the hypothetical teachings of the leaders of Spiritualism, let them be American or European. In my eyes, Allan Kardec and Flammarion, Andrew Jackson Davis and Judge Edmonds, are but schoolboys just trying to spell their A B C and sorely blundering sometimes. The relation between the two is in just proportion what were in the ancient ages the book called *Sohar*, based on the perfect knowledge of the Kabbala handed down by oral tradition from David and Solomon to Simon ben Jochai, the first man who dared write it down, and the *Massorah*, a book based on outside, not direct tradition, and which never vouchsafed the truth of what it taught.²⁷

Note that Blavatsky already uses the term “theosophy” here, and clearly means it to refer to the classic traditions of *Western* esotericism or occult philosophy. Theosophy is supposed to have originated in the Kabbalah or, as formulated in her “HIRAF” article a few months later, “the primitive Oriental Cabala” that possessed all the “primitive secret powers of the ancient Chaldaeans.”²⁸ In using the word “Oriental” here, she was hardly thinking of India or the Far East: her reference was to standard nineteenth-century concepts of a universal kabbalah with *non*-Jewish origins that, according to some of the most influential authors available to her (from a legitimate academic such as Adolphe Franck to the French occultist Éliphas Lévi), had ultimately emerged from the religion of Zoroaster.²⁹ Such perceptions of Kabbalah as Zoroastrian or Chaldaean may sound bizarre to us today but were perfectly normal in 1875. They ultimately reflected the Platonic Orientalist narrative of an “Ancient Wisdom Tradition” that had been promoted by countless European intellectuals since the fifteenth century, and remained remarkably widespread in nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship.³⁰ Only in the early twentieth century did Gershom Scholem succeed in replacing these concepts of a universal kabbalah with Oriental origins by a proper understanding of kabbalah as a Jewish tradition.³¹

The Theosophical Microbe: George Henry Felt

That a journalist writing in 1875 could perceive the First Theosophical Society as “a school for sorcery” is not at all surprising, as will be seen. Discussions at Blavatsky’s weekly gatherings tended to move all over the place, touching upon such diverse topics as

[t]he phallic element in religions; the souls of flowers; recent wonders among the mediums; history; Italian character; the strangeness of travel; chemistry; poetry; Nature's duality; Romanism; Gravitation; the Carbonari; jugglery; Crook's new discoveries about the force of light; the literature of magic [. . .]³²

On the fateful evening of September 7, a military officer named George Henry Felt (1831–1906) gave a lecture about a book project of his. It was concerned with *The Kabbalah of the Egyptians*, which he interpreted as containing the lost “Canon of Proportion of the Greeks.” It is important to get the title right: this is what Felt's book (which was frequently announced but would never appear in print³³) was supposed to be titled; and when Olcott rendered it as “The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians,” without mentioning kabbalah, he was clearly just collapsing title and subtitle into one. The report of this evening by the Rev. J. H. Wiggins was in fact titled “The Cabala,” and it is perfectly clear from his description that the members of Felt's audience believed they were listening to a talk about *kabbalistic* mysteries. From the default perspective of a “universal kabbalah” referred to above, these mysteries were believed to hold the key for unlocking “the secrets of nature” already known to the ancient Egyptians (who, by the way, were claimed to have emigrated from Finland!), the ancient Greeks, the Hebrew scriptures, the “learned Rabbins,” and the teachings of Jesus. No mention of Brahmans or India.

After Felt's lecture, Blavatsky's personal physician, Seth Pancoast (who seems to have owned a valuable library of occult books³⁴ and was particularly interested in medical applications of the kabbalistic “science of light”³⁵), seems to have challenged Felt for discussing “the kabbalah” just a bit too safely from a theoretical perspective alone. He argued that “the ancient occultists” had not just been concerned with geometrical proportions, but had been practical alchemists who could “transmute the baser metals into gold” and “indefinitely prolong human life.” Moreover, they knew how to summon “spirits from the vasty deep” as well as “ward off and neutralize the power of surrounding ill-boding demons.”³⁶ From Wiggins's account, one gets the impression that Pancoast was deliberately and even aggressively trying to provoke Felt:

Could Mr. Felt do this? Did he fully understand the meaning of the alphabet, numerals, and other Cabalistic signs? If so, nature was subject to his will, and he could not be confined

by bolts and bars. A crystal was then shown to the Cabalist, whose meaning he could not then and there explain. To the questions these were HIS STRAIGHTFORWARD REPLIES: He could, with his chemical circle, call into sight hundreds of shadowy forms resembling the human, but he had seen no signs of intelligence in these apparitions [etc.].³⁷

It would seem that Felt took the bait. As regards the “bolts and bars,” he boasted that he knew how to escape from prison if he wanted; but more importantly, he proposed to give a series of further lectures (for payment), during which he would “exhibit the nature-spirits to us all.”³⁸ It was in response to these promises of invoking “elementals” that the idea was born “to form a Society for this kind of study.”³⁹ Henry J. Newton was therefore correct in describing Felt (in a later hostile account) as “the theosophical microbe, the germ from which was constructed that ‘crazy quilt’ called Theosophy.”⁴⁰

Felt did indeed give several further lectures, on September 18, 1875, and June 21, 1876. The first of these must have been promising enough to inspire great expectations in Olcott, as one can see from his Inaugural Address of November 1875:

Without claiming to be a theurgist, a mesmerist, or a Spiritualist, our Vice-President [= Felt] promises, by simple chemical appliances, to exhibit to us, as he has to others before, the races of beings which, invisible to our eyes, people the elements. Think for a moment of this astounding claim! Fancy the consequences of the practical demonstration of its truth, for which Mr. Felt is now preparing the requisite apparatus! [. . .] What will the Spiritualists say, when through the column of saturated vapor flit the dreadful shapes of beings whom, in their blindness, they have in a thousand cases revered and babbled to as the returning shades of their relatives and friends?⁴¹

These statements were an embarrassment to Olcott seventeen years later, when he admitted that these high expectations had been “a bit foolish.” Presumably in reference to Felt’s second lecture, on June 21, 1876, he now described the demonstration as “a complete and mortifying disappointment. Whatever he may have done by himself in that direction, he showed us nothing, not even the tip end of the tail of the tiniest

Nature-spirit. He left us to be mocked by the Spiritualist and every other class of sceptic.”⁴²

But was it really so simple? For his part, Felt claimed that he *had* been successful enough but had been forced to interrupt his demonstration because the “*illuminati* of the Society” (as he calls them) were spooked by the experience:

Certain members of lower degree were impressed with a feeling of dread, as though something awful were about to happen; most of the probationers were rendered uncomfortable or uneasy; some became hypercritical and abusive; several of the novitiates left the room; and Mme. Blavatsky, who had seen unpleasant effects follow somewhat similar phenomena in the East, requested me to turn the drawing and change the subject.⁴³

What was Felt’s manner of operation? According to a hostile newspaper article from November 10, 1895, based on statements by Henry J. Newton, he claimed that “the methods used in Egypt and India in connection with their mysteries [. . .] produce[d] the phenomena of so-called materialization by a combustion of aromatic gum and herbs”⁴⁴ This detail is significant for two reasons. First, similar references in the work of Emma Hardinge Britten (see below) suggest that occultists during the later 1870s were trying to reintroduce a kind of Neoplatonic theurgy, including its use of herbal fumigations to create an atmosphere thick with smoke in which spectral visions would appear.⁴⁵ This fits perfectly with Olcott’s reference to a “column of saturated vapor.” If we compare this information with Emma Hardinge Britten’s more detailed descriptions of occultist theurgy in *Ghost Land* (see below),⁴⁶ it seems clear that such rituals were perfectly capable of inspiring feelings of dread and gothic horror.

[. . .] the sight itself can be rendered more subtle, the nerves more acute, the spirit more alive and outward, and the element itself—the air, the space—may be made, by certain secrets of the higher chemistry, more palpable and clear. [. . .] Now, in space there are millions of beings, not literally spiritual, for they have all [. . .] certain forms of matter, though matter so delicate, air-drawn, and subtle that it is, as it were, but a film, a gossamer, that clothes the spirit. Hence the Rosicrucian’s [sic] lovely phantoms of sylph and gnomes [sic] [. . .] He who

would establish intercourse with these varying beings, resembles the traveller who would penetrate into unknown lands. [. . .] Because the very elixir that pours a more glorious life into the frame, so sharpens the senses that those larvae of the air become to thee audible and apparent.⁴⁷

When Bulwer-Lytton's protagonist, Glyndon, inhales the "delicious odor" that comes from the "ecstatic liquid" kept in crystal vessels in the study of the master adept Mejnour, he does indeed begin to see the shapes of elemental beings—although soon enough, his experiment gives way to an experience of gothic horror, with the appearance of the terrifying "dweller on the threshold."⁴⁸ These pages from the most influential occult novel of the nineteenth century explain why the early Theosophists would be so excited about the idea of invoking elementals through procedures that they saw as "kabbalistic" alchemy. If Felt did indeed use fumigations in some kind of "theurgical" ritual, as seems very likely, then one easily understands the feelings of fear and dread that appear to have overwhelmed the participants when it dawned on them that he might actually succeed.

No wonder then that contemporaries could see the first Theosophical Society as a "school for sorcery," concerned as it was with theurgic invocations of elementals and other spiritual beings (as an alternative to the typical Spiritualist séance). Blavatsky and her friends saw themselves as heirs of the ancient "kabbalistic" tradition,⁴⁹ represented not just by Jewish practitioners, but also by Egyptian Hermetists, Neoplatonic theurgists, alchemists, and famous "adepts" or magicians such as Ramon Llull, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, John Dee, or Robert Fludd. Just two weeks after the founding of the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky described how she saw it at that time:

[i]t will be composed of learned occultists and cabbalists, of *philosophes hermétiques* of the nineteenth century, and of passionate antiquaries and Egyptologists generally. We want to make an experimental comparison between Spiritualism and the magic of the ancients by following literally the instructions of the old Cabbalas, both Jewish and Egyptian.⁵⁰

Once again, the primary reference is to Egypt and the kabbalah, not to India, Hinduism, or Buddhism. It should be clear then how little the First Theosophical Society resembled the movement that would become famous

after 1878. Other leading Theosophists such as William Q. Judge likewise joined the Society not so much because of an interest in Buddhism or other Oriental religions, but “to investigate the same thing that Mr. Felt had investigated.”⁵¹ As the invocation of Elementals proved more problematic or frightening than first expected, they moved on to exploring other occult practices, notably astral travel.⁵²

The Other Woman: Emma Hardinge Britten

We have seen that the early Theosophists believed in a “kabbalah” with non-Jewish Oriental origins in Chaldaea and Egypt. As such, they were faithful heirs of nineteenth-century Orientalism and the Platonic Orientalist tradition in Western esotericism. How then did they look at India and its traditions? To explore this question, I will focus on the case of Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899).

As the only woman apart from Blavatsky, Britten was among the most active founding members of the Theosophical Society. Significantly, its preamble and bylaws were adopted and its first officers elected not in Blavatsky’s apartment, but in the reception rooms of Britten’s husband and their residence on 38th Street, New York, on October 16 and 30.⁵³ At this time, Britten was busy preparing two books that would both appear in 1876 under the titles *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land*.⁵⁴ Blavatsky, for her part, was struggling mightily with a manuscript of her own that seems to have carried the provisory title *A Skeleton Key to Mysterious Gates*.⁵⁵ But, as she did not have Britten’s long experience as an author and editor, she needed much help to produce a publishable version; and while it was certainly not in her character to show any signs of insecurity, she must have felt the pressure of the competition. It is important to realize that while Blavatsky had arrived in New York just two years earlier, Britten was already comfortably established as a celebrated speaker in the American Spiritualist milieu. A strong personality on top of her game, she had forceful opinions of her own and would hardly be inclined to play second fiddle to Blavatsky or anyone else. It is not hard to understand, then, that “the atmosphere was at times thick with tension”⁵⁶ between these two formidable women each working on her own mysterious manuscript about occultism. Because Britten would soon turn away from the Theosophical Society and become a vocal critic of Blavatsky and her “turn towards the East,” there has been a tendency to see her not as a Theosophist, but

as a Spiritualist and independent occultist. Understandable as this may be, such a view is anachronistic. In the early years of the Theosophical Society, from 1875 to 1876, Britten's perspective was perfectly typical of what "Theosophy" was supposed to be all about.

So who was Emma Hardinge Britten? We know that in 1823 she was born in England as Emma Floyd, but for many details about her life we have only her own testimony. This is unfortunate because, as noted by her biographer Mathiesen, she "consistently and deliberately obscured the record of her own early life."⁵⁷ For instance, she was a gifted musician and seems to have been a child prodigy—but should we believe that at the age of twelve she already had embarked on a public career as singer, concert pianist and organ player (not to mention her activities as a choral conductor and composer)?⁵⁸ Somewhat similar reservations are in order about the exact nature of her involvement in a mysterious "Orphic Circle," described by her as a secret society of magical practitioners that enlisted her as a child medium at about the same time (1836). Fourteen years later, in 1850, she claims to have renewed her acquaintance with one of its members, a mysterious "Chevalier Louis de B---," to whose significance we will return.

In 1854 Emma left England for Paris, where she worked as an actress. She now appeared on stage as "Mrs Hardinge," but it is doubtful whether she ever married the medical botanist and Mesmerist E. Hardinge or was even acquainted with him at all.⁵⁹ Be that as it may, in 1855 she (and her devoted mother) moved to New York, where Emma soon became involved in the Spiritualist movement. Having begun as a test medium, she found her true calling as an "inspired" lecturer who would address large audiences in a state of trance. Traveling widely at the invitation of Spiritualists all over the United States and England, she established a solid reputation as one of the most vocal and visible defenders of the Spiritualist cause.

From about 1858 on, her religious ideas began to change. She drifted away from Christianity to embrace a worldview grounded in the notion of an ancient and universal religion of Nature, an "astronomical religion" of Solar and phallic worship.⁶⁰ Emma's earliest statements to that effect were delivered in a state of trance and published in 1860 as *Six Lectures on Theology and Nature*.⁶¹ Her career as a prolific writer began at about the same time, with numerous articles in Spiritualist journals and a long series of books.⁶² Some of these were based on stenographed versions of her trance lectures; others were written under her own name: first that of Emma Hardinge and later (after her marriage to William G. P. Britten in 1870) that of Emma Hardinge Britten.

Britten was also active as a founder and editor of Spiritualist journals. Her first attempt, the short-lived *Western Star* of 1875, is most relevant to our present concerns. It carried a series of articles titled “‘Ghost Land’: or, Researches into the Mysteries of Spiritual Existence” by an author who concealed his identity behind the pseudonym “Austria,” as well as a series entitled “Amongst the Spirits: or, Glimpses of Spiritual Men, Women, and Things” by another Anonymous who signed as “Asmodeus.”⁶³ Whether for financial reasons or the Boston fire of 1875 (or both), the series was cut short; but it is here that we see the first beginnings of the two crucial books that Emma would publish four years later.

Mysteries of Authorship and the Orphic Circle

Art Magic was published in April 1876 as a limited edition of only 500 copies available only to subscribers.⁶⁴ Later that year, it was followed by *Ghost Land*, this time in a normal edition for the general public. Those readers who had read the original articles in *The Western Star* now learned that behind the pseudonyms “Austria” and “Asmodeus” were two members of the mysterious Orphic Circle. Britten insisted that *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land* were written not by herself, but by “Chevalier Louis de B---” (with some chapters based on materials written by his friend and fellow adept “John Cavendish Dudley”). She presented her own role as merely that of a modest editor and translator, but if we are to believe the Author’s Preface, she was much more than that. She is presented there as a selfless hero who courageously volunteers to act as a buffer between an extremely timid Chevalier de B--- and the uncomprehending outside world. With characteristic pathos, the Chevalier writes how he had been “shrinking with unconquerable repugnance from any encounter with those butchers of human character, self-styled ‘critics,’ whose chief delight is to exercise their carving-knives upon the bodies of slain reputations, without regard to qualification for the act of dissection,”⁶⁵ and had been “equally averse to entrusting the dangerous and difficult processes of magical art to an age wherein even the most sacred elements of religion and Spiritualism are so often prostituted to the arts of imposture, or mean traffic.”⁶⁶ In short, it was only because of Britten’s insistence and her willingness to take the heat on his behalf that he finally consented:

The reception which [the circular that announced *Art Magic*] met with, the unworthy jibes, sneers, and cruel insults which

have been leveled against the excellent lady who volunteered to stand between the author and his shrinking spirit, have caused him the deepest remorse for having placed her in such a position, and induced a frequent solicitation on his part that the publication of the book should be abandoned.⁶⁷

But did this mysterious Chevalier de B--- and his friend Dudley really exist? Robert Mathiesen believed he could identify the former as Ernest de Bunsen (1819–1903), son of the more famous historian of religions Christian Carl Josias von Bunsen (1791–1860);⁶⁸ but Marc Demarest has contested this identification with strong arguments, and I am inclined to agree with him.⁶⁹ For John Cavendish Dudley, we might perhaps have a slightly more promising candidate in the person of Alexander Lindsay, the 25th Earl of Crawford (1812–1889),⁷⁰ but the evidence remains circumstantial and speculative.

Regarding the Orphic Circle, it does seem to have existed. However, we should imagine it not as a formal organization, but rather as a loose-knit social network of occult practitioners with different personal agendas, active between the 1820s and 1850s.⁷¹ It seems to have emerged from a kind of mutual aid society for practicing astrologers that referred to itself as *The Mercurii* and took shape around John Varley senior (1778–1842), Robert Cross Smith (better known by his writer's pseudonym "Raphael," 1795–1832), Richard James Morrison (known as "Zadkiel," 1795–1874), and Thomas Oxley (1807–1837).⁷² Eventually its participants began to experiment with clairvoyants and scrying, and as new figures joined the network (notably Frederick Hockley [1808–1880], Edward Bulwer Lytton [1803–1873], Philip Henry Stanhope [1871–1855], and Richard F. Burton [1821–1890]⁷³), they began to think of themselves as "Rosicrucians." Various anonymous members of the Orphic Circle mentioned in *Ghost Land* can be plausibly linked to these historical personalities: hence "Mr. B." would be Burton, "Sir James M---" would be Morrison, "Lord L---" would be Bulwer Lytton, and "Sir Peter S---" would be Stanhope.

The logic by which scholars have been operating is that *if* these identifications are indeed correct, then it should be possible to identify Chevalier Louis de B--- and John Cavendish Dudley as existing beyond the pages of the book as well.⁷⁴ However, this logic is questionable. It seems significant that, although *Ghost Land* contains much more precise and detailed information about these central protagonists than about any other member of the network, they still have resisted identification much more successfully than those shadowy companions of which we are told

nothing but their initials. Based on the evidence presently at our disposal, it seems most likely that precisely Chevalier de B---, his Master Professor Felix von Marx, and his friend John Cavendish Dudley (with his daughter Blanche, see below) are fictional inventions by Emma Hardinge Britten, but that she placed them in a context of occultist networks and practices that has some basis in historical fact. I therefore agree with Marc Demarest that, in all likelihood, the true author of *Art Magic* is Emma Hardinge Britten herself,⁷⁵ and am inclined to believe that she wrote *Ghost Land* as well.⁷⁶ If this is so, it is of considerable importance for our concerns in this chapter. Whereas Chevalier Louis de B--- is claimed to have been born in Hindustan and to have spent a large part of his life there, we know for certain that Britten never visited India. If she is indeed the real author of *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land*, then these books are (exactly as one might expect) typical products of the mid-nineteenth century Orientalist imagination, illustrative of an imaginary Hindustan concocted from a limited number of Western literary sources.

The Contents of *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land*

It may be instructive to quote the title of the first volume in full:

Art Magic; Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism. A Treatise in Three Parts and Twenty-Three Sections: Descriptive of Art Magic, Spiritism, the Different Orders of Spirits in the Universe known to be related to, or in Communication with Man; together with Directions for Invoking, Controlling, and Discharging Spirits, and the Uses and Abuses, Dangers and Possibilities of Magical Art.⁷⁷

This title shows that “Spiritism” and “Magic” are seen as inseparable from “occultism” or even synonymous with it.⁷⁸ *Art Magic* begins by outlining some basic metaphysical and *naturphilosophical* principles grounded in the primacy of Spirit over Matter. Historically, it is claimed, human consciousness has gone through a long process of evolutionary progress on earth; but on the individual level, each human spirit incarnates in our material world just one single time, after which it progresses further in a possibly infinite series of higher spiritual realities. Reincarnation therefore is rejected in favor of a traditional doctrine of “ascendant metempsychosis.”⁷⁹

India is described as the cradle of human civilization, and the oldest religious records are the Vedas. The original religion that first developed among the “Hindoos” was an “astronomical religion” grounded in veneration of the powers of nature, and more specifically of the Sun and the forces of sexual generation as the sources of all life. The same type of religion developed in China, and from Asia it spread toward Egypt and Chaldaea. The belief in intermediary beings is universal in all these forms of ancient religion, and the great hierarchy of such entities ranges from the “sub-mundane” realms of Elemental beings connected to the natural world, the “mundane” realms of discarnate human spirits, and the “super-mundane” realms of planetary angels and an enormous variety of even higher entities. It is only with Judaism and especially Christianity that the universal astronomical religion of solar and sexual worship began to be rejected by the priestly elites, who replaced it with a dogmatic and intolerant faith that demonized large parts of the celestial realms and persecuted spiritualists as pagans, heretics, or witches. Similar inquisitorial attitudes are typical of scientific materialism in our own time, which seeks to ridicule the belief in spirits and is still persecuting its adherents. But the future belongs to Spiritualism: as science will eventually be forced to accept the irrefutable evidence for spiritual manifestations, the ancient philosophy of Occultism will make its comeback as the most logical scientific framework for understanding the interrelation between spirit and matter.

Ghost Land has a shorter subtitle: *Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism. Illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches*. Significantly, it is presented as published “By the Editor.” This detail is most plausibly an attempt at correcting a previous slip of attention: *Art Magic* had been presented as published “by the Author,” which, according to Britten’s official story, was not her but Chevalier Louis de B---. Be that as it may, in the Preface to *Ghost Land*, its author insists on the “strict veracity”⁸⁰ of his account and admits to a “special dislike to tales of fiction.”⁸¹ The book consists of two parts, one situated in Europe and the other in India.

In Part One we read how, at the age of twelve, Louis meets a professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin, a certain Felix von Marx, who introduces him into a secret society of Mesmerist practitioners. Under von Marx’s tutelage, Louis embarks on an extremely successful career as a clairvoyant medium adept at astral travel. Interestingly, the members of this “Berlin Brotherhood” are described as dogmatic scientific materialists who strictly reject the idea of immortality: Spiritualist manifestations therefore cannot be attributed to the souls of deceased human beings but are caused

by non-human Elemental or Planetary beings. The confrontation between this quasi-materialist type of occultism and its Spiritualist alternative runs like a red thread through the narrative of *Ghost Land*.

As Louis develops into a virtuoso clairvoyant, the power of magnetic rapport eventually causes his own personality to be overwhelmed and almost obliterated by that of von Marx, who completes the process of “mental obsession” at the moment of his death, when he magically transfers his own life force to his pupil. Von Marx himself tries to present this as an ultimate sacrifice in which he gives up his life so that Louis may inherit his powers, but in fact it appears to be a perfectly selfish act: convinced as he is that there is no personal immortality, von Marx tries to prolong his own life by “taking over” the life of his pupil.⁸² Notwithstanding, Louis is so shattered by his master’s death that he withdraws deep into the forest, where he tries to starve himself to death. His spectacular dying visions of the invisible world and the splendor of the spiritual hierarchies are a literary highlight of the novel. Meanwhile, the spirit of von Marx appears in a séance of the Orphic Circle, telling its members to go find Louis and save his life. They manage to bring him back from the brink of death, but he no longer seems to be himself. In yet another spectacular magical séance, the spiritual forces of light succeed with great effort to cure Louis from what turns out to be his occult “obsession” by the spirit of von Marx (who after his death appears to have fallen victim to sinister sub-human Elementals).

The second part of *Ghost Land* is situated in Hindustan. Having returned to his normal state, Louis had moved to India, where for twenty years he enjoyed a successful political and military career. It is in this part of the novel that we encounter the Orientalist imagination in full swing. Louis joins a mysterious occult Brotherhood that meets at Ellora, “in the gloomy subterranean crypts of a vast range of ancient ruins, where the spirit of a grand, antique faith pervaded every stone and hallowed the scenes which were once consecrated to the loftiest and most exalted inspiration.”⁸³ Wandering “beneath the shadows of the grim idols, the darksome caverns, the mighty banyan groves and memory-haunted forests,”⁸⁴ he meets an Indian initiate, Chundra ud Deen, who brings him to a large subterranean temple

sculptured with the emblems of Egyptian and Chaldaic worship, interspersed with sentences emblazoned in gold, in Arabic, Sanskrit, and other Oriental languages. [. . .] The walls [. . .]

were thickly adorned with gigantic images of the Hindoo and Egyptian gods, surmounted by a border of gorgeous bas reliefs, some of which represented ancient Chaldaic tablets; others were engraved with planispheres, astrological charts, and scenes in Babylonish, Assyrian, and Chaldaic history.⁸⁵

Surrounded by masked initiates, he is granted an ecstatic vision of the spiritual universe. Like several similar visionary experiences, its phenomenology is so evidently psychedelic that one cannot help wondering about the numerous references to narcotics⁸⁶ that are sprinkled through both *Art Magic* and *Ghost Land*:

These sparkling worlds swam, danced, sported, floated upwards and darted downwards, with all the erratic mobility of zigzag lightning. Could they be really living, sentient beings—glorious organisms not moved upon, but breathing, burning, rejoicing lives, acting in the unimitable procedures of fixed law? [. . .] Could they be all living organisms, and the immensity of the universe be filled, not with billions of manufactured automata, but with legions of living creatures, rushing through the orbits of illimitable space in the joy and glory of life everlasting? Could our own burning sun and its shining family of planetary orbs be all creatures of parts and passions, organs and susceptibilities, with a framework of rocky ribs and mountain bones and sinews; veins and arteries coursed by the fluid-life of oceans and rivers; heaving lungs aerated by the breath of winds and atmospheres; electric life evolved from the galvanic actions of metallic lodes threading their way like a gigantic nervous system through every globe [. . .] and one vast collective soul in the aggregated mass of soul atoms that maintain a parasitical life upon the surface of every planet?⁸⁷

Part Two of *Ghost Land* moves toward its dramatic climax with the arrival in India of John Cavendish Dudley's angelic daughter Blanche and Louis's confrontation with a pair of black magicians, Helene Laval and her brother Paul Perrault. Helene is in love with Louis and her brother with Blanche. Both are using powerful magnetic techniques and dark Voodoo rituals to dominate and control the objects of their obsession, and it is only with great difficulty that Louis (assisted by his Indian brethren from

the Ellora Brotherhood) succeeds in diverting their occult attacks. Louis ends up marrying Blanche, a typical example of the Victorian “angel in the house”; and as always in such narratives,⁸⁸ the price of love consists of the loss of his magical powers. But the story ends badly. After a period of marital bliss, the pure and innocent Blanche falls victim to yet another occult attack from Helene Laval and her brother. Louis fails to save her this time, and she dies in his arms. The only compensation is that he is now free to return to his study of the occult and continue exploring the mysteries of after-death survival.

This is where the novel ends. However, in 1892, Britten tried to continue it in separate installments published in her journal *The Unseen Universe*.⁸⁹ This series was never finished and is of no great interest to our present concerns, as it basically describes how Louis returns to the United States, where he becomes involved in Spiritualism.

India in the Early Theosophical Imagination

Early on in *Art Magic*, we are told about a child medium of twelve years old (later identified as Sonoma⁹⁰), the niece of a “Noble Hindoo” from Malabar. Merely as a result of the medium falling asleep with her head on a tripod, sheets of paper lying on that tripod are filled by invisible hands with writing in ancient Sanskrit.⁹¹ Four volumes of text have already been received in this manner, and they describe how “souls spring up like blossoms . . . in the Paradises of purity and love,”⁹² which then descend into the world of matter to embark on a pilgrimage, first on “many earths” before the present one, until they become human beings on this earth. The doctrine of transmigration is based on an incorrect interpretation of this belief, for

it is a sin against divine truth to believe that the exalted soul that has once reached the dignity and upright stature of manhood should, or could, retrograde into the bodies of creeping things, or crouching animals—Not so, not so!⁹³

So what we have here is a Hindu child medium transmitting texts in ancient Sanskrit to refute reincarnation and preach a doctrine of spiritual progress on broadly Swedenborgian foundations, quite compatible with the teachings of a Spiritualist theologian such as Andrew Jackson Davis

or the French Swedenborgian Alphonse-Louis Cahagnet (a major influence on Britten). This very same passage was quoted by Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*⁹⁴ and may have its origin in a so far undiscovered story in the popular periodical literature.⁹⁵ That we have reason to doubt its credibility would be an obvious understatement.

Britten claimed that Louis de B---'s original manuscripts were full of footnotes that she did not care to reproduce in her published version. However, Marc Demarest has identified many of the tacit references in his annotated edition of *Art Magic* (2011). Most relevant here are the very lengthy descriptions of "Fakeer miracles" in Chapter XI and its supplement section devoted to India.⁹⁶ Its purpose is to demonstrate that Fakirs have such perfect control over the *ākāśa* (interpreted as the universal magnetic life force) that they can perform spectacular feats such as ripping open their abdomens with their own hands and curing the wound again. The reader is presented with lengthy and gruesome accounts, many of which are clearly (and even explicitly) based on well-known traveler's descriptions, notably the missionary's M. Régis Évariste Huc's *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine* (1850, English translation 1851), and the Princess de Belgiojosa's travel memoirs, *Asie mineure et Syrie* (1858). Emma Hardinge Britten had lived in Paris and must have been able to read some French, but we need not assume that she had seen the originals: in fact, the relevant passages from these and similar sources were quoted at length in articles about Indian miracles in contemporary spiritual magazines, notably (in this case), a contribution to Jason Burn's magazine *Human Nature* (1873)⁹⁷ and an article by William Howitt in *The Spiritual Magazine* (July 1868)⁹⁸ that was based in turn on a piece by Z. J. Piérart published one month earlier in his French *Revue Spiritualiste*.

We find a similar pattern for the other descriptions of Oriental religion in *Art Magic*: typically, they can be traced without too much trouble to a limited number of contemporary publications. Among the more important ones are Thomas Maurice's three-volume *Indian Antiquities* (1806), Lydia Maria Child's three-volume *Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855), William Howitt's two-volume *History of the Supernatural* (1863), Joseph Ennemoser's *History of Magic* (1844; English translation by William Howitt 1854), Hargrave Jennings's *Indian Religions* (1858) and *The Rosicrucians* (1870), and Samuel Johnson's *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* (1872). All of this provides further confirmation for Joscelyn Godwin's thesis that the new occultism of the 1870s was grounded in an anti-Christian Enlightenment mythography that focused on Solar

and phallic worship and traced the origins of religion to India. The only point I would add is that an important part of this background goes back to *German* Romantic sources, to which Godwin was giving somewhat less attention. The relation between German Orientalism and Romantic Mesmerism, and the transmission of both to French and English contexts, requires more attention than it has so far received.

Whereas *Art Magic* is presented as a semi-scholarly overview full of quotations from unidentified (but partly identifiable) sources, the backgrounds to *Ghost Land* are much more difficult to determine. However, there is nothing in the book that suggests any firsthand acquaintance with Indian practices or traditions. The mysterious descriptions of the temples and caves of Ellora clearly reflect the Romantic “sublime” as pictured in a famous series of paintings by Thomas Daniell after James Wales, published in 1803,⁹⁹ and later publications such as John B. Seely’s *The Wonders of Elora* (1824). And, of course, that these Indian temples are supposed to be full of “Egyptian,” “Chaldaic,” “Assyrian,” “Babylonian,” and “Arabic” script and symbolism (see the quotation above) really says it all. These temples never existed in India: their true location was in the occultist imagination.

Conclusion

We have seen that the Theosophical Society emerged as an organization devoted to occult practices that were generally seen as “kabbalistic.” This occultist kabbalah was not considered to be a Jewish tradition but, rather, a universal religious philosophy that was believed to have existed since ancient times and had ultimately come from “the East.” This historical vision was based on a standard “ancient wisdom narrative” that had been popular among Western intellectuals and the wider public since the fifteenth century and was adopted in its broadest outlines by nineteenth century Orientalist scholarship. Early Theosophists hardly cared to differentiate between Indian, Egyptian, Persian, Zoroastrian, and Chaldaean origins: what mattered to them was the universality and superiority of this ancient “oriental kabbalah.” While India was beginning to be given a slightly privileged status in Emma Hardinge Britten’s work, this was still the India of the popular Orientalist imagination, including its roots in a much older Platonic Orientalist tradition. This kabbalistic chapter in the history of Theosophy did not end when Blavatsky and Olcott boarded a steamship for India on December 17, 1878. However, their arrival in Bombay on

February 16, 1879, did open a new chapter in a different book: that of a mutual fertilization of Indian religions and Western esotericism that would finally transform both almost beyond recognition.

Notes

1. Michael Gomes, *The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* (Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987); John Patrick Deveney, "Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society," *Theosophical History Occasional Papers* 6 (1997); James Santucci, "Foreword," *Theosophical History Occasional Papers* 6 (1997): i–iii; Robert Mathiesen, "The Unseen Worlds of Emma Hardinge Britten: Some Chapters in the History of Western Occultism," *Theosophical History Occasional Papers* 9 (2001): 32–33; Marc Demarest, "A School for Sorcery: New Light on the First Theosophical Society," *Theosophical History* 15, no. 1 (2011); John Patrick Deveney, "The Two Theosophical Societies: Prolonged Life, Conditional Immortality and the Individualized Immortal Monad," in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016). An important new volume appeared when the present chapter was already in press: *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*, ed. Tim Rudbøg and Erik Reenberg Sand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

2. On the problematics of distinguishing between "Western" and "Eastern" in this context, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3 (2015). I understand "Western" from a perspective of cultural history rather than in a strictly geographical sense, recognizing that important parts of this history have unfolded in areas that are nowadays seen as belonging to the Middle East and Northern Africa. As a manifestation of "Western esotericism" in this sense, modern Theosophy traveled to India after 1878, where its system of beliefs began to change under the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism. It is impossible to establish criteria for determining at what point this process caused Theosophy to be no longer "Western" but "Eastern" (not to mention "Universal") without reverting to essentialist notions of "East" and "West" or religionist notions of a generic supra-historical "esotericism." Opinions in favor or against the adjective "Western" are therefore just that: opinions, or preferences, based upon specific scholarly commitments or agendas. My own preference is to maintain the adjective "Western" as referring to the *cultural provenance* (rather than the geographical location) of specific worldviews or traditions.

3. On the fashionable notion of "entangled genealogies" (*verflochtene Genealogien*) in postcolonial discourse, see e.g. Shalini Randeria and Regina Römheld, "Das postkoloniale Europa: Verflochtene Genealogien der Gegenwart—

Einleitung zur erweiterten Neuauflage (2013),” in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus*, ed. Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Römhild (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013); Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, “Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten—Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt,” in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus*, ed. Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Römhild (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013). In my opinion, there is no such thing as *non*-entangled history, and hence the adjective is strictly superfluous; in other words, the recipe for overcoming Eurocentric perspectives does not consist of some new historical method but of radical and consistent historicization. Nevertheless, the language of entangling/disentangling remains useful for describing the intellectual historian’s attempt at unraveling the complex tapestry of ideas by tracing its various threads backward in time. Needless to add, each thread is in turn the product of prior processes of entanglement, and so on ad infinitum.

4. For a useful historical overview of this shift, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’: Western Esotericism and Eastern Religion in ‘Theosophy,’” *Theosophical History* 13, no. 3 (2007).

5. On the problematics of “authenticity” in analyzing the relation between Theosophy and Indian religions, see e.g. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55–82, esp. 56–57.

6. Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 177–78. Cf. van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 75.

7. Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 23.

8. For these deeper historical roots, see the discussion of “Platonic Orientalism” in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. chapter 1; and cf. John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Essentially, the notion of Platonic Orientalism stands for the extremely widespread idea, rooted in Hellenistic antiquity and promoted by many of the early Church fathers, that Platonism was a spiritual wisdom tradition ultimately derived from Oriental (Egyptian, Persian, Hebrew, even Indian) origins rather than just a rational philosophy founded by Plato in Greece. Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism should be seen in this much larger historical perspective.

9. On this notion of the “mystical east” see e.g. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), esp. chapters 6 and 7.

10. See for instance Blavatsky’s letter to Mme C. R. Corson a few months after the ill-fated “unification” of the Theosophical Society with the Arya Samaj:

“we go dead against *idolatry* in every shape and colour, whether in the heathen or Christian religions” (Eugene Rollin Corson, ed., *Some Unpublished Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, with an Introduction and Commentary* [London: Rider & Co, 1929], 197). In this regard, the Arya Samaj (founded by Dayananda Saraswati in 1875) simply continued the perspective of the older movement of the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Rammohun Roy in 1828 (on these movements and their relevance to Theosophy, see e.g. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 307–31; van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 55–82).

11. On the three “grammars” basic to the formation of identity/alterity (“orientalization,” “segmentation,” “encompassment”), see Gerd Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach,” in *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, ed. Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (New York: Berghahn, 2004).

12. Prothero, *White Buddhist*, 131.

13. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 455.

14. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

15. E.g., Granholm, “Locating the West,” 30; Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (2014): 403.

16. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism.” I would still disagree with Bergunder’s claim that the notion of Western esotericism “leaves no room for a global history understanding of esotericism” (Bergunder, “Experiments,” 403, 420). On the contrary, I see Bergunder’s own work as an excellent illustration of the approach I advocate: after all, he shows convincingly how Gandhi read “Hinduism” originally through the Western esoteric or occultist prism of Blavatsky’s *Key to Theosophy*, which led him to construct a supposedly “authentic” Indian spirituality that would eventually be promoted worldwide. Of course, Blavatsky’s *Key* was already the outcome of an earlier process of “entanglement” (see note 3, above) between the original Western occultist framework prior to 1878 and new influences derived from Blavatsky’s Indian experience. In my opinion, we are dealing here with a typical case of “encompassment” (see note 11), where Indian materials are appropriated and incorporated in an already existing framework of assumptions that are themselves typical of nineteenth-century Western (European/American) culture.

17. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 455.

18. Important steps into that direction have been taken by Karl Baier: see especially Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, vol. 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 315–76; and idem,

“Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the Cakras in Early Theosophy,” in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016).

19. Seventeen according to an early report: Anonymous, “A Theosophical Society,” *The Spiritual Scientist* 3, no. 2 (September 16, 1875); but see also Anonymous [= Rev. J. H. Wiggin], “The Cabala,” *The Liberal Christian* 30, no. 87 (September 25, 1875): 1 (I am grateful to John Patrick Deveney for his scan from this extremely rare journal); the article was reprinted in Michael Gomes, “Rev. Wiggin’s Review of George Henry Felt’s 1875 Lecture on the Cabala,” *The Canadian Theosophist* 71, no. 3 (1990). Most participants are identified in Gomes, *Dawning*, 85; and for longer personal descriptions, see Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society, 1875–1937* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938), 110–15. If one attempts to establish the exact number, one runs into some problems, for instance with the need to add the wife of “Signor Bruzzesi” (see Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: The True Story of the Theosophical Society, 1875–78* (Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1895]), 115).

20. Anonymous, “Latter-Day Magic,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, November 13, 1875. This article was discovered by Marc Demarest and reprinted in Demarest, “School for Sorcery,” 15–19. The version in *The Daily Inter Ocean* seems to be a reprint of an earlier article published in the New York *Mercury* or its sister publication, the *Sunday Mercury*, but efforts to find that original have so far been unsuccessful (*ibid.*, 19).

21. Gomes, *Dawning*, 36–61.

22. Helena P. Blavatsky, “A Few Questions to ‘HIRAF,’ Author of the Article ‘Rosicrucianism,’” *Spiritual Scientist* 2, no. 19 (July 15, 1875) and no. 20 (July 22, 1875). Blavatsky was responding to an article written, apparently as a hoax, by her lawyer William M. Ivins and his friends F. W. Hinrichs, J. C. Robinson, C. F. Adams and W. E. S. Fales under the acronym “HIRAF”: see HIRAF, “Rosicrucianism,” *Spiritual Scientist* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1875) and no. 18 (July 8, 1875). See also the editorial introduction anonymously written by Olcott: “Rosicrucianism,” *Spiritual Scientist* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1875). For background to this exchange and discussion, see Gomes, *Dawning*, 76–77; Boris de Zirkoff, “The ‘Hiraf’ Club and its Historical Background,” in *Collected Writings* by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House/The Theosophical Press, 1966); Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 158–60.

23. Corson, *Some Unpublished Letters*, 127–29; see also Daniel H. Caldwell, *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky: Insights into the Life of a Modern Sphinx* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2000), 63–66. Hiram Corson (1828–1911) was a professor at Cornell University and is still remembered as a significant scholar of

English literature today. He had become a convinced Spiritualist after the death of his daughter in 1874.

24. Helena P. Blavatsky, “The Philadelphia ‘Fiasco,’ or Who Is Who?,” *Banner of Light* 36, no. 18 (January 30, 1875).

25. Letter by Blavatsky, as quoted in Anonymous, “Mme Blavatsky: Her Experience, Her Opinion of American Spiritualism and American Society,” *Spiritual Scientist* 1, no. 13 (December 3, 1874): 149. See also Blavatsky, “Philadelphia ‘Fiasco,’” 2 (“our belief,” “our cause,” “my rights [. . .] as a widely known Spiritualist” etc.).

26. Blavatsky, “Philadelphia ‘Fiasco,’” 2.

27. H. P. Blavatsky, undated Letter to Hiram Corson (postmarked February 16, 1875), in Corson, *Some Unpublished Letters*, 128–29.

28. Blavatsky, “A Few Questions to ‘HIRAF,’” 104, 107.

29. On Franck’s and Lévi’s understandings of “kabbalah,” see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah: Adolphe Franck and Éliphas Lévi,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010). A deeper and more complex analysis of Lévi’s “kabbalah” is now available in Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

30. See, notably, Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), xxiv, xxvii–xxix, 1–6. While Marchand still broadly relies on Frances Yates’s grand narrative of “the Hermetic Tradition,” her argument strongly confirms my more recent repositioning of Renaissance Hermeticism within the wider context of “Platonic Orientalism” (see note 8). Most relevant to our present concerns is not the “Hermetic” interpretation of Platonic Orientalism, but a common nineteenth-century conflation of the competing “Mosaic” interpretation (better known as “Christian kabbalah”) and the “Zoroastrian” interpretation highlighted since Gemistos Plethon and Marsilio Ficino (see Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*, 2 vols. [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998]).

31. It is significant that even as late as 1977, Scholem still found it necessary to juxtapose his perspective against common notions of a “universal kabbalah” in his large Eranos lecture about Alchemy and Kabbalah: Gershom Scholem, “Alchemie und Kabbala,” in *Judaica* 4, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984 [1977]), 19–20 (see English translation and discussion in Hanegraaff, “Beginnings,” 107–10).

32. Anonymous [= Rev. J. H. Wiggin], “Rosicrucianism in New York” [thanks again to John Patrick Deveney for his scan of this article from a journal that is impossible to find through regular channels]. The passage is quoted in Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 115.

33. For all known details about Felt and what happened to his book project, see the meticulous but still unpublished research by Marc Demarest and the “Felt Working Group,” available online as a progress report (dated November 3, 2011) on www.ehbritten.org; Marc Demarest, “The Fate of George Henry Felt’s The Kabbalah of the Egyptians” (unpublished paper presented at the biannual Conferences of the Association for the Study of Esotericism, 2012); John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1997); idem, “Astral Projection,” 58–60.

34. Ransom, *Short History*, 114.

35. Seth Pancoast, *The Kabbala: or the True Science of Light; an Introduction to the Philosophy and Theosophy of the Ancient Sages, Together with a Chapter on Light in the Vegetable Kingdom* (Philadelphia: J.M. Stoddard, 1877).

36. Anonymous [Wiggin], “The Cabala,” 1.

37. Ibid., 1/4. Felt also suggested that, through his kabbalistic researches, he had been able to perfect the military signal rockets for which he had gained a patent (on Felt as an inventor, see James Santucci, “George Henry Felt: The Life Unknown,” *Theosophical History* 6, no. 7 [1997]).

38. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 117.

39. Ibid., 118 (cf. D. D. Home, *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*, 2nd ed. (London: Virtue & Co, 1878), 248: “The tree which Mr. Felt planted and African magicians are to water”). Olcott claimed that it was he who came up with the original idea for a Society, and was appointed as chairman to organize the initial meetings, but note the conflicting claim by Henry J. Newton twenty years later: “At the close of his [Felt’s] lecture I moved a committee be appointed to organize and investigate the phenomena which he alleged he was able to accomplish. This committee was appointed. I was made chairman and called a meeting at my house where we continued to meet weekly until a society was formed and named ‘The Theosophical Society of New York’” (Henry J. Newton, “Denied by Mr. Newton: He Characterizes Some of the Statements Made by George H. Felt as False,” *The New York Herald*, December 15, 1895, 9).

40. Newton, “Denied,” 9.

41. Hiram Corson, “The Theosophical Society and Its President’s Inaugural Address,” *Banner of Light* 38, no. 15 (January 8, 1876): 2; cf. Home, *Lights and Shadows*, 245–46. Blavatsky too seems to have been impressed: “And Mr. Felt *has done it* in the presence of nine persons in all” (handwritten comment to Corson, *ibid.*: see Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 294).

42. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 138 (and cf. 126).

43. Felt, draft of a letter to the editor of *The Spiritualist* (London), signed June 19, 1878, as reprinted in Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves 1875–78*, 131. The description seems compatible with Olcott’s account of Felt’s September 18 lecture (*ibid.*, 126); but if it refers to the lecture on June 21, 1876, the nature of its “success” might help explain why the Theosophical Society decided to turn toward

another and less practical direction (cf. Deveney, *Paschal Beverley Randolph*, 290, 293).

44. Anonymous, "Theosophy's Origin Exposed: The Herald Tells the Secrets of Its Birth in This City and the Jugglers Behind It [etc.]," *The New York Herald*, November 10, 1895. In his response, Felt states that Newton had omitted "one very important factor of the recipe—viz. rum, either Santa Cruz or New England" (Georg Henry Felt, "Mr. Felt's Disclaimer: He Takes Issue with Henry J. Newton's Statements About Theosophy," *The New York Herald*, December 1, 1895). While this may well have been an attempt at irony, as suggested by Deveney, it is noteworthy that an article in the Spiritualist *Banner of Light* of 1859 claimed that "In some yet unexplained manner we know that tobacco, rum, opium, hashish and other substances of like nature, produce an effect upon the spirit of man that opens the perceptions to the spirit world" (A. B. Child, "Hashish," *Banner of Light* 4, no. 17 [January 22, 1859]: 3). See also Newton, "Denied," 9.

45. Cf. Buddha, "Exotic Spirituality," *Spiritual Scientist* 4, no. 18 (July 6, 1876) (with long quotations from Jung Stilling and Eckartshausen). Buddha, of California, "What Is Occultism?" *Spiritual Scientist* 4, no. 10 (May 11, 1876). "Buddha" is a pseudonym of Dr. Augustus W. Baylis, an Englishman who had lived in Palermo and Ceylon (where he started the *Kandy Herald*) and finally settled in California. He began to contribute to the *Spiritual Scientist* in September 1875 and explicitly disavowed being a Rosicrucian, Brother of Luxor, or member of any other secret occult society, Eastern or Western (See Buddha, "Occult Philosophy," *Spiritual Scientist* 3, no. 1 [September 9, 1875]: 8). Under the additional pseudonym of "Don Fulano," he also contributed a long series to the *Spiritual Scientist* all through 1876 on various aspects of Buddhism, such as reincarnation (which he abhorred) and morality. Under his own name and as "Don Fulano" and "Medicus," he made regular contributions to the San Francisco Spiritualist journal *Common Sense* as well. Blavatsky called him "a marvellously gifted man" (Helena P. Blavatsky, "The Power to Heal," *The Theosophist* 4, no. 7 [April 1883]) (Deveney, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

46. Anonymous, *Ghost Land; or Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism. Illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches, in Two Parts* (Boston: Published for the Editor, 1876), 93–105, 247–61, 285–89.

47. Anonymous [= Edward Bulwer Lytton], *Zanoni*, vol. II (London: Saunders & Otley, 1842), 10–11. Such entheogenic occultism has clear and explicit precedents, especially in the writings of Alphonse-Louis Cahagnet (Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The First Psychonaut? Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet's Experiments with Narcotics," *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 7, no. 2 [2016]).

48. *Zanoni*, vol. II, 18–27.

49. On Blavatsky and kabbalah, cf. Julie Chajes, "Construction through Appropriation: Kabbalah in Blavatsky's Early Works," in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016).

50. Vsevolod Sergyeevich Solovyoff, *Modern Priestess of Isis* (London: Longman, Green & Co, 1895), 256–57; cf. Joscelyn Godwin, “The Hidden Hand, Part III: The Parting of East and West,” *Theosophical History* 3, no. 4 (1990): 108.

51. John Patrick Deveney, “An 1876 Lecture by W.Q. Judge on His Magical Progress in the Theosophical Society,” *Theosophical History* 9, no. 3 (2003): 13, referring to William Q. Judge, “Giebt es eine Magie und Zauberer?,” *Psychische Studien* 4, no. 4 (1877): 194 (“Ich verband mich mit der Gesellschaft zu dem Zwecke, dasselbe zu erforschen, was Mr. Felt erforscht hatte”).

52. See the fundamental study by Deveney, “Astral Projection.”

53. Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 32; cf. Emma Hardinge Britten, “The Theosophical Society: Its Origin and Founders,” *The Two Worlds* 4, no. 187 (1891): 359. See also Robert Mathiesen, “Britten, Emma (Floyd) Hardinge,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

54. For their importance as foundational texts of the new occultist movement, see Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 302–6. The two other key texts were Lady Caithness’s *Old Truths in a New Light* (likewise 1876) and, of course, Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877).

55. Solovyoff, *Modern Priestess of Isis*, 257.

56. Mathiesen, “Unseen World,” 33.

57. *Ibid.*, 1. However, see now Marc Demarest’s invaluable blog *Chasing Down Emma* (ehbritten.blogspot.com), devoted to “resolving the Contradictions of, and filling in the Gaps in the Life, Work and World of Emma Hardinge Britten.”

58. Source references for these claims in Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 3 note 17.

59. Marc Demarest, “Revising Mathiesen: Updating Richard Mathiesen’s Work on Emma Hardinge Britten” (revision 3, 2009, unpublished manuscript available at www.ehbritten.org) responding to Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 4–10.

60. On the centrality of this worldview to the occultist movement, see the classic study by Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, esp. 200–3.

61. Emma Hardinge, *Six Lectures on Theology and Nature, together with the Outline of a Plan for a Humane Enterprise and an Autobiographical Introduction* (Chicago: for the author, 1860). Note that “the superb dynasties of India and Egypt” are always mentioned together here, and are described not as the origin but the inheritors of “the astronomical systems of the ancients” (*ibid.*, 24–25, 105, 114, 123, 126–27).

62. For a chronological bibliography, see Appendix B in Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 75–77.

63. Austria, “‘Ghost Land,’ or, Researches into the Mysteries of Spiritual Existence,” *The Western Star* 1, nos. 1–5 (July–November 1872); Asmodeus,

“Amongst the Spirits; or, Glimpses of Spiritual Men, Women, and Things,” *The Western Star* 1, nos. 2–6 (August–December 1872).

64. On the publishing history, see Marc Demarest, “Introduction to the Annotated Edition,” in *Art Magic* by Emma Hardinge Britten, ed. and annot. Marc Demarest (Forest Grove, OR: Typhon Press, 2011), iii–lvi, esp. v–xv.

65. Anonymous, *Art Magic; Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism. A Treatise in Three Parts and Twenty-Three Sections: Descriptive of Art Magic, Spiritism, the Different Orders of Spirits in the Universe Known to Be Related to, or in Communication with Man; Together with Directions for Invoking, Controlling, and Discharging Spirits, and the Uses and Abuses, Dangers and Possibilities of Magical Art* (New York: Published by the Author, 1876), 8 (Dem 5). All page references will be to both the first edition of 1876 and Marc Demarest’s new annotated edition (who, because he considers the authorship question as settled, presents *Art Magic* as a book by Emma Hardinge Britten).

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 8–9 (Dem 5). On these hostilities, cf. Britten, “Theosophical Society,” 346.

68. Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 25–31.

69. Demarest, “Revising Mathiesen”; and *idem*, “Introduction,” xl–xlii. Like Demarest, I am not impressed by the alleged similarity (Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 28–29) between *Art Magic* and de Bunsen’s published works.

70. Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 31–32.

71. Marc Demarest, “Hypotheses on the Orphic Circle” (revision 5, June 2011, www.ehbritten.org); and see also Demarest’s two fascinating “Orphic Circle Social Network Diagrams” at www.ehbritten.org. Cf. Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 205–12; Mathiesen, “Unseen Worlds,” 22–25.

72. On these personalities, see Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 136–40 (Varley), 143–47 (Smith), 175–78 (Morrison); Ellic Howe, *Astrology: A Recent History Including the Untold Story of Its Role in World War II* (New York: Walker and Company, 1967), 28–32 (Smith), 33–47 *passim*, 49–50 (Oxley).

73. On Hockley, see John Hamill, *The Rosicrucian Seer: The Magical Writings of Frederick Hockley* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1986); Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 170–75; Samuel Scarborough, “Frederick Hockley: A Hidden Force behind the 19th Century English Occult Revival,” *Journal of the Western Mystery Tradition* 14, no. 2 (2008). On Bulwer Lytton, see e.g. Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 123–30, 192–96; on Stanhope, see Godwin, *ibid.*, 162–67, 181–85; on Burton, see Godwin, “Burton, Sir Richard Francis,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

74. Interestingly, I do not know of any attempts to identify Louis’s master Professor Felix von Marx (on whom more below).

75. Demarest, "Introduction," xliii–xliv.

76. Demarest seems to leave this question open, while also questioning the purely fictional nature of *Ghost Land* ("Introduction," xlvii).

77. Anonymous, *Art Magic*, cover (Dem 1).

78. Note that while the noun "occultism" appears just twice in *Art Magic* (1876 edition, 287–88), it appears frequently throughout the text of *Ghost Land*, including in the book's very subtitle. The adjective "occult" appears regularly in both volumes.

79. On this crucial distinction, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 474–75, 480–81.

80. Anonymous, *Ghost Land*, 5 (all references are to the first edition of 1876).

81. *Ibid.*, 18.

82. On the central importance of such attempts (at preserving one's individuality after death) to the worldview of the First Theosophical Society prior to Blavatsky's and Olcott's acceptance of reincarnation, see Deveney, "Two Theosophical Societies."

83. *Ibid.*, 333.

84. *Ibid.*, 336–37.

85. *Ibid.*, 347–48.

86. On this neglected dimension of occultism, and the probable sources from which Britten derived her interest in narcotics, see Hanegraaff, "First Psychonaut."

87. *Ghost Land*, 352–53.

88. Cf. e.g. Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*, where the adept Zanoni sacrifices his immortality and his magical powers to marry his beloved.

89. Anonymous, "Extracts from 'Ghostland,' vol. II. or, Researches into the Realm of Spiritual Existence. By the Author of 'Art Magic.' Translated and Collected by Emma H. Britten," *The Unseen Universe* 1, nos. 1–12 (1892–83). (1893).

90. Anonymous, *Art Magic*, 213 (Dem 222).

91. *Ibid.*, 26–27 (Dem 25–26).

92. *Ibid.*, 27 (Dem 26).

93. *Ibid.*, 28 (Dem 29).

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

95. Cf. Britten, *Art Magic* (Demarest ed.), 25 note 134.

96. *Art Magic*, 174–218.

97. *Ibid.*, 200 (Dem 208 with note 507).

98. W. H. [= William Howitt], "Modern Fire and Other Phenomena of the Eastern Nations," *The Spiritual Magazine* 3 (July 1868).

99. Thomas Daniell, *Hindoo Excavations in the Mountain of Ellora Near Aurungabad in the Decan* (London: Thomas and William Daniell, 1803).

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