

The Consolation of Theosophy

By Frederick C. Crews

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Review

Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America

by Peter Washington

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1.

During my several decades of teaching literature at Berkeley, one of my favorite offerings proved to be a large introductory lecture course on modern British and American authors. I always found it a pleasure to lead wary but game lower-division students at least partway into the rarefied, highly wrought worlds of Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, Stevens, and their contemporaries. Notoriously, however, modernism comes with some awkward ideological baggage. My distaste for Lawrence's preaching against insubordinate women and for Pound's fulminations against "the Jews" made it hard for me personally to cope with such noxious rant, to say nothing of asking California sophomores, steeped in egalitarianism and innocent of history, to put it into some ameliorating perspective.

The juncture in each semester that I approached most warily, though, was the hour when an accounting had to be made of W.B. Yeats's magical beliefs and practices. Here was perhaps the greatest of modern poets, the one who could most fearlessly and eloquently address perennial human concerns about sexual striving, wounded pride, lost love, bodily decay, shattered dreams, and helplessness before blind forces; but here as well was someone who needed—and not just for the sake of his muse—to believe in palmistry, crystal gazing, astral travel, the secret governance of history by phases of the moon, and a spirit world that could be commanded through ritual incantations. How, I wondered, could such a "sentimentalism of the intellect," as Yeats's father justly called it, square with the poet's exultation in his capacity to face cold reality without flinching? Moreover, I knew what to expect at the end of my necessarily equivocal lecture: the blocking of my exit by a small but intent cluster of students who would clamor for further news about those 2000-year cycles that really, professor, *really* make everything fall into place at last.

That Yeats was in earnest about his esotericism cannot be doubted. As his bemused friend Pound observed in a letter of 1919, "Bit queer in the head about 'moon,' whole new metaphysics about 'moon,' very very very bughouse." Neither Pound's sarcasms nor John Butler Yeats's paternal chiding could shake the poet's conviction that, in his own words from 1892, "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I

write." Like some of my students a century later, Yeats felt that gnostic beliefs and rituals were less a rear-guard protest against the iron rule of science and materialism than the advancing edge of an emergent mass consciousness. As he put it, "I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world."^[1]

But until Yeats became a distinguished personage, that voice was a mere echo of a far more confident one. Like others who pined for lost certainties, Yeats had fallen under the spell of one of the gaudiest characters of the nineteenth century, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder (with Henry Steel Olcott) of the burgeoning Theosophical Society, and a catalyst of unorthodox neo-religious stirrings in America, England, the European continent, India, and elsewhere.

For sheer chutzpah, there has never been anyone quite like Madame Blavatsky. Born in Russia and descended from Russian-German aristocrats, she fled at age seventeen from an ill-considered marriage and kept on moving for the next quarter-century, scooping up assorted occult/religious notions during her passage through much of the world, and liberally inventing other travels and adventures that would enhance her self-portrayal as an initiate into secret brotherhoods. When she settled in New York in 1873 at age forty-two, she looked to be just another table-rapping spiritualist.^[2] But she would soon one-up her fellow mediums by copiously plagiarizing and synthesizing esoteric texts and by making claims of paranormal contact with Tibetan "Masters" or "Mahatmas" whom she had allegedly visited in person. Thus she came to be known as an authority on the world's religions and ancient cults, which all proved to have derived from an aboriginal, long-suppressed doctrine that had been revealed to her in telepathic trances and in letters that were "precipitated" by psychic express into her antechambers and train compartments.

Blavatsky moved her society's headquarters from New York to India in 1878 after the American press, which had gotten wind of her vulgar deceptions as well as her zany stories, showed a determination to keep her in the satirical limelight. But the move wasn't just expedient; HPB wanted to tip Theosophy's scales away from too exclusive an emphasis on Western esotericism—the body of thought that yoked together magic, alchemy, Hellenistic and Renaissance Neo-Platonism, the Kabbalah, the Tarot pack, and communication with spirits—and toward the more mystical, higher-toned Eastern tradition that included Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism.^[3] The result was a still more awkward mishmash of dogmas that would have troubled even the chronically credulous if HPB hadn't kept them marveling at her paranormal demonstrations—some of which, however, were once again being publicly exposed as shams. When she moved, one last time, to London in 1887, it was because the skeptics were back on her trail; a commission of the Society for Psychical Research, investigating her stunts at Adyar (near Madras), had pronounced her an accomplished fraud. Yet Blavatsky's apparent persecution by "materialists" only enhanced her glory in the eyes of neophyte admirers like Yeats, who was easily persuaded by a dashing Indian disciple, Mohini Chatterjee, to join the Theosophical Society's magic-minded Esoteric Section in London.

To be sure, when the hypersensitive Yeats actually met Blavatsky, he was taken aback by her coarseness of manner. Nor could he ever quite bring himself to believe in the

existence of her Himalayan Masters. In turn, HPB was made so uneasy by Yeats's insistence on performing foolish magical experiments—trying, for example, to raise the ghost of a flower from its ashes—that she soon exacted his resignation. Yet Blavatsky had placed her stamp on his mind indelibly. Without her encouragement to pierce the veil of maya, Yeats would have been deprived of the prophetic strain and several of the odd but passionately held beliefs that helped to lend his verse its uniquely rapt quality.

2.

If Yeats's case were unique, we could dismiss it as a curious footnote to modern cultural history. But from the 1880s straight through the 1940s an imposing number of prominent figures, from Kandinsky and Mondrian through Gandhi and Nehru to Huxley and Isherwood, intersected the Theosophical orbit long enough to have their trajectory significantly altered by it. As some of those names imply, moreover, the movement distinguished itself from most esoteric fads by resonating with consequential forces of sociopolitical change. Blavatsky and Olcott's political message—internationalist, pacifist, socially progressive—appealed not only to the enlightened bourgeoisie of England and America but also to indigenous leaders in colonized lands such as India and Ceylon, where the Theosophical Society established impressive beachheads. And although its enrolled membership, worldwide, never exceeded 45,000, it spawned a number of related associations—most notably, perhaps, Rudolf Steiner's "Anthroposophy"—that exert a continuing influence on reformist and utopian thought.

One is tempted to assume that such an effective movement must have been only superficially irrationalist in emphasis. After all, the Theosophical Society's charter sounded almost like a university catalog, referring soberly to "the encouragement of studies in comparative religion, philosophy and science" and to "the investigation of unexplained laws of nature." But it wasn't comparative religion that instructed Madame Blavatsky about "the Lord of the World," who, she reported, had dropped to Earth from Venus with various helpers whose own assistants included her two chief personal Masters. Nor was it science that taught Theosophists to construe pure spirit as a sufficient cause of events ranging from remote communication between individuals to the secret prearrangement of whole historical epochs by celestial busybodies.

How could otherwise discerning people have subscribed to such preposterous ideas? To address that question, one turns expectantly to scholarly treatises on esotericism in general and Theosophy in particular. But one quickly finds that most of the historians are themselves occult partisans who, for example, "objectively" weigh the likelihood that enlightened beings paid astral visits to Olcott and others, making flowers appear in midair, causing an indoor rainshower, and so forth. ^[4] One such expert avers that experimental science is "hardly capable of accounting for" the correspondences that "unite all visible things and likewise unite the latter with invisible realities," and another maintains that work such as Blavatsky's "demolishes the pretensions of science by adducing a mass of evidence against the premises of materialism." ^[5] Such writers can't tell us why occult ideas have proved seductive; they merely illustrate the problem.

So, too, the esoteric historians' gratitude toward the propounders of transcendent doctrine leaves them reluctant to be candid or vivid about the shamming, squabbling, and

jockeying for power that inevitably characterize the daily conduct of any movement that traffics in unconfirmable ideas. Consider, for example, what becomes of Madame Blavatsky in the hands of K. Paul Johnson, the best-informed but hardly the most trustworthy commentator on Theosophy. [6] Though he acknowledges HPB's light regard for the truth and reluctantly explodes several features of her legend, Johnson airily maintains that she "devot[ed] all her energies to the enlightenment and liberation of humanity." Her lies, he declares, were told with the most selfless of motives, to protect the identities of her politically active tutors in Egypt and India, the real-life prototypes of her fanciful Mahatmas Koot Hoomi and Morya: "Most of her public life was an effort to serve hidden Masters without betraying their secrets." [7]

Such piety obscures both the cynical glee Blavatsky must have taken in perpetrating ruses and the obvious self-interestedness of her concocted "Master letters," which, far from expressing sublime and eternal truths, mirrored her own opinions and advanced her immediate tactical ends vis-à-vis jealous rivals. At the same time, Johnson's emphasis on her role as a handmaiden to male sages occludes the very traits of HPB's that we can still admire: her feisty independence and impetuosity, her spurning of a conventional feminine role, her impatience with petty hypocrisy, her earthy humor, her well-founded scorn for her lieutenants, and her shrewdly accurate gauging of other people's eagerness to be gulled.

Happily, though, the story of modern esotericism is not the exclusive property of esotericists. As of 1995, we have had the benefit of Peter Washington's invaluable *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, a work that makes cogent sublunar sense of HPB and much of her progeny. Not coincidentally, it is also a comic triumph, a deliciously deflating narrative about quirky lawgivers—dreamers, power trippers, pedophilic poseurs—and their unruly rank and file, "the neurotic, the hysterical, the destructive and the downright mad." Yet Washington is by no means merely a naysayer. He shows empathy with seekers who found themselves orphaned by the loss of traditional faith, and he credits some of them with a clear awareness of the difference between what Aldous Huxley would call Theosophy's "bunkum about astral bodies, spiritual hierarchies, reincarnations and so forth" and its standing as "a good enough religion—its main principles being that all religions contain some truth and that we ought to be tolerant...."

Washington's portrait of HPB is especially nuanced and convincing. He sees that she was never really in control of her temperament, her finances, or her courtiers, whom she couldn't resist needling impishly; but he also detects in her an endearing note of self-mockery—as when, for example, she describes herself, in a letter of 1883, being feted in India by discomfited British officials and their wives. Writing in the third person, the 245-pound Blavatsky depicts her own

graceful, stately person, clad in half-Tibetan, half-night-dress fashion, sitting in all the glory of her Calmuck beauty at the Governor's and Carmichael's dinner-parties; HPB positively courted by the aide-de-camps [sic]! Old "Upasika" [one of her several nicknames] hanging like a gigantic nightmare on the gracefully rounded elbows of members of the Council, in pumps and swallow-tailed evening dress and silk stockings, smelling brandy and soda enough to kill a Tibetan yak.

Could this be the obedient figure depicted in K. Paul Johnson's deferential studies? It is a stronger person altogether—self-invented, whimsical, and enormously amused by the inconvenience she is causing those who play by the official rules.

This ironic flamboyance on HPB's part comes across vividly in Washington's telling. Of particular note is her almost affectionate quarrel with Darwinian biology, a body of theory whose emphasis on chance adaptations and raw necessity was diametrically opposed to her spiritualizing and teleological approach to causality. The theory of evolution through natural selection, she was well aware, had been acquired through more legitimate labors than her own, and she acknowledged Darwin's preeminence in a characteristically high-spirited private gesture. Her prize possession, as Washington reports, was "a large bespectacled [stuffed] baboon, standing upright, dressed in wing-collar, morning-coat and tie, and carrying under its arm the manuscript of a lecture on *The Origin of Species*." And as Washington shows, much of HPB's magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), reads like a hashish-induced satire on *The Descent of Man*, with interplanetary spirits preempting the ancestral role of apes.

But Washington also sees that when it came to established Christianity, Blavatsky's whimsy disappeared; she wanted the whole religion overthrown. The touchy, divisive "Personal God" of the Judeo-Christian tradition, she felt, had strutted his bloody hour on the historical stage and should now give way to a mellow, nonspecific pantheism. If her means of imparting conviction were meretricious, the conviction itself in this major instance was not.

3.

As Washington's narrative reveals in fine detail, the dilemma that kept HPB continually off balance—how to advance sincerely held principles that had become entangled with improvised nonsense—was bequeathed to her associates when she died in 1891. Most of *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* is given over to that largely farcical but sometimes poignant aftermath. Washington's masterly telling of the story is not just a chronicle but, implicitly, a parable about the progress of any religion from visionary zeal through the consolidating of a privileged and corruptible priesthood. That HPB was never so innocent as to believe herself a divinely instructed messenger would appear to set Theosophy apart from many another religion, but the more important difference is that it remained a comic-opera affair: no intimidation of the wretched, no collusion with rapacious potentates, no burning of heretics, no genocidal crusades.

After HPB's earthly remains were maneuvered into the grave, the manifest topic of Theosophical debate became how best to honor her legacy; but of course the real question was who should rule. Narrowly partisan letters from the Masters and even from Blavatsky's own shade now began floating like aerial leaflets into the hands of the schemers who stood to gain from them. HPB herself was eventually "occulted" to the status of an Ascended Master sitting between Morya and Koot Hoomi in spirit heaven, and a whole new theology began to crystallize around her. Meanwhile, every tendency she had tried to suppress—Christ worship, ecclesiastical solemnity, apostolic succession, sexual libertinism—blossomed in one cranny or another of the ungovernable international movement.

Insofar as leadership was maintained, furthermore, it was nothing to boast about. Most prominently, there was the ubiquitous and ritual-happy Annie Besant, who remained president from 1907 until her death in 1933. Besant had been a fiery Victorian atheist and socialist, and at the helm of the Theosophical Society she retained her genius for fundraising and public relations. But esoteric notions, once they had taken hold, appear to have addled her judgment. At once the new president began establishing superfluous suborders—the Preparation League of Healers, the Imperial Services League of Modern Thought, the Prayer League, and so forth—while courting for herself such extra titles as Very Illustrious Most Puissant Grand Commander of the British Jurisdiction of the Co-Masonic Order. Dottiness overtook her long before senility set in for good. In 1925, for example, she and others attempted to locate the Hungarian castle of one of HPB's lesser Masters, the Count of Saint-Germain, by choosing a seemingly random but divinely inspired destination from a railway timetable. The "Dark Forces," she concluded after a week of vexatious trainhopping, were responsible for the party's having gotten no farther than Innsbruck.

Besant's choice of trusted associates was a continuing source of imbroglios and recriminations. Above all, she remained steadfastly loyal to Charles Leadbeater, who remained in positions of authority for twenty-five years after the first of many plausible accusations of child molestation were voiced against him in 1906. Leadbeater specialized in cosmological systematizing and in divining the past incarnations of himself and other Theosophists, who had all, it seems, been related to one another not only in earthly ages but on other planets as well. It was Leadbeater, too, who accepted a bishopric in the "Liberal Catholic Church" of James Wedgwood—an even more improbable personage who shared Leadbeater's fondness for invented ranks, beribboned frocks, and pubescent boys, and who once told the police, after having been observed visiting eighteen public lavatories within a two-hour period, that he was seeking a friend who had "gone wrong" in a previous life.

Leadbeater was also instrumental in engineering the Theosophical Society's greatest and most ironic success, the grooming and selling of Jiddu Krishnamurti, the "World Teacher"—supposedly an incarnation of Maitreya, the Messianic Buddha—to a holiness-parched international public. Washington leaves us to surmise whether Leadbeater's quasi-abduction in 1909 of this fourteen-year-old son of an impoverished Indian Theosophist was motivated more by lust or by ambition to play John the Baptist to a new savior. What we do know is that Krishnamurti, who confessed after twenty years of grooming for guruhood that he had never finished reading a single Theosophical book, remained a virtual prisoner of the society's directorate from 1909 until the day in 1929 when he publicly renounced not only occultism, ceremony, and hierarchy in general but the society in particular.

The irony of Krishnamurti's career, Washington demonstrates, lay in the spectacular aftermath of that renunciation. His Theosophical handlers had so exasperated him with their transparently hollow mumbo jumbo, while nevertheless convincing him that he was a chosen vessel of some kind, that he could turn his manufactured celebrity to a sane end, namely, informing millions of seekers that there were no Masters and no fixed paths—

nothing to follow but their inner light. Krishnamurti, who settled in Ojai, California, and died in 1986, lived long enough to see even this mild lesson twisted into "flower power" narcissism. Even more sadly, grave risks of egotism and insulation from needed criticism awaited the increasingly pampered sage who would show people everywhere how to distrust all ideas except his own. Still, by thwarting the plans of Leadbeater and Besant to turn him into a living god and by preaching self-reliance and toleration, Krishnamurti perpetuated the more viable element in HPB's confused original vision.

Was the mature Krishnamurti, then, a great exemplar of the Theosophical outlook or an exasperated rebel against it? Washington doesn't resolve the question, but he frames it for us in a stimulating way by pairing Krishnamurti with an equally extraordinary personage, his manic antagonist G.I. Gurdjieff. These two figures stand out from all others in *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, marking the most divergent paths that share a starting point in the teachings of HPB. Whereas Krishnamurti disdained systematic assertion and took a meditative and pacifist approach to every issue, the anarchically charismatic Gurdjieff—"a cross between guru and carpet dealer," as Washington characterizes him—blended gnostic cosmology and numerology with an aggressively impulsive policy of disorienting and humbling his adherents, supposedly so as to cut through their defensive layers of acquired personality and arrive at the core of being within. But Washington seems more inclined to believe that Gurdjieff had founded an eccentric personal cult—one that sadistically exploited his disciples' yearnings for remission from bourgeois respectability.^[8]

Washington feels that if Gurdjieff discarded the Theosophical Society's platform of harmony and fraternity, he couldn't have been a Theosophist with a capital "T":

If Theosophy represents the idealistic tendencies in early-twentieth-century Europe—the currents of feeling which gave birth to the League of Nations, social democracy and youth movements—Gurdjieff is part of the complementary fascination with barbarism and primitivism which colours the politics of Fascism and works of art from Lawrence's novels to Stravinsky's early ballets. Gurdjieff's doctrine was war and his method of teaching was to stir up productive strife with all the means at his disposal.

This contrast is well drawn, yet insofar as it absolves Theosophy of blame for Gurdjieff's excesses, it is open to dispute. Washington's whole book shows the incapacity of Blavatsky, Olcott, and their heirs to keep the Theosophical urge within prescribed doctrinal bounds. Once HPB had set the precedent of combining a flouting of decorum with fraudulent assertion of contact with divine powers, the emergence of a madcap Pied Piper like Gurdjieff could not be regarded as a complete surprise.

Gurdjieff also appears closer to the Theosophical mainstream if we set his temperament aside and concentrate instead on what people took away from his "Work"—a communal but far from egalitarian blending of menial tasks with dancing, chanting, breathing exercises, and metaphysical pep talks. To the jaundiced Washington, the quintessential Gurdjieffian acolyte may have been Katherine Mansfield, whom Gurdjieff had scrubbing carrots in cold water at midnight just before her final tubercular collapse. But many survivors of the Work, which continues even today in unpublicized communes, never

repented of what they took to be an enlightening discipline focused on the core message that they must awaken from the slumber of routine existence. That was just what they were hearing from Krishnamurti as well, without seeing any need to choose between the two otherwise disparate sources of advice.

4.

It scarcely matters, in any event, who should and shouldn't be called an authentic Theosophist. What remains puzzling is the still unresolved "Yeats problem." In some of the most striking instances of Theosophical allegiance and self-transformation, the celestial flummery and mock science provided by Blavatsky and others *did* play a central role. Wild assertions about lost continents, interplanetary visitations, and ranked angelic hosts superintending the universe were either countenanced or actively embraced by well-educated and otherwise discriminating people. Once again, how can we explain it? What benefit could have been great enough to make such a sacrifice of judgment appear worthwhile?

A clue can perhaps be found in another noteworthy career that is overlooked by Washington, that of Henry A. Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt's vice president. Wallace was a leading agronomist who knew as much about hybridizing corn as anyone alive, a crusading secretary of agriculture who pleaded for the wise husbanding of Earth's resources, an astute advocate of free trade and of the concept that led to the Marshall Plan, an early proponent of racial integration, and a voice of restraint in the tense early years of the cold war, whose eventual end he clearly foresaw. Yet he was also a zealous Theosophist, schooled in Blavatsky's doctrines by none other than Yeats's friend George W. Russell ("AE"), and a firm believer in what he called "an order of reality which can be contacted by people who have certain types of perception."^[9] Indeed, the competent and well-traveled Wallace was no less a moonbeam climber than Yeats himself.^[10]

Wallace's excellent biographers Graham White and John Maze make it clear that without his esoteric beliefs, he could not have become the pragmatic activist that he was. They also supply the crucial mediating factor that makes such a paradox understandable: Wallace needed to get out from under a sense of religious paralysis. Freed by Theosophy from a confining Presbyterian obsession with individual sin and damnation, he found that he could allow his equally Christian zest for good works to operate without impediment on a universal scale. Wallace could match or surpass the nonconformist righteousness of his forefathers only by adopting a still more heterodox creed than theirs—one that vested enormous (if illusory) power in supplicants who had acquired a proper awe for nature's hidden correspondences.

Yeats's case was very different, but it was no less involved with the search for a way to detach religious and creative impulses from any entrenched creed. The poet was driven toward magic by the force of his father's rationalistic arguments against organized religion—arguments that he found himself incapable of refuting. With his churchly leanings thus thwarted but with his yearning for certainty and closure more urgent than ever, Yeats was disposed to reach directly for supernatural insight. That was just what Blavatsky was urging all of her lapsed-Christian contemporaries to do; and it wasn't just

her opinion, she emphasized, but that of history's all-star team of sages and of the living Masters, too.

We might well ask what was to be gained, intellectually, by scrupling over the resurrection of Jesus but asserting general reincarnation, or by putting one's own psychedelic visions and prophecies in the place of St. John's. But cogency of assertion was less crucial to Yeats than establishing his autonomy, and Theosophy aimed its lessons precisely at self-development. Despite the alleged immemorial antiquity of its doctrines, it was a do-it-yourself religion, allowing the believer to regard his own reveries as authorized from the other side. As the once shy, now bold Yeats put it, "All that we do with intensity has an origin in the hidden world, and is the symbol, the expression of its powers...." ^[11]

There can be no escaping the fact that in our nominally empirical, technology-driven age, the creativity and initiative of many significant achievers has been bound together with transparently absurd beliefs and practices. While Theosophy has hardly been the sole locus of such enabling supernaturalism, it is the most blatantly counterscientific one to have been taken up by serious thinkers. Mere faith in a Creator, after all, tends to leave the laws of physics and chemistry (if not always of biology) unchallenged, but the Theosophical believer specifically trumped those laws with the assertion of a Prospero-like power that Gurdjieff's explicator P.D. Ouspensky aptly called "the miraculous." Yet it was precisely that illusion of omnipotence—the fancy that all things are possible when the will is attuned to hidden sympathies—that proved efficacious as a solvent to inhibitions.

Nevertheless, cases like those of Yeats and Wallace may leave us more indulgent toward Theosophy than the full record warrants. To judge from them, one would conclude that nothing but psychological and social benefit can result from surrendering one's critical judgment to a gnostic way of knowledge. It may be, however, that Theosophical occultism was benign only because the people who adopted it had been schooled since childhood in public-spirited ideals.

What happens, we may wonder, when occult assumptions are seized upon by malcontents who are not disposed to settle for the tolerant eclecticism that formed the heart of Aldous Huxley's "good enough religion"? And what if broadly gnostic means of acquiring certitude have infiltrated our mainstream institutions, producing widely accepted dogmas that are neither true nor harmless? There is more to be said about these matters than can be found in the dryly satirical pages of *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*. By turning, in the concluding part of this essay, to other books and to a somewhat broader conception of irrationalist loyalties, we will reopen the question of modern occultism in a more disquieting key.

This is the first of two articles.

Notes

[1] This discussion, including the quotations from Yeats, his father, and Pound, is indebted to William H. Murphy, *Family Secrets: William Butler Yeats and His Relatives* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 369-389. See also the classic account in Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (Macmillan, 1948), *passim*.

[2] Indeed, Blavatsky and Olcott came together, platonically, over their common interest in the summoning of ghosts—an object of naive awe for him, a workaday meal ticket for her.

[3] Some definitions are called for here. I will treat occultism as the belief that nature possesses secret properties contradicting the presumed laws of science; a dedicated occultist believes that those properties can be manipulated through adept exercises of magic. Esotericism is the broader project that weds occultism to self-transformation. Spiritualism is the attempted practice of communicating with the dead through séances. Mysticism purports to bring the seeker into direct experience of, even merger with, a transcendent deity. Gnosticism, broadly conceived, is the intuitive apprehension of deep truth without a felt need for corroborating evidence. Theosophy, uncapitalized, is gnostic and esoteric lore that relates human destiny to speculation about the origin, nature, and governance of the universe. Finally, in its capitalized form Theosophy refers to the specific theosophical doctrines and organizations launched by Madame Blavatsky and her successors.

[4] I take it as axiomatic that in assessing paranormal claims, we ought to be guided by Hume's sturdy principle for authenticating miracles: that the testimony to establish a given miracle be so credible that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the alleged phenomenon itself. Thus the possibility of fraud or self-deception (neither of which defies common sense) deserves priority over the hypothesis that a reported wonder, such as the receipt of psychic e-mail or the appearance of an adept in two places at once, has somehow slipped the hold of known physical laws.

[5] Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 34; Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 305.

[6] See K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (State University of New York Press, 1994) and *Initiates of Theosophical Masters* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

[7] Johnson, *The Masters Revealed*, pp. 226 and 244.

[8] That Gurdjieff was deeply strange is not in dispute. Washington cites one occasion when "a party of rich and respectable New Yorkers dining with Gurdjieff were shocked by a recital of his most obscene stories, liberally

decorated with four-letter words. Nevertheless, they gradually succumbed to his power of suggestion and threw themselves into an orgy under Gurdjieff's direction—until violently and humiliatingly interrupted by his harangue on the slavery of all Americans to the sex instinct."

[9] Quoted by Graham White and John Maze, *Henry A. Wallace: His Search for a New World Order* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 25.

[10] Look, for example, at one of Wallace's so-called "guru letters" to his fellow Theosophist Nicholas Roerich—letters whose rumored existence probably doomed his renomination as vice president, and whose later authentication by the journalist Westbrook Pegler finished off his already hopeless campaign for the presidency in 1948:

Dear Guru,

I have been thinking of you holding the casket—the sacred most precious casket. And I have thought of the New Country going forth to meet the seven stars under the sign of the three stars. And I have thought of the admonition "Await the Stone."

...We think of the People of Northern Shambhalla and the hastening feet of the successor of Buddha and the Lightning flashes and the breaking of the New Day. (Quoted in Maze and White, p. 65)

This is wonderfully daffy prose, but the greater wonder is that if FDR had died one year earlier than he did, the awaiteer of the Stone would have become our chief executive.

[11] Quoted in Ellmann, *Yeats*, p. 95.

Letters

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Biographical Note

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Source

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Contents. September 19, 1996 • Volume 43, Number 14. Louis Menand. Hollywood's Trap. The Consolation of Theosophy. Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America by Peter Washington. Frank Kermode. The Pleasure of the Text. Frederick C. Crews's new book, *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*, will be published in the fall. (February 2017). Joan Didion is the author, most recently, of *Blue Nights* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*, among seven other works of nonfiction. He edits *The Lancet*, a weekly medical journal based in London and New York. He is also a visiting professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Book Review|The Curious Conundrum of Freud's Persistent Influence. <https://nyti.ms/2uU4YBK>. Advertisement. FREUD *The Making of an Illusion* By Frederick Crews Illustrated. 746 pp. Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company. \$40. Frederick Crews, the eminent literary critic and perennial Freud censor, opens his new study with an important question: "If Freud's career and its impact are so well understood, what justification could there be for another lengthy biographical tract?" This question is especially pertinent since, as Crews goes on to note, Freud's scientific reputation has plummeted over the past generation.