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Occult Sciences

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The occult sciences were woven into the fabric of everyday life in nineteenth-century Britain. By no means the exclusive preserve of late Romantic all-male secret societies or, subsequently, of the urban bourgeoisie who formed the core membership of occult organizations such as the Theosophical Society or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Campbell, Dixon, Wunder), they were available to the wider public in the fortunes told at local fairs, in the clairvoyant mirrors advertised in magazine classified columns, in the public lectures devoted to the speculative histories of alchemy and Rosicrucianism, in the dream-scriving techniques shared by word of mouth, and, perhaps most of all, in the pages of popular novels which, as the century progressed, became increasingly suffused with occult plots and tropes. The designation ‘occult science’ was liberally applied in this period to a dizzying gamut of old and new magical practices, including divination, geomancy, clairvoyance, palmistry, alchemy, tarot reading, ceremonial magic, astral projection, kabbalah, necromancy, angel invocation, demonology, astrology, and many others (Hanegraaff 234). These eclectic forms of what Wouter Hanegraaff terms ‘rejected knowledge’ offered to reveal to their users a mysterious, hidden world that lay beyond normal sensory perception, one that no microscope could ever penetrate and in which the supernatural intermediaries and forces increasingly ousted by scientific naturalism were still very much alive and open to supplication. Yet it would be inaccurate to regard these speculative entities and their occult invokers as simply the antithetical and much-maligned others to the secular science of the era. Not content with their *de facto* banishment from the realm of scientific rationalism, many nineteenth-century occult practitioners, as this chapter will demonstrate, worked relentlessly

to insist on the affinities, complicities, and uncanny parallels between their own esoteric knowledge base and the emerging worldview of secular scientific naturalism.

Their task was by no means an easy one. Although diffuse in number and often difficult to categorize, those sciences designated as occult in the nineteenth century shared one key characteristic: their frequent – but never total – rejection by members of the mainstream scientific establishment who desperately wanted to quarantine their own newly-professionalized field from the taint of superstition and irrationality.¹ We find a classic example of this boundary negotiation in Edward Burnett Tylor's landmark *Primitive Culture* (1871), a foundational work of cultural anthropology which dismisses occult science as 'contemptible superstition' (102) associated with 'the lowest known stages of civilization' (101) and characterized by 'a sincere but fallacious system of philosophy' (122). As a proponent of a new social-scientific discipline dedicated to studying the belief and cultural systems of so-called 'primitive' societies, Tylor was arguably more anxious than most of his fellow professionals to differentiate his own methodology and ontological first principles from those of the people he took as subjects. Yet even Tylor was forced to admit that occult practice had by no means vanished from the modern West in which scientific rationalism was now, allegedly, gaining dominance; it lived on in crude survivals such as clairvoyance, mesmerism, and the séances of the so-called 'necromantic religion' (130) of modern spiritualism. Speaking of this American new religious import that had by the mid-century gained so many converts on British shores, he remarked:

¹ Any attempt to wholly oppose scientific naturalism and the occult in the nineteenth century must run aground of the number of high-profile scientific converts to phreno-mesmerism and spiritualism, including John Elliotson (1791-1868), Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), C. F. Varley (1828-83), William Crookes (1832-1919), and Oliver Lodge (1851-1940).

The world is again swarming with intelligent and powerful disembodied spiritual beings, whose direct action on thought and matter is again confidently asserted as in those [pre-Enlightenment and non-Western] times and countries where physical science had not as yet so far succeeded in extruding these spirits and their influences from the system of nature.

(Tylor 129)

Although personally disdainful of the occult belief, Tylor was intelligent enough never to dismiss its expressions as culturally insignificant (Stocking), recognizing instead that occultism still represented an important if atavistic means through which Britons of varying backgrounds sought to understand their place in the natural world.²

Naming and Categorizing Occult Science

Once considered, as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (2008 4) and Martin Priestman (140) observe, an illegitimate topic of inquiry for serious scholars, nineteenth-century occultism has been subject to an explosion of critical interest in the last two decades as its historical significance for the professionalization of science, the emergence of modernist aesthetics, and the development of feminist, socialist, [and](#) anti-imperialist, but also at times deeply reactionary, politics has been increasingly acknowledged. (For representative examples of scholarly works in this vein, see Dixon, Ferguson, Galvan, Goodrick-Clark, Kontou 2008, Luckhurst, Luckhurst and Sausman, Morrison, Owen 2004A, Sword, and Pasi). This is not to suggest that the occult is now understood only as a butt of or catalyst for more exoteric and rational historical developments. On the contrary, the growing academic sub-discipline of Western

² Tylor's inclusion of spirit mediumship within the category of 'occult science' is somewhat controversial; occultism and spiritualism, though clearly interlinked, were increasingly recognized as differently inflected, and differently gendered, forms of numinous experience in the nineteenth century. In its association with the apparently passive and exoteric practice of mediumship, spiritualism was often regarded as a distinctively feminine pursuit (Owen 2004B 6-17), whereas occultism, understood as a scholastic ancient wisdom tradition that trained the practitioner's will, was encoded as masculine (Dixon 67). Tylor was by no means alone, however, in equating the two.

esoteric history pioneered by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and others addresses occult science in its own right as an enterprise that has, since its inception, championed the cause of intellectual as well as spiritual enlightenment. The term ‘occult’, as Hanegraaff reminds us, has a long history, deriving in the late Middle Ages from the Latin *qualitates occultae* to refer to those properties of objects that are hidden to the naked or untrained eye (178-9). In this initial use, Hanegraaff explains, the occult had no particular connection to what we now think of as the mystical or the supernatural; rather, it identified natural phenomena which, although presently mysterious, might eventually be made explicable through study and investigation. ‘[F]ar from suggesting an “occultist” worldview according to modern understandings of the term’, he writes, ‘it was originally an instrument for disenchantment, used to withdraw the realm of the marvelous from theological control and make it available for scientific study’ (Hanegraaff 180). It is perhaps a reflection of this disenchanting genealogy that hermetic inquiry, esoteric Freemasonry, and the language of magic flourished rather than faded during the peak years of the European Enlightenment as thinkers sought to exercise their own faculties in investigating the material and spiritual world (Taylor, Wunder, Priestman). These precedents are important, demonstrating that the affinity between occult and scientific ways of knowing the world asserted by many if not all nineteenth-century practitioners was not simply a novel creation of their post-Enlightenment era, but also a partial return to earlier conceptualizations of occult science. After all, as Hanegraaff notes, it was not until the sixteenth century that occultism gained its now standard association with magic (180). This etymological history anticipates the tension between the desire to expose and to protectively conceal that would later emerge as a distinguishing feature of the discourse of nineteenth-century occult science, one further exacerbated by the growing social expectation that useful knowledge should always be made public.

Although many nineteenth-century occult practitioners referred to their study as ‘science’, they rarely shared the same understanding of that category and its epistemological criteria as the nation’s leading scientific institutions. Routinely absent in the writing of self-professed occult scientists such as H. P. Blavatsky or Henry Steel Olcott, co-founders of the Theosophical Society, is the emphasis on method, falsifiability, reproducibility of results, and open dissemination so crucial to the period’s emerging paradigm of scientific investigation. Instead, occult science was for them more of a fixed body of knowledge acquirable through the adoption of a spiritually monist view of the universe. ‘The term *occult*’, claimed Olcott, was simply the name ‘given to the sciences relating to the mystical spirit of nature – the department of force or spirit’ (1885 202). Empirical experiment could play a role in the pursuit of occult wisdom, but it was not necessarily required, and Theosophists in particular became wary of phenomenal demonstration after the Society for Psychical Research denounced Blavatsky’s purported psychic manifestations as fraudulent in 1885 (see Hodgson). Writing six years after this debacle, Theosophist A. P. Sinnett had characters in his occult novel *Karma* claim that ‘the psychic phenomena which has to do with outer facts ... is [a] *cul de sac*’ (66) and that ‘it would degrade spiritual science to an extent quite revolting to its devotees, if it were pursued to a considerable extent for the sake of its lower victories on the material plain’ (79). Well might an occultist like Sinnett, one whose movement’s leading figure had just been accused of using conjuring tricks to produce fake spiritual manifestations, seek to downplay the role of phenomenal display and material evidence in his belief system. But such anxieties about the ramifications of occult experiment were by no means confined to initiates. They surface also in surrounding popular gothic fictions such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894), novellas which trace the horrific consequences of transferring arcane knowledge from the library to the laboratory. In the first,

a seemingly respectable chemist degenerates into an inhuman troglodyte through the aid of an unstable, pseudo-alchemical formula; in the second, a pagan deity is unleashed on London in the shape of the homicidal *femme fatale* Helen Vaughan. Occult science, these narratives suggest, could be a distinctly hazardous enterprise, one best left to non-practising armchair eccentrics or indeed avoided entirely if the reputability and safety of the new scientific disciplines were to be maintained.

An Ancient Science for the Modern Age: The Ethics of Occult History

Although practical occult experimentation was often recognized as dangerous or unnecessary in nineteenth-century Britain, believers did not abandon the quest to fuse the arcane wisdom tradition with scientific naturalism. Instead, they pursued this alliance through other less controversial and less empirical tactics, recognizing that some form of imaginative consilience was necessary for the survival of the occult tradition in the modern age. In his 1891 study *The Occult Sciences* (1891), ceremonial magician A. E. Waite argued that, without scientific validation, ‘the transcendental philosophy would be simply the revival of an archaic faith, and would be wholly unadapted to the necessities of to-day’ (2). Understandably then, he, like many of his co-believers, was frustrated by the ongoing refusal of contemporary investigators to recognize that the older occult sciences at least ‘constitute[d] a sufficient ground for a new series of scientific inquiries’ (Waite 1891 2). His sentiments provide an important corrective to those who would read nineteenth-century occultism simply as a nostalgic retreat from scientific modernity into a rarefied past. Were it to endure, occult science had to modernize, and if the secular scientific establishment was unwilling to assist in this effort via collaborative investigation, then occultists would forge the connection themselves by appropriating the language of, and claiming precedence for,

emergent naturalist theories of species evolution and geological gradualism. (For differing accounts of Victorian occultism's appropriation of scientific naturalism, see Luckhurst, Thurschwell, Gomel, Galvan, Luckhurst and Sausman, and Ferguson). Blavatsky, for example, argued in *Isis Unveiled* that '[m]odern science insists upon the doctrine of evolution; so do human reason and the Secret Doctrine' (35). Darwin's thesis of gradual species evolution provided Theosophy with analogical support for its Eastern-influenced belief in the metempsychotic development of the human soul over consecutive reincarnations; similarly, in Lyell's extended estimate of the earth's geological age, the occult order found the timeframe necessary to accommodate its theory of the slow development of the first five root races of man – there would, Blavatsky held, ultimately be seven in total – and the sinking of Atlantis. (Campbell and Ramaswamy provide fuller discussions of the role of the root races and evolutionary time in Theosophical thought). *Isis Unveiled* thus proclaims: 'The discoveries of modern science do not disagree with the oldest traditions. Within the last few years, geology ... has found unanswerable proofs that human existence antedates the last glaciation of Europe – over 250,000 years!' (Blavatsky 1997 4).

The modern scientific discoveries claimed by nineteenth-century occult scientists were creatively fused with the ageless wisdom of the *prisca theologia*, that is, the concept, in Goodrick-Clarke's words, of 'an ancient theology ... deriving from such founder-figures and representatives as Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Orpheus, who had supposedly bequeathed this unitary wisdom tradition to humankind in times immemorial' (Goodrick-Clarke 2008 7). Although long lost, this *Ur*-wisdom was nonetheless imagined as recoverable by appropriately trained and temperamentally suited seekers who knew how to crack its universal emblem code. This cipher is exotically rendered here in Waite's important

translation of French ceremonial magician Eliphas Lévi's *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856), published as *Transcendental Magic* in 1896:

Behind the veil of all the hieratic and mystical allegories of ancient doctrines, behind the darkness and strange ordeals of all initiations, under the seal of all sacred writings, in the ruins of Nineveh or Thebes, on the crumbling stones of old temples and on the blackened visages of the Assyrian or Egyptian sphinx, in the monstrous or marvelous paintings which interpret to the faithful of India the inspired pages of the Vedas, in the cryptic emblems of our books on alchemy, in the ceremonies practised at receptions by all secret societies, there are found indications of a doctrine which is everywhere the same and everywhere carefully concealed.

(1)

Such fanciful and loosely, if at all, evidenced perennialist syntheses of disparate cross-cultural beliefs obviously reflect what R. A. Gilbert has recognized as the pervasive amateurism of nineteenth-century occult scholarship, a body of writing replete with errors and plagiarisms, and characterized by a frequent unwillingness to engage with primary source materials (Gilbert 1997 91; for more on plagiarism and suspicious source use in nineteenth-century occult writing, see Campbell on Blavatsky's plagiarism from William Howitt, Emma Hardinge Britten, and Hargrave Jennings, and Demarest (see Britten 2011) on Emma Hardinge Britten's covert borrowings from Jennings). Yet even if historically incorrect, articulations of the *prisca theologia* such as these were nonetheless tremendously important to believers in the ethical position they enabled. Occultists used the *prisca theologia* to forge what they viewed as a much more ethical and empirical approach to the past than that offered by their sceptical scientific peers who typically linked early human civilization with primitive backwardness and superstition. 'To deny Occultism, or Magic', declared the first issue of the Glasgow-based *The Occult Magazine* in 1885, 'is not only to reject history, but to foolishly cast aside the testimony of witnesses thereof, extending through a period of more than four

thousand years' (Mejnour 6). Blavatsky had made the same argument several years earlier, fulminating in *Isis Unveiled* that 'To believe that, for many thousands of years, one-half of mankind practiced deception and fraud on the other half, is equivalent to saying that the human race was composed only of knaves and incurable idiots' (11). One could still champion the cause of progress, occultists claimed, without casting a suspicious eye on the motives or mental capacities of our ancient ancestors.

It was not only in its treatment of the past that occult science claimed to be more ethical than its secular rational counterpart. At a time when new biological, social, statistical sciences were combining to buttress the edifice of white supremacy under the auspices of eugenics and Social Darwinism, some – if by no means all – occultists were deploying the ancient wisdom tradition to insist on a radical interracial equality. This tendency is particularly evident in those Eastern-influenced versions of occult science – Hargrave Jennings's Phallism and Blavatsky's and Olcott's Theosophy – that tapped into the interest in Asian religions spearheaded by William Jones and Richard Payne Knight in the late eighteenth century (Godwin J. 15-16). Hargrave Jennings, possibly the namesake inspiration for the demon-haunted Reverend Jennings in Sheridan Le Fanu's Swedenborgian gothic tale 'Green Tea' (1869), was a self-taught occult scholar who wrote prolifically, albeit often highly inaccurately, on such topics as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and Buddhism. In his controversial and anonymously published *The Indian Religions* (1858), he notoriously defended the recent Indian rebellion – one which he scornfully refused to deem a 'mutiny' (Jennings 1858 166) – as a foreseeable and largely justifiable reprisal against longstanding religious oppression and commercial exploitation. British rule in India had constituted nothing more, Jennings contended, than 'a hundred years of active, unmitigated tyranny, unrelieved by any one trait of generosity, scarcely for once qualified, even accidentally, by a

single act dictated by an unmixed, unselfish, and sincere desire to benefit the people whom Providence had delivered over into their charge' (1858 158). The religions of the East, or rather Jennings's occult constructions of them, deserved respect rather than contempt; without a sea-change in attitude, the British empire would continue to reap the 'bitter fruits' (1858 159) of constant insurrection. An occult sensibility could prevent such conflicts by annihilating the arrogant sense of cultural, religious, and scientific superiority which triggered them.

The occult anti-imperialism championed by Jennings found a ready home in later Theosophical thought, featuring regularly in the writings and platform speeches of the society's adherents as they vaunted the distinguished past and admirable contemporary spiritual practices of non-Western peoples. In a particularly vivid example of this orientation, Olcott, lecturing on occult science in British Ceylon in 1875, blasted European colonizers for putting too much metaphysical stock in their phenotype and their scientific expertise alike:

We modern Europeans have been so blinded by the fumes of our own conceit that we have not been able to look beyond our noses. We have been boasting of our glorious enlightenment, of our scientific discoveries, of our civilization, of our superiority to everybody with a dark skin, and to every nation east of the Volga and the Red Sea, or south of the Mediterranean, until we have come almost to believe that the world was built for our Anglo-Saxon race.

(1885 214)

The true practice of occultism, he concluded, would impel the West to 'approach the Eastern people in a less presumptuous spirit, and honestly confessing that we know nothing at all of the beginning or end of natural law, ask them to help us find out what their forefathers knew' (Olcott 1885 215). Unsurprisingly, sentiments such as these raised profound suspicions

among colonial officials in India and Ceylon, ones that were only confirmed when, under the direction of Annie Besant, the Theosophical Society came to champion Indian independence in the early twentieth century (see Campbell and Dixon for more on Theosophy's contribution to the Indian independence movement). These alignments provide an important counter-weight to the more openly xenophobic treatments of non-Western and non-white cultures that dominated late Victorian popular gothic novels such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886-7), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), texts in which the East typically features as a source of threat and contamination rather than of valuable wisdom and ethical restoration. Occultism had the potential to heal and reverse these paranoid constructions, forming the basis of a potent anti-imperial science that would evidence the futility of racial domination and the necessity of cultural hybridity.

The Dangerous Circulation of (Occult) Scientific Knowledge: Godwin's *St Leon* (1799) and Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842)

Hitherto we have been focusing on what might be considered the most progressive and populist aspects of nineteenth-century occult science – its openness, however eccentric and partial, to an alliance with contemporary scientific naturalism; its *ad populum* argument for the existence of a supernatural world on the basis of the sheer number of people over the space of the globe and through the course of history who have believed in one; and finally, its pioneering receptivity to non-First World spiritual traditions, one that remains a key feature of contemporary occult and New Age belief systems today. We cannot conclude our discussion without considering the equally significant, if far less radical and democratic, representations of occult science best epitomized in the era's alchemical and Rosicrucian novels. Inspired by the German *Bundesroman* genre (Ziolkowski 69-70), these texts examine

the actions of secret societies, or even of discrete individuals, who, for good or ill, possess and protect occult scientific knowledge from the general public. Their adept-protagonists only very occasionally select new initiates, typically hapless or desperate men who are doomed rather than elevated by their sudden acquisition of occult wisdom. Perhaps the most famous Romantic example of this sub-genre is William Godwin's *St Leon* (1799), a tragic account of the near-fatal alienation suffered by a French nobleman whose entrustment with the secret of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life severs him from his kin and community. Sworn to secrecy about the source of his wealth, and hounded and imprisoned by those who distrust its origins, St Leon lives to rue the day he exchanged the domestic comforts of family life for the solipsism of the occult. 'How unhappy the wretch', he laments, 'who is without an equal; who looks through the world and cannot find a brother ... who ... lives the solitary, joyless tenant of a prison, the materials of which are emeralds and rubies!' (Godwin W. 210-11). Occult science here encapsulates everything that Godwin's communitarian egalitarianism led him to reject, representing the horrific consequences of knowledge monopolization for both those who possess and those who are denied occult secrets.

Occultism fares little better in its later treatment by Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose bombastic *St Irvyne; or The Rosicrucian* (1810) features the pursuit of an outcast nobleman by a bandit-chemist who tries aggressively to initiate him into the occult fold. By the end of the novel's ridiculous plot, both men are dead. For early nineteenth-century progressive radicals like Godwin and Shelley, occult science was a vicious dead end, a means of exploitation and tyranny antithetical to democracy and thus deserving of destruction.

Yet the very anti-egalitarianism which rendered occult science suspect for Godwin and Shelley would later be presented as its chief virtue in what is arguably the most significant, influential, and also deeply reactionary Victorian fictional treatment of the topic: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842). A prolific popular writer and eventual peer of the realm, Bulwer-Lytton authored numerous occult-themed novels and stories over the course of his fifty-year long literary career, including 'The Haunted and the Haunters; or, The House and the Brain' (1859), *A Strange Story* (1862), and *The Coming Race* (1871); indeed, so frequently did he return to this shadowy fictional territory that he was often assumed, albeit incorrectly, to be an initiate of an esoteric order himself (Godwin J. 123). Within occult circles at least, *Zanoni* was the most influential of all of the author's supernaturally-themed works, inspiring respectful homages in subsequent occult *Bildungsromans* such as Paschal Beverly Randolph's *The Wonderful Story of Ravalette* (1863) and Emma Hardinge Britten's *Ghost Land* (1876), and establishing Bulwer-Lytton, in J. Jeffrey Franklin's words, as the 'single person in the first half of the nineteenth century ... representative of the period's enthusiasms, reservations, and deep-seated fears concerning occult spiritualities' (126). The novel is also a meditation on the dangers of modern democracy and the expansion of knowledge it promotes, arguing that occult scientific education must be confined to an elite and almost impossibly select few whose role must be to conceal rather than share its boons with the general populace. This obsession with secrecy, with the rigorous regulation and control of knowledge dissemination, was no less pronounced a characteristic of nineteenth-century occult thought than the previously-examined populist and modernizing tendencies with which it co-existed in uneasy tension. *Zanoni*'s paranoia about who has the right to possess and use (occult) scientific knowledge functions arguably as a grotesque parody of the boundary work simultaneously being performed by the professionalizing naturalist sciences. In the occult milieu of the novel, as in the scientific institutions of nineteenth-century Britain,

scientific authority had to be protected from the incursions of improperly trained dilettantes and charlatans who would use it only for their own gain.

Zanoni was not entirely unique in reflecting an anxiety about the application, authorization, and dissemination of occult science; in fact, we find references to, and explanations for, the veiling of esoteric knowledge in most of the period's key occult texts. In many of these, however, concealment is defended as a historical necessity rather as a defiantly exclusionary strategy. For Eliphas Lévi, for example, secrecy was the only way to protect occult practitioners from establishment persecution:

The science was driven into hiding to escape the impassioned assaults of blind desire; it clothed itself with new hieroglyphics, falsified its intentions, denied its hopes. Then it was that the jargon of alchemy was created, an impenetrable illusion for the vulgar in their greed of gold, a living language only for the true disciple of Hermes.

(3-4)

As Blavatsky contended in *Isis Unveiled*, this mystification, however unavoidable, had the unfortunate consequence of cementing secular prejudices against occult practice: 'The impenetrable veil of arcane secrecy was thrown over the science taught in the sanctuary. This is the cause of the modern depreciating the ancient philosophies' (5). Both Lévi and Blavatsky wrote in the conviction that times had changed, and that a loosening of the strictures on esoteric knowledge might now be both possible and desirable; even the very title of Blavatsky's first major occult treatise, *Isis Unveiled*, promises an act of portentous public revelation. *Zanoni* by contrast, although written within the far more popular genre of the occult romance, shares almost none of Blavatsky's optimism about the beneficial spread of arcane wisdom. Instead, it offers a dire warning about the consequences of expanding occult

science's public sphere beyond even the extremely limited constituency of its two sole initiates, the Rosicrucian brother Zanoni and his teacher Mejnour.

Zanoni's obscurantist drive exists in awkward contradistinction with the massive range of occult practices it enumerates within its pages; the novel is after all, as Joscelyn Godwin writes, 'an encyclopedia of the occult sciences' (126) which dramatizes everything from mesmerism to alchemy and demonology. Indeed, it is very much the kind of novel that a nineteenth-century reader might have turned to as a primer of the secret arts. But *Zanoni* also insists that occult science only be pursued under controlled conditions by students of the rare character, integrity, and experience now virtually unachievable in the violently democratized environment of its western European setting. Presented as a translated cipher manuscript, it tracks the doomed love affair between the Rosicrucian adept Zanoni and the beautiful singer Viola Pisani from its origins in a Neapolitan opera house through to its bloody conclusion in Revolutionary France. Zanoni, having first abandoned his immortality to form a sexual relationship with Viola and father her child, then makes the further sacrifice of taking her place at the guillotine when she is entrapped by Robespierre's despotic regime. The still-imprisoned Viola dies soon afterwards, her cold face bearing a beatific smile suggestive of a post-life reunion with Zanoni in the upper spiritual spheres. The Revolutionary prison house, this staging suggests, is ultimately a kinder place for pure-hearted spirits such as Viola than the turbulent Revolutionary world outside where people mix without any regard to class or distinction. Indeed, the prison site had earlier won praise from *Zanoni's* narrator for its subtle encouragement of a restored respect for rank among its inmates. There, he remarks, 'all ranks were cast, with an even-handed scorn. And yet there, the reverence that comes from great emotions restored Nature's first and imperishable, and most lovely, and most noble Law—THE INEQUALITY BETWEEN MAN AND MAN!' (Lytton 1877 392-3).

Bulwer-Lytton's virulently conservative novel does not condemn the Age of Reason for suppressing or ridiculing occult science; on the contrary, it lambasts its popularization of secret wisdom for an undeserving and tainted constituency. A forceful silencing of occult knowledge, it implies, would have been preferable to this reckless glamorization under the aegis of Enlightenment. Far from being mutually exclusive, *Zanoni* insists, democratic rationalism and certain strains of occultism are, in fact, volatile symbiotic partners. Their dangerous co-dependency is nowhere more evident than in the tragic conversion of young English artist Clarence Glyndon, a radical who meets Zanoni in Italy and begs to be admitted into the Rosicrucian fold. His desire for initiation, we are told, is a symptomatic outgrowth of the Revolutionary *zeitgeist*:

It was then the period, when a feverish spirit of change was working its way to that hideous mockery of human aspirations, the Revolution of France. And from the chaos into which were already jarring the sanctities of the World's Venerable Belief, arose many shapeless and unformed chimeras. Need I remind the reader, that while that was the day for polished skepticism and affected wisdom, it was the day also for the most egregious credulity and the most mystical superstitions,—the day in which magnetism and magic found converts among the disciples of Diderot,—when prophecies were current in every mouth,—when the salon of a philosophical deist was converted into an Heraclea, in which necromancy professed to conjure up the shadows of the dead ... Dazzled by the dawn of the Revolution, Glyndon was yet more attracted by its strange accompaniments, and natural it was with him, as with others, that the fancy which ran riot amidst the hopes of a social Utopia, should grasp with avidity all that promised, out of the beaten science, the bold discoveries of some marvelous Elysium.

(Lytton 1877 75-6)

This fascinating passage might strike us at first as a wholesale, and hence deeply paradoxical, condemnation of the occult science the novel has hitherto lauded through its eponymous protagonist; after all, here magic and mesmerism represent credulity and superstition, not viable or even superior forms of scientific knowledge. Such sentiments would indeed undo the narrative's occult ontology were it not for their framing stipulation. Fraudulent democratic mysticism may be widespread, but it is not the only type of occult activity that exists in *Zanoni*; furthermore, it is easily distinguishable from more authentic forms through its site of practice. Any branch of occult science performed out in the open, in urban *salons* for bourgeois audiences, automatically marks itself as illegitimate.

It is no surprise then that the only valid forms of occult science in the novel, as practiced by Zanoni and Mejnour, are witnessed by an extremely limited audience and are never successfully taught to would-be seekers. This lack of transmission seems at first highly regrettable in light of the potential utility of the Rosicrucian medicine they profess, one that can cure all ailments and extend human life for centuries, even millennia. 'This is not Magic', explains Mejnour: 'All we do is but this—to find out the secrets of the human frame, to know why the parts ossify and the blood stagnates, and to apply continual preventatives to the effects of Time ... [I]t is the Art of Medicine rightly understood' (Lytton 1877 217). In *Zanoni*, however, the occult art of medicine is most beneficial when unapplied, and its restriction is presented as an act of compassion. Such at least is Mejnour's rationale when confronted by Glyndon with the question that perennially shadowed all practitioners of occult science in the fiercely utilitarian nineteenth century: '[I]f possessed of these great secrets', he asks, 'why so churlish in withholding their diffusion[?] Does not the false and charlatanic science differ in this from the true and indisputable—that the last communicates to the world

the process by which it attains its discoveries; the first boasts of marvelous results, and refuses to explain the causes[?]' (Lytton 1877 218). Mejnour replies:

Well said, O Logician of the Schools—but think again. Suppose we were to impart all our knowledge to all mankind, indiscriminately, alike to the vicious and the virtuous—should we be benefactors or scourges? Imagine the tyrant, the sensualist, the evil and corrupted being possessed of these tremendous powers; would he not be a demon let loose on earth? ... It is for these reasons that we are not only solemnly bound to administer our lore only to those who will not misuse and pervert it; but that we place our ordeal in tests that purify the passions, and elevate the desires.

(Lytton 1877 218)

Here the Genesis punishment for acquiring forbidden knowledge is invoked without any consoling promise of future remediation; once occult wisdom has been unleashed amongst the *demos*, there can be no return to Eden. Certainly, a select few might be chosen to act as safe repositories, but their appearance is obviously extremely rare, so much so as to provide the tacit rationale for Mejnour's and Zanon's enforced immortality. Only by staying alive across the centuries can the Rosicrucian brother hope to find the few initiates worthy of receiving and preserving the hidden knowledge.

Zanoni thus dramatizes an occult milieu in which access to scientific knowledge has become nihilistically, albeit necessarily, over-restricted. Even were the system more open, the narrative suggests, the acquisition of secret wisdom could still have little appeal to potential initiates, given the terrifying consequences of failure, ones manifested in the devastating aftermath of Glyndon's premature experimentation with the elixir of life. The English neophyte, who after his rejection by Zanon has been studying with Mejnour in a remote Italian castle, becomes impatient to obtain results. Left alone for a few weeks as a covert test

of character, he breaks into the occult master's study and attempts to concoct an immortality potion from partial instructions in a cipher manuscript. The experiment not only fails, but also, like the alchemical investigations in Godwin's *St Leon*, reaps a horrible reward. Glyndon summons a demonic nemesis known as the Dweller on the Threshold which haunts him for years to come, whispering in his ear poisonous words 'forbidden [for] the lips to repeat and the hand to record' (Lytton 1877 270) and ultimately causing the death of his sister Adela. Glyndon cannot save her from the spirit-produced epilepsy that eventually kills her; his brief training has left him with no practical or useful medical knowledge. Later, Zanoni helps to cure the artist of his deadly obsession, but only on the basis that Glyndon abandon any further attempts to penetrate behind the veil or to participate in the apparently equivalent pursuit of revolutionary action. 'Return, O wanderer!' Zanoni counsels. 'Return. Feel what beauty and holiness dwell in the Customary and the Old' (Lytton 1877 366).

The Zanoni-Glyndon plot's narrative arc ultimately reinforces the anti-populist and anti-democratic emphasis of the novel's surrounding frame, with both sequences combining to offer a staunch warning about the dangers of universal education and open scientific culture. *Zanoni*'s fascinating introductory paratext describes Bulwer-Lytton's alleged discovery of the main manuscript through a chance encounter in a virtually deserted Covent Garden occult bookshop in which 'there were to be found no popular treatises, no entertaining romances, no histories, no travels, no "Library for the People", no "Amusement for the Million"' (xi). Instead, the shop's cantankerous proprietor Mr D— stocks a select variety of rare esoteric works which he actively defends from the few dilettantish customers who occasionally cross his threshold, refusing to sell, or even spontaneously buying back, his treasured stock when it attracts consumer interest. Mr D—'s self-defeatingly closed system is offered as an optimal

model for the (non)-circulation of occult scientific knowledge whose necessity is dramatized in Glyndon's fate.

The fictionalized Bulwer-Lytton, one of a very few patrons tolerated in the shop, meets there a fellow seeker who approves of his interest in occult lore and offers him the Rosicrucian romance – namely, the interior manuscript of *Zanoni* – that he has written in ‘an unintelligible cipher’ (xviii). Fortunately, our narrator-editor finds a key, but new complications arise when, after translating one version of the text, Bulwer-Lytton discovers another one that has to be decoded anew and whose eccentric syntax and rhythm defy his best translative efforts. ‘Truth compels me to confess’, he acknowledges, ‘that, with all my pains, I am by no means sure that I have invariably given the true meaning of the cipher; nay, that here and there either a gap in the narrative, or the sudden assumption of a new cipher, to which no key was afforded, has obliged me to resort to interpolations of my own’ (Lytton 1877 xix). As an *exposé* of the secrets of Rosicrucian science then, *Zanoni* presents itself as a partial or even fraudulent account in which key passages have, due to their untranslatability, simply been replaced with the editor's inventions. Nonetheless, readers ultimately learn that such obfuscation achieves a great social good. To unleash too candid an account of esoteric wisdom into the public sphere would be to risk social insurrection. The value of occult science as imagined in *Zanoni* is calibrated directly in relation to its inapplicability.

Opposing the egalitarian and democratic ambitions of the more progressive nineteenth-century esoteric movements and of Godwin's *St Leon*, Bulwer-Lytton's romance clearly stands at the most conservative end of occult science's ideological spectrum. Yet its popular fictional genre complicates this positioning as it makes its appeal for an elite secretive occulture in a form geared towards mass audiences. *Zanoni* thus epitomizes the tensions

between elitism and populism in nineteenth-century occult thought that would only intensify in the decades following the century's close when the advent of World War One elicited new concerns about the legacy, and culpability, of (occult) scientific advancement for the unprecedented slaughter. In her remarkable 1915 spirit-soldier memoir, *War Letters of the Living Dead Man*, American Theosophist Elsa Barker – or rather, David P. Hatch, the recently departed California judge she allegedly channels – indicts the occult revival for contributing to the invasive and martial spirit of the age:

Occult societies dot the world. In other days these societies were really secret, and no one had access to their knowledge until after tests were passed which proved fitness for further study and further secrets. But the doors of the unseen have been besieged by an army of intellectual enthusiasts who have not passed those tests ... Democracy has even spread into occult orders, and sacred mysteries have been broadcast by those who put no curb upon their personal ambitions. The hosts of the unseen world have suffered invasion.

(173)

Ostensibly a work of post-mortem war reportage, the text here yokes the recent spread and democratization of occult knowledge – processes to which it itself contributes – to Germany's martial incursions in Europe. In each case, a barbarous and brutal constituency has caused mayhem by over-spilling its boundaries. Barker's spirit correspondent asks in conclusion: 'Would you let a child loose in a gunpowder factory with a box of matches in his hand? That is what has been done in the last few years in the Western world' (174-5). Her sentiments here anticipate in occult form those of a later, secular twentieth-century scientist as he invoked the *Bhagavad Gita*, that most influential of Asian religious texts for Western esoteric thought, to reflect on his own awe-inspiring and devastating contribution to the technology of war. Describing his response to the 1945 Trinity nuclear detonation in New

Mexico, physicist Robert Oppenheimer famously recounted: ‘A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita ... “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”’ (‘J. Robert Oppenheimer’). Although Barker, the fringe Theosophical amanuensis, and Oppenheimer, the distinguished three-time Nobel nominee, may have shared nothing else, they evince in these moments a common concern that the quest for ‘scientific’ knowledge, whether exoteric or occult, might ultimately turn monstrous and annihilate the very population it was intended to serve.

Such cautions aside, occult science has never retreated into complete secrecy. The ancient wisdom tradition thrives today in the commercialized spiritualities of the New Age and in the offshoots and continuations of *fin de siècle* occult movements such as Theosophy and the *Ordo Templi Orientis* that continue to hold gatherings and attract members eager to learn the secrets of spiritual science. Students can receive academic training in occult history, and even practical instruction in occult technique, at such institutions as Amsterdam’s History of Hermetic Philosophy and Associated Currents Centre, the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism, and London’s College of Psychic Studies and Faculty of Astrological Studies. The existence of the latter two in particular indicates that professionalization is by no means a unique priority of the non-occult sciences, even if occult practitioners still remain more ambivalent about, and less dedicated in their pursuit of, disciplinary institutionalization than their secular counterparts. Although often imagined as opposites, or even antagonists, in the nineteenth century, occult science and scientific naturalism are perhaps better understood as uneasy analogues, rehearsing a shared desire to expand understandings of the natural world while simultaneously controlling the potential applications of such knowledge and policing access to their own disciplinary authority. In fascinating ways, the nineteenth-century

literature of occult science rehearses the complex boundary work simultaneously underway in the more central currents of professional British science, demonstrating the mutual commitment of occultists and scientific naturalists alike to both expanding and policing the constituencies of their discrete knowledge bases.

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