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What does Popular Fiction have to do with the Occult?

From the outset, any connection between popular fiction and occultism might seem oxymoronic. After all, if occultism is supposed to be about secrecy and arcane knowledge, what could it possibly have to do with a brashly commercial form of literature which is thoroughly at home in the marketplace, seeks to gain as many readers as possible, and values entertainment more than instruction? Nonetheless, to take the case of Britain alone,[1] occult topics have been fixtures of the popular fiction landscape since the eighteenth-century birth of the Gothic onwards, featuring in the alchemical, Rosicrucian, and Satanic subplots of novels like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). When, nearly a century later, the cumbersome and costly triple-decker novel finally made way for the sleek and affordable single volume format that has since become the industry standard, occult novels like George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) and Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) topped the newly-constituted best seller lists. In today's increasingly globalised and e-based fiction market, the allure of the occult seems only to have grown, as demonstrated by the remarkable success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Dan Brown's Robert Langdon novels.[2]

Why has occultism so frequently and successfully been co-opted within mainstream literary genres such as the thriller, the romance, the school story, and the horror novel? What new understanding of the development and cultural impact of Western esotericism might we gain by focusing on these texts, rather than just on non-fictional works of occult philosophy which typically have far smaller audiences and lack

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[1] As a scholar of Victorian and Edwardian British literature, I shall largely draw my examples from this geographical context, although many of the patterns and developments I observe can also be documented more widely across the West.

[2] See Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2005); and Brown, *Angels and demons*, *Da Vinci Code, Lost Symbol*, *Inferno*, *Origin*.

the dynamic of suspenseful plotting? Although genre fiction might sometimes strike us as sensational, ersatz, or even scurrilous in its approach to esotericism, it urgently requires our attention if we are to understand how occult ideas have been transmitted, commercialised, and given meaning by and for the public.

Within the academy, however, this attention has not been immediately forthcoming. Far more focus has been directed towards the occult dimensions of modernist and *avant garde* literary movements, some, if by no means all, of which were premised on an explicit rejection of mass culture.[3] The earliest studies of literary occult modernism started appearing in the mid-twentieth century,[4] initiating a thriving critical industry which has expanded dramatically since the nineteen-nineties, as evidenced by book-length studies by Leon Surette, Timothy Materer, Roger Luckhurst, Helen Sword, Suzanne Hobson, Leigh Wilson, Edmund Lingan, John Bramble, Caroline Maclean, and Matte Robinson, to name just a few. We must view with some scepticism, then, the recent claim that "in scholarship the relationship between occultism … and modernist literature, art, and cinema … has been either dismissed as inconsequential or insufficiently explored."[5] On the contrary, the literary dimensions of occultism have been taken very seriously indeed within modernist studies, under whose aegis they have hitherto almost exclusively been examined.[6] Studies of occultural popular fiction have been far slower in coming, although the important recent work of Jeffrey J. Kripal, Andrew McCann, and Susan Johnston Graf has helped to redress this lag.

How might we account for this critical hesitation, or even reluctance, to examine popular fictional representations of occultism? There are many potential explanations, foremost of which might be a scholarly squeamishness about bringing together two subjects that have until relatively recently been considered unworthy of serious academic study: esotericism and popular fiction. As Wouter Hanegraaff has argued,

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3 For more on the complex – sometimes oppositional, sometime collaborative – relationship between modernism and mass culture, see Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*; Cooper, "Modernism."

4 See for example Senior, *Way Down and Out*; Clark, "Metaphors for Poetry: Mills, *Yeats and the Occult*.

5 Bauduin & Johnsson, "Conceptualizing Occult Modernism," 3.

6 Notable exceptions to this critical prioritization of occult modernism include Wolff, *Strange Stories* and Roberts, *Gothic Immortals*.

esotericism has long been defined as an obsolete form of knowledge on whose rejection "our very identity as intellectuals or academics depends"[7]; indeed, it has only been through the creation of dedicated programmes and institutes such as the University of Amsterdam's Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents that the academic study of esotericism has come to seem, not only respectable, but culturally valuable, and even necessary. The same may be said of popular fiction, which, until the nineteen-sixties disciplinary advent of Cultural Studies, was systematically excluded from university literary curricula as the abject other to what Ken Gelder describes as "Literature" with a capital L.[8] Indeed, in his insightful analysis of the prejudices which have driven this exclusion, Gelder indicts a stereotypical version of the popular fiction reader which has much in common with mainstream perceptions of the esoteric seeker: namely, that she is naïve, deluded, or indiscriminating. "It is commonplace," he writes,

> to imagine the reader of popular fiction as *uncritical*, someone who actually comes to believe in the remote worlds he or she reads about and even (in, say, genres like fantasy and romance or some historical popular fiction) inhabits them or replicates then … But the role of the reader of Literature . . . is to disenchant the text, to *disbelieve* … popular fiction is usually credited with the opposite function: it enchants its readers, which is another way of saying that it distracts them.[9]

Gelder's deployment of the language of enchantment shows how the stigma around esotericism can and has been extrapolated into other fields; readers of popular fiction, he suggests, have often been accused of a kind of magical thinking which prevents them from thinking accurately and realistically about their place in the world. Such is certainly the charge that Marxist critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer notoriously laid against all expressions of the "culture industry" in their highly influential *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; English trans. 1972), one that Adorno would hone specifically towards practices such as astrology, fortune-telling, and spiritualism in his later works *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951; English trans 1974) and "The Stars Down to Earth" (1957). As scholars increasingly challenge such hostile perceptions by

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7 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 3.

8 Gelder, *Popular Fiction*, 1.

9 Ibid, 38.

revealing the critical sophistication, impact, and creativity of esotericism and popular fiction alike, the time is right for a critical reappraisal of the connections between these areas of imaginative endeavour.

What can we gain from a new form of literary occultural studies which combines expertise in both the emergence of esoteric currents and in the development of popular literary genres and markets? Such a methodology promises to correct previous approaches to occult fiction which have either minimised its literary texture or miscast its complex relationship to historical expressions of esotericism. We see an example of the latter tendency in Fred Botting's recent assessment of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842) in his formidable genre survey *Gothic* (2014). Gothic studies might seem like the natural disciplinary home for research on occult fiction, and it is indeed within its precincts that popular occult novels such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) or Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) have received the most critical attention. But this literary sub-field's critical preoccupation with fear, horror, and transgression does not form an easy fit with what Marco Pasi deems the largely "positive epistemology" of Western esotericism,[10] nor does its propensity, noted by Alexandra Warwick, to reduce all forms of haunting to metaphoric stand-ins for more mundane processes of psychological deterioration or repression.[11]

Botting's analysis reveals some of these problems when it describes *Zanoni* as a novel about "a hero schooled in occult reading, experimenting in ancient black arts in a search for the elixir vitae of the alchemists."[12] First of all, we might start with the inaccuracies – the Chaldean Zanoni is already adept in alchemy, and has long held the elixir of life which has allowed him to retain a youthful appearance for millennia. Second, there is the mischaracterisation of *Zanoni*'s occult sciences as "black arts" – on the contrary, and as the numerous nineteenth-century occult believers and movements inspired by the novel would later affirm,[13] Zanoni is the practitioner of a higher and spiritually elevated "supreme science" which, if practised correctly, would allow mankind

10 Pasi, "Arthur Machen's Panic Fears," 74.

11 Warwick, "Feel Gothicky."

12 Botting, *Gothic*, 117.

13 See Franklin, "Evolution of Occult Spirituality" on the significant and catalysing impact of *Zanoni* on the late nineteenth-century occult revival.

to "rank at last amongst the nearest ministrants and agents gathered round the Throne of Thrones."[14] Needing to subsume *Zanoni* within a Gothic tradition of deviance and terror, Botting conflates heterodoxy with diablerie. Yet Zanoni's occultism is celestial rather than satanic, aiming not to estrange man from God, but to unite the two. That it struggles to do so has less to do with its fundamentally dark nature than with the materialist and violent climate of revolutionary France. For occult readers, the novel furnished not simply – or even at all – an opportunity for a quick scare through encounter with a past always already marked as primitive and deviant, but an invitation to embrace the higher spiritual truths of a lost Golden age.

Popular fiction, as the example of *Zanoni* demonstrates, is not simply an outlet for dread or anxiety; it has also acted as an important vehicle through which to share, promote, and rebrand spiritually heterodox beliefs hitherto associated with deviance and danger. That modern occultists themselves have always been aware of this positive potential is evident in their own prolific but often neglected, authorship of genre fiction. Among the many nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultists who attempted to crack the popular fiction market, we find Emma Hardinge Britten, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Mabel Collins, A.E. Waite, Charles Leadbeater, Franz Hartmann,[15] John William Brodie-Innes, Aleister Crowley, and Dion Fortune.[16] The fiction these figures produced may never have been "popular" in terms of sales, but it clearly aimed to reach wide audiences through its mode of publication – often in serial format within inexpensive periodicals – and its choice of genres, ranging from the oriental romance to the ghost story, the fairy tale, the nascent science fiction novel, and the detective plot. Novels such as Mabel Collins's *The Blossom and the Fruit: A Tale of Love and Magic* (1888) and Franz Hartmann's *The Talking Image of Urur* (1890) made their debut in monthly instalments

[14] Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni*, 247, 147.

[15] A German occultist who wrote extensively if not exclusively in his native language, Hartmann appears to have composed many of his *fin de siècle* fictions in English. The earliest serializations and publications of works such as *The Talking Image of Urur* and *An Adventure Among the Rosicrucians* are not identified as translations, and there is no record of their previous publication in German.

[16] Also important in this context, although outwith this essay's purview, are the American writers Paschal Beverly Randolph and H.P. Lovecraft. Randolph, an occultist, sex magician, and healer, authored the *Zanoni*-esque *The Wonderful Story of Ravalette*; Lovecraft, although his own personal investment in occultism remains moot, has had an enormous influence on twentieth-century occult practitioners. See Deveney and Engle.

within the pages of the Theosophical magazine *Lucifer*,[17] where they aimed to pump up sales for future issues through their – admittedly not always successful – attempts to generate narrative suspense. Later occultists like Dion Fortune and Aleister Crowley would exploit the popularity of fictional consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, himself the creation of the spiritualist believer Arthur Conan Doyle, to produce their own recurring occult sleuths Dr Taverner and Simon Iff, who solved crimes by uncovering their esoteric catalysts.[18] Such examples show that occultists, far from being hostile to the mass market, were keen to embrace literary commercialisation and diverse audiences. Popular fiction, they recognised, could be both ally and stimulus. Accordingly, an 1887 article in *Lucifer* urged its seeker-readers to consult contemporary best-seller lists for inspiration, arguing that there they might find ample proof of secular materialism's failure to capture the hearts of the public. Lauding the success of recent "mystic and theosophic" novels such as Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), the piece reaches the glowingly *ad populum* conclusion that "Literature, is the public heart and pulse. Beside the glaring fact that were there no demand there would be no supply, current literature is produced only to please, and is therefore evidently the mirror which faithfully reflects the state of the public mind."[19]

Yet popular literature need not simply be a passive reflection of enduring public opinion towards esotericism; it might also, as occultists and anti-occultists alike have recognised, be its active producer. The evangelical backlash against the *Harry Potter* novels, for example, has been driven by the suspicion that vulnerable readers – in this case, children – are being deliberately enticed towards a religiously heterodox, even

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17 Both novels were serialised in the London Theosophical journal *Lucifer* before being published in single volume form. Fascinatingly, Collins's novel would undergo a series of sub-title and authorial changes across its serialisation in *Lucifer* – from "A Tale of Love and Magic" to "The True Story of a Magician," and from "By Mabel Collins" to "By Mabel Collins and _____" – before receiving its final single volume designation of *The Blossom and the Fruit: A True Story of a Black Magician*, by Mabel Collins and –. These changes suggest, among other things, an ongoing debate about how best to market Collins's tale of reincarnation and feminine magical identity.

18 See Fortune, *Secrets of Doctor Taverner*; Crowley, *Simon Iff Stories*.

19 Anonymous, "The Sign of the Times," 84.

demonic, worldview in the off-guard hours of their leisure.[20] While Rowling has rejected such charges with vehemence, other writers of occult-themed fiction, particularly those publicly associated with Theosophical and Ufological currents, have eagerly embraced the propagandistic potential of popular fiction, sometimes to the detriment of its aesthetic quality. In the eighteen-eighties, writers like "Rita" [pseudonym of English writer Eliza Margaret Humphreys] and Franz Hartmann worked a bait-and-switch routine on their buyers, luring them in with sensational titles such as *The Mystery of a Turkish Bath* (1888) and *An Adventure Among the Rosicrucians* (1887); rather than racy story-telling, however, such texts actually deliver lectures on occult doctrine spoken by one-dimensional characters in a state of largely plotless inertia. Readers seeking the titularly-promised mystery and adventure in either of these works will find themselves sorely disappointed; unsurprisingly, neither title sold well. Far more successfully, the American pulp fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard used his science fiction stories, in combination with an excellent business model and marketing strategy, to spawn one of the twentieth-century's most powerful new religious movements: Scientology.

Rita, Hartmann, and Hubbard all wrote from a professed position of sincere belief in an esoteric or new religious worldview,[21] and/or with the overt aim of audience conversion. Yet occultists have not always required such sincere conviction from the popular novels they champion and co-opt. In an appendix to *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), Aleister Crowley lists a series of fictional, anthropological, and folkloric texts intended to equip seekers with "a general familiarity with the mystical and magical tradition," but stipulates that it is "not to be taken . . . too seriously";[22] it includes Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and the work of Arthur Machen. Three years later, American Theosophist James Taylor would

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20 For an example of such evangelical condemnation, see Abanes, *Harry Potter and the Bible*. For scholarship on the Christian critiques of the Potter books, see Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending*; Jones, "Threat to Imagination."

21 The key word here is of course "professed"; we have no means of knowing whether their actual beliefs – which are ultimately indeterminable – were in line with their published works. As such, we need to proceed with caution when distinguishing between "believing" and "non-believing" authors of occult fiction. While such distinctions can sometimes prove strategically useful, they remain necessarily tenuous.

22 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 214.

advance a similar if significantly expanded list in his pamphlet *Occult Novel as Theosophical Propaganda*, which recommends books that Theosophists might request for purchase by their local public libraries. There, the works would, Taylor hoped, subtly open the public consciousness to occultism in the same way as did *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to abolitionism.[23] While some of the novels he selects for endorsement are indeed by openly-identified occult or spiritualist believers, many are not; he lists also publications by vehement anti-spiritualists such as Charles Dickens, whose *A Christmas Carol* (1843) gets a mention, and H.G. Wells, three of whose titles make the cut – *The Time Machine* (1895), *Tales of the Unexpected* (1922), and *The Dream* (1924). What mattered to Taylor was not authorial intention or doctrinal consistency, but rather the imaginative sympathy which such works might inspire. "Experience has shown that if an individual can be persuaded to read a few occult novels," he writes, "many prejudices will disappear, new and larger conceptions of man and the universe will arise in the reader's mind and the way will be opened for the real study of theosophical books."[24]

As Taylor's pamphlet suggests, occultists have long recognised propaganda as a crucial, perhaps even primary, function of popular fiction, but this is by no means the only use they have found in the medium. Indeed, our understanding of occult fiction will remain severely impoverished if we relegate it to the role of ideologically-crude content delivery vehicle, designed to impose unquestioning assent rather than debate or aesthetic play. Early British Theosophists in particular knew that the fiction about their movement needed to do far more than just teach; it also had to be entertaining and imaginatively stimulating. Thus during their co-editorship of *Lucifer*, Theosophists Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Mabel Collins regularly published reviews which criticised new occult fictions for being spiritually worthy but dull. Of the anonymously-authored reincarnation novel *The Twin Soul; or, The Twin Soul of Mr Rameses* (1887), one such review remarks damningly, "it begins well, goes on from bad to worse, promises much, holds nothing, and ends nowhere, seeming to be written not as a work of fiction, but simply to ventilate the author's ideas."[25] By contrast, Blavatsky's own short gothic fiction, compiled posthumously in *Nightmare Tales* (1892), is lively, sensational, and

[23] Taylor, *Occult Novels*, 2.

[24] Ibid., 3.

[25] Anonymous, "Twin Soul," 397.

happy to jettison explanations of occult theory when they impede the dynamics of her plotting.[26] Annie Besant's foreword to the collection celebrates rather than chastises this breeziness of approach, hailing Blavatsky as "a vivid, graphic writer, gifted with brilliant imagination" who "th[rew] off" these stories in "her lighter moments."[27] The implicit argument here is that occultism has an entertainment as well as spiritual value – and that these two forms of value might be inextricably linked. Furthermore, it asserts the specifically *popular* nature of this aesthetic function, one associated with ease and entertainment rather than difficulty and work.

Beyond the purposes of *proselytisation* and *entertainment*, popular fiction and the occult collaborate in other ways as well. One of these is *canon formation*, whereby occult thinkers identify certain critically acclaimed and/or enduringly popular works of literature as encoded vessels of esoteric wisdom; in doing so, they claim the attendant cultural capital of such texts for their own mystical worldviews. The most accomplished example of this technique is Arthur Machen's *Hieroglyphics* (1902), a remarkable work of esoteric literary criticism which positions novels such as Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (first published as *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* 1836-7) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) as contemporary repositories of the ancient mystery rites, their secrets hidden in plain view.[28]

Occultists have also employed popular fiction for the purposes of *internal debate and self-critique*, adopting the conventions of the gothic tale (Mabel Collins's anonymously-published *Morial the Mahatma,* 1891), the Near Eastern romance (Laurence Oliphant's *Masollam: A Problem of the Period*, 1886), and the comic picaresque (Franz Hartmann's *The Talking Image of Urur,* 1890) to condemn false gurus and rival esoteric groups, and to probe their own previous beliefs. Finally, and by no means mutually exclusively from these previous applications, occultists have produced popular fiction as a form of *spiritual practice,* in which the text's (often channelled) mode of production has as much, if not more, esoteric import than its contents. Joan Grant's

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26 This is particularly evident in "The Cave of Echoes," a gothic shocker which rejects the complex cosmological schema of reincarnation proposed in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) to have a recently-killed man return promptly to earth to exact revenge on his murderer.

27 Besant, "Foreword."

28 For more on this work, see Ferguson, "Reading with the Occultists."

historical romance *Winged Pharaoh* (1937) is a particularly notable example of this phenomenon, describing the life and exploits of the apocryphal Ancient Egyptian female pharaoh Sekhet-a-Ra that Grant claimed to have received through the psychical technique of far memory. Books like Grant's succeed precisely because they can accommodate a wide range of reader positions and desires: they appeal to the genre fan who seeks only an adventure story set against an exotic backdrop, offer evidence of reincarnation for the occult believer, and provide a testing ground or target for the sceptic as she takes the temperature of her surrounding literary and religious climate.

This brief survey reveals not only that modern occultists have always produced, used, and championed popular fiction, but also that they recognise in it a complexity that elitist literary critics have denied. In their hands, it is rarely just a tool of distraction or crude ideological imposition; rather, popular fiction becomes a site in which pleasure, spiritual development, genre experimentation, and critique combine, and the agendas of competing audiences might overlap. Much more work on the fascinating confluence between popular fiction and occultism remains to be done, and I hope that some of this essay's readers will take it up. At present, the genre fiction of the West's most prominent occult and New Age pioneers, including Aleister Crowley, Mabel Collins, L. Ron Hubbard, and Kenneth Grant, remains almost completely neglected by literary critics; so too does the vast body of serialised fiction – not to mention poetry – that appeared in the spiritualist and occult periodicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We also require a much better sense of how occult ideas and tropes have proliferated through and helped to spawn new popular literary genres: excellent recent initiatives in this direction include James Machin's *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939* (2018) and Aren Roukema's research on the interface between occultism and British fantasy and science fiction.[29] As further work gets underway, I urge us to retain an expansive and flexible understanding of occult fiction, one that rejects any prematurely-narrow definition that might reduce our prospective corpus in a procrustean fashion. While my own research focuses particularly on the popular literary narratives produced by self-identified occultists, such identification need not be an exclusive or privileged criteria in a working definition of occult fiction. At present, it is far less important for scholars to produce an exact typology of the popular occult novel – must it be written by a bona fide believer? or reach a certain

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[29] See Roukema, "Naturalists in Ghost Land" (2018).

sales threshold? to what extent is representational accuracy important? – than that we expand the parameters of this new field, and invite more people into it. The territory is ripe for exploration, and can accommodate a rich variety of approaches.

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