

REASON VS. TRUTH:  
HOW THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM  
EFFECTED THE VICTORIAN OCCULT

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When discussing the Victorian Occult, one can easily become overwhelmed with the amalgamation of different belief systems, practices, and imagery that made its way into Victorian secret societies. Enlightenment ideas of scientific reasoning, the search for knowledge, and the superiority of man to nature can be seen in Freemason writings. Romanticism encouraged Theosophists to embrace the ancient wisdom of Eastern religions. In this presentation I will explore how Enlightenment, Neoclassical, and Romanticist ideas encouraged the adoption of foreign beliefs into secret occult societies. This adoption of foreign ideas not only made the Victorian Occult fashionable, but it caused an unexpected reaction from Indian Nationalist who used Romanticism to validate their superiority of their foreign rulers.

Before I present my argument, it is necessary for us to understand the first cultural movement which I will explore throughout this presentation, the Enlightenment. If we spent any time in a public-school classroom in America, we probably know that the Enlightenment was a movement that became popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries which is argued to be one of the main causes of the American Revolution and many other revolutions around the Western world. The Enlightenment idea which sparked these revolutions is the idea that a ruler is accountable to those under his or her rule. In my presentation, however, I will focus on the Enlightenment emphasis on scientific reasoning, and a personal search for knowledge and truth.

In the study of the occult, one important theory is one which Max Weber presented in his lecture “Science as a Vocation” in 1958 which he calls the “disenchantment of the world.” Weber believes that the world has been “disenchanted” by the rise of science and industry. He explains that this “disenchantment” is a disconnection from the magical things of life, based upon the adoption of reason as the basis for fact rather than religious or philosophical belief. Weber argues that this caused everyday things to lose their spiritual meaning and significance.<sup>i</sup>

This concept has been applied to the study of the occult as an explanation as to why there was a shift from religiously based spiritual beliefs, to occult beliefs grounded in scientific reasoning. Though Occult beliefs are not necessarily religious in nature, they are often times validated by existing religious frameworks. For example, Hermes Trismegestus, the mythical creator of Hermeticism, is a combination of Greek, Egyptian, and Christian characters which Hermeticists used to give their organization legitimacy.<sup>ii</sup>

Another important work in the Historiography of the Victorian Occult is *Orientalism* by Edward Said. Said theorized in this book that Europeans created a study and curiosity about the “Orient” that was in and of itself separate from the actual culture of the East. Said’s Orientalism revolved around a European understanding of the East, rather than actual cultural fact. This can be applied to the occult, because the “Orientalist” understanding of the East was based on a myth of a land of superior spirituality. India was seen as one of the origins of life itself, filled with gurus who held untold knowledge of the universe.<sup>iii</sup> This idea was present in the origins of Theosophical knowledge, and in the practices and beliefs of secret occult societies.

Alex Owen in her book *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, focuses on Enlightenment ideas as a basis for Victorian Occult practices. Owen argues that the search for Enlightenment through Eastern traditions was akin to the search for knowledge and truth during the Enlightenment Movement. Both of these Movements were based on the seeking of ancient knowledge. While Enlightenment thinkers based a lot of their thinking on Greek and Roman ideas, Occultists based their thought on Eastern religious beliefs and traditions.<sup>iv</sup> Theosophists focused on Indian Hinduism and Buddhism, while members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn looked to Egyptian religion, Judaism, amongst many other Eastern religions.

In this paper I will argue that Romanticism, Neoclassicism, Enlightenment thinking, and scientific advancement all impacted the Victorian Occult in order to create an amalgamation of Eastern and Western traditions that was unique to that time. Romanticism was present in the Victorian Occult in an emphasis on the return to nature and history, the view of nature as unknowable, and a preoccupation with the history of Eastern countries and religions<sup>v</sup>. Neoclassical ideas in art and culture encouraged the adoption of Greek and Roman ideas which led to the adoption of Eastern cultures much like Classical people became fascinated with mystery cults like that of the Egyptian Goddess Isis<sup>vi</sup>. Enlightenment thinking was adopted by Freemasons and other occult organizations in a reaction to the scientific and industrial advancements of the time<sup>vii</sup>.

### Enlightenment ideas in the Occult

One does not necessarily associate Enlightenment thinking with the occult, a field which is often discredited and overlooked in the study of history. However, many Enlightenment ideas made their way into the practice of occult beliefs during the Victorian era. Freemasons for example, believed in the concept of brotherhood that was present in many Enlightenment Movements, especially the French Revolution whose rally cry was “libertie, egalitie, fraternitie” or liberty, freedom, and brotherhood<sup>viii</sup>. Famous Freemason, Ignaz Edler von Born explained the scientific root for the organization by arguing that their mythical founder Hermes Trismegistus was the father of science. Florian Ebeling explains this belief in his book *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus : Hermeticism From Ancient to Modern Times*. Ebeling states, “Freemasons, Born observed, should recollect the Enlightenment roots of the mysteries in order to promote a general revision of Freemasonry: “May superstition and fanaticism never desecrate our [lodges]!” In his reconstruction of the “Egyptian mysteries,” Hermes Trismegistus

had a place of honor as founder of Egyptian science”<sup>ix</sup>. Because Egyptian religion was seen as highly scientific by the Freemasons, they believed that Freemasonry was based on science.

In societies like The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an emphasis was put on the use of scientific reasoning and the scientific method to record their experimentations. A segment from *The Equinox*, a journal edited by order member Alistair Crowley lists the process of recording their experimentations for members to abide by, it states, “2. It is highly important to note the physical and mental condition of the experimenter or experimenters. 3. The time and place of all experiments must be noted; also the state of the weather, and generally all conditions which might conceivably have any result upon the experiment either as adjuvants to or causes of the result, or as inhibiting it, or as sources of error. 4. The A.°. A. °., will not take official notice of any experiments which are not thus properly recorded Yet the emotions should be noted, as being some of the conditions. Let then the record be written with sincerity and care, and with practice it will”<sup>x</sup>. Though the author does emphasize the importance of understanding the emotions at play during the experiment, it is portrayed as a factor which could negatively affect their results. This is more of a modern idea, however the search for knowledge and understanding is clearly an Enlightenment concept.

Another Enlightenment belief that was present in the practices of the Victorian Occultists, was the belief that all people should be able to seek and gain knowledge in order to reason for themselves. Adam Michael Birkholz, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn states in his book *Compass of the Sages* that, “True wisdom rests not on this or that society, not on ceremonies, not on the opinion of this or that Order; it must be accessible to each and every man’. According to Birkholz, the goal is ‘to acquire wisdom, skill, and virtue, to

please God, and to serve one's neighbor<sup>'xi</sup>." The idea that one should seek out knowledge and wisdom for their own benefit is one that is unmistakably Enlightenment based.

### Romanticism in the Occult

Just as the occult embraced reasoning and science to validate their magic, they also used intangible ideas and feelings in the same way. This brings us to our next cultural movement, Romanticism. Romanticism was a movement that occurred as a reaction to the harsh conditions of the Industrial Revolution. Romanticists believed that nature was an unstoppable, unknowable force which humans should not attempt to bend to their will like many types of industry had done. Railways busted through mountains with explosives, and smoke clouded the airs of London. It is no wonder that members of occult societies would embrace Eastern beliefs which encouraged man's oneness with nature and his own humanity. Romanticism also encouraged people to explore their shared histories. The Hermetic principle of rhythm illustrates how feeling was used to validate occult beliefs. In their founding text *The Kybalion* the author explains, "If you will stop and consider a moment, you will realize how much these swings of Rhythm have affected you in your life—how a period of Enthusiasm has been invariably followed by an opposite feeling and mood of Depression. Likewise, your moods and periods of Courage have been succeeded by equal moods of Fear. And so it has ever been with the majority of persons—tides of feeling have ever risen and fallen with them..."<sup>xii</sup>. This concept illustrates not only the Romantic belief in the unknowability of human nature, but it also encourages Order members to embrace the changeability of their circumstances.

The founder of Theosophy, Helena Blavatsky shows us another way in which Romanticism has impacted the culture of the occult. While Enlightenment ideas encourage the search for knowledge, which Freemasons seek through science and math, Theosophists believed

that sense was more important than knowledge. Theosophists believe that sense comes from the true understanding of ancient teachings, not from new technologies or theories. In her book *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky quotes Hermes Trismegistus when she states that, “Knowledge differs much from sense; for sense is of things that surmount it, but Knowledge is the end of sense’—i.e., of the illusion of our physical brain and its intellect<sup>xiii</sup>”. By using Hermes’ definition of knowledge as the end of sense, Blavatsky breaks from the traditional Enlightenment belief and gives her own understanding of what true understanding is. This concept after all is very important to the Theosophical belief system. Only through understanding and the search for truth does Blavatsky argue that humans can reach the likeness of God and purity of soul which all people aspire to.

The Romantic fascination with history is also present in the Victorian Occult. The creation of the “mystic east” which Said explains in *Orientalism* is an excellent example of this. In *Reincarnation* authors Pascal and Rothwell explain why India was seen as such a mystically superior place when he states, “Northern India was the cradle of the present race—the fifth—the Eden of our humanity, our physical, moral, mental, and spiritual mother. From her womb issued the emigrant hordes that peopled Europe after spreading over Egypt, Asia Minor, and Siberia; it was her code of ethics that civilised Chaldæa, Greece, Rome, and the whole of the East...”<sup>xiv</sup>. The authors see India as the cradle of humanity, where all people originated and from where the code of ethics that guides humanity was born. It is then easy to understand why so many societies and occult systems based their teachings on those of mythical “mahatmas” or Buddhist gurus. If the origins of man lie in India, then the truth of man’s purpose and mystical abilities would also be present there.

When trying to understand the obsession with history in the Romantic Movement, it is unclear why it is present, however it is possible that a neoclassical obsession with the epic histories and heroes of Greece and Rome inspired a desire for people to uncover the wonders of their own history. Leon Rosenthal explains his theory on the occult preoccupation with history when he states, “The shape that history took [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was] highly Romantic and it made its way into literature, theatre and public balls under that form. Having located in the past a joie de vivre quite lacking in the present, Romantic artists played a role in a quasi-universal Movement<sup>xv</sup>”. Rosenthal argues that not only was there a Romantic obsession with history, but a romanticizing of history that we see in the Victorian Occult. The way in which Occultists revered Egyptian religion and culture shows a Romantic understanding of the culture. Since the Rosetta Stone had just recently been discovered, the fact that people all over the world could read and understand Egyptian writing, opened a door to a mystical world full of magic and wonder that had been locked before<sup>xvi</sup>.

Theosophists and those like them searched for truth in the ancient wisdom of other societies, like Buddhists. Eastern religions were the source of much of this knowledge, because the Orient was seen as the origin of life and an uncorrupted region of the world. This idea is very reminiscent of Romanticism, which argued that industries were corrupting powers over nature<sup>xvii</sup>. If that were true, then a society free from modern industrialization and Darwinistic scientific beliefs would be morally superior to Western society.

### Colonial Implications on the Occult

This research has admittedly been rather kind to English colonizers in the East. Because this project focuses on the Occult in England, the sources used are from the perspective of the

colonizer. Most members of these societies were English, but that was not always the case. When studying Theosophy in particular you see a collaboration between the colonizer and the colonized which seems to be an unanticipated result of the occult adoption of Eastern beliefs. In her book *Isis Unveiled*, Theosophy creator Helena Blavatsky argues that not only is Eastern society superior to Western society, but that Eastern people are more suited to occult practices. Blavatsky states that, “Civilized nations lack the phenomenal powers of endurance, both mental and physical, of the Easterns; the favoring temperamental idiosyncrasies of the Orientals are utterly wanting in them. In the Hindu, the Arabian, the Thibetan, an intuitive perception of the possibilities of Occult natural forces in subjection to human will, comes by inheritance; and in them, the physical senses as well as the spiritual are far more finely developed than in the Western races”<sup>xviii</sup>. From this quote we can infer that Blavatsky believes that individuals from the mystic Orient were more biologically fit for the practice of magic.

Indian natives also believed that their magical powers were superior to those of Europeans. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said quotes an Indian scholar who asserts, ““In the Orient we represent spirituality, justice, and the category of the ideal. England is powerful there; Germany is all-powerful; but we possess Oriental souls”<sup>xix</sup>.

The idea that Oriental occult practices were superior to Western occult practices was in direct contention with the culture of colonialism that was present in India at the time. In *Orientalism*, Dr. Said argues that Europeans simply assimilated Eastern Ideas into their own European ideas, “...ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.... The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony”<sup>xx</sup>. Though the occult practices and magical superiority of the

East were embraced by colonialists, it was through the lens of opportunism. This was not always the case, however.

In the case of the Theosophical Society, leaders worked closely with native Indians to try and gain independence for the country under British control. Alex Owen argues this when she states, "...under the influence of Annie Besant (future president of the Theosophical Society), the society became closely identified with the cause of Indian nationalism. Besant herself was to be interned in India for activities relating to her support of Indian Home Rule, and... was elected president of the Indian National Congress<sup>xxi</sup>." It would be misleading to argue that colonialist Brits were all idealistic or that all colonialists were opportunistic in their reasoning for adopting Eastern beliefs as their own. There were a few among the Theosophists who genuinely seemed to care for the people they were colonizing. However, the majority of Victorian Occultists were far removed from people whose beliefs they appropriated.

### The White Man's Burden

While some sought to push forward Eastern independence from their colonial invaders, many of the English believed that it was only through the intervention of Europeans that Easterners could reach their full potential. The confluence of Eastern and Western beliefs and culture was used by Europeans to "civilize" Easterners with more reasoning and enlighten the souls of business minded Europeans. In this segment by Edward Said, he argues that the success of Egypt as a modern nation relies on its ability to embrace western culture when he states, "the real future of Egypt... lies not in the direction of a narrow nationalism, which will only embrace native Egyptians... but rather in that of an enlarged cosmopolitanism<sup>xxii</sup>. The idea that cosmopolitanism or Western culture would be the source of success for Eastern civilizations was one that was common during the Victorian colonial period.

The popularity of Neoclassicism explains why this idea was accepted so easily. When looking at the example of Rome, not only did they absorb the beliefs and cultures of those who they imperialized, but they spread their culture to them. In *Theosophy and the World's Problems*, Annie Besant shares a lecture from J. Krishnamurti in which he argues that, "... Rome became great, with the result that Rome was able to extend her Empire and become the 'mistress of the world'"<sup>xxiii</sup>. In this example, the idea of Rome's success rests on her ability to not only absorb but to spread her culture around the world. In this same way Victorian Colonialists believed that by joining together Eastern and Western traditions, Eastern countries can be truly great like the Roman Empire before them. Westerners embraced this idea to its fullest extent and used Eastern beliefs to profit and create new occult societies and belief systems.

### Conclusion

Romantic, Neoclassical, and Enlightenment influences all impacted the way in which the Victorian Occult was formed and practiced. Whether it was through the incorporation of Eastern ideals, or through an emphasis on the search for knowledge, these cultural Movements did not leave the occult untouched. It is easy to look at each individual belief system as a separate entity which spontaneously arose out of the minds of individuals like Helena Blavatsky or Samuel Liddell Mathers. However, when one examines the influences on each occult belief system, they will find that the cultural Movements of the time had immense power in the shaping of those beliefs and the societies that formed around them. The Enlightenment influenced the Freemasons in their embrace of the concept of brotherhood and the search for knowledge. The Romantic Movement lent its emphasis on nature, emotion, and national histories to Theosophy. The Neoclassical Movement led the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to emphasize Egyptian, Greek, and Roman symbolism and mythology in their organization. These are just a few

examples of the impact which cultural Movements and the adoption of foreign beliefs had on the Victorian Occult.

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