

SECRET KNOWLEDGE, SECRET HISTORIES:
OCCULTISM AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN FIN-DE-SIECLE ENGLAND

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I.

Writing ten years before the turn of the twenty-first century, Elaine Showalter opens her *Sexual Anarchy*, an analysis of the literature and culture of the end of the nineteenth century that draws frequent links to our own fin-de-siècle moment, by asking:

Could there be cycles in time like cycles in the weather, like hurricanes and earthquakes, which are chaotic but not random?...Frank Kermode argued that "the sense of an ending" is a myth of the temporal that affects our thought about ourselves, our histories, our disciplines, and our fictions: "We project our existential anxieties onto history; there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the peculiarity of our imagination, that it chooses always to be at the end of an era." The crises of the *fin de siècle*, then, are more intensely experienced, more emotionally fraught, more weighted with symbolic and historical meaning, because we invest them with metaphors of death and rebirth that we project onto the final decades and years of the century. Myths and metaphors cannot be separated from our historical understanding of the fin-de-siècle experience, for they are part of it, not merely decorative flourishes in an objective historical description, but constitutive of the experiences themselves. (2-3)

Showalter proposes that history and culture are inseparable from and productive of one another: the end of the century becomes a

such a charged locus of meaning because of its specific place in history, in the progression of time, but simultaneously that specific place in history is always already charged with those meanings, already turned into metaphor before it even happens.

And metaphors are infinitely replicable: Showalter's suggestion that there might be "cycles in time" implies not so much that "history repeats itself" but that the way we *imagine* history repeats itself, and thus that historical representation is an imaginative enterprise both as it is happening and in retrospect. Furthermore, then, history can be reimagined: we can reach back into it and manipulate the way that we think about it and the way that we think about ourselves in light of it. This paper will be concerned with "history," with a few of the things that were going on in England in roughly the years 1880-1914 and the ways that people were talking about them, but it will also be concerned with the imaginative creation of narratives about history, with the dense intersection of "symbolic and historical meaning" at the fin-de-siècle: with the re/un/dis-covering of histories - hidden histories, secret histories, fantastic histories; occult histories and queer histories - by writers involved in certain literary and religious movements that emerged out of the "intensely experienced, emotionally fraught" cultural atmosphere of the

turn of the twentieth century. These versions of history, like Showalter's, propose, whether literally or figuratively, the existence of "cycles in time," and question normative conceptions of beginnings and ends, adamantly disrupting the boundaries between "myths and metaphors" and "objective historical description." These are also histories that put the "anxieties" and "metaphors of death and rebirth" that shape our heavily loaded sense of the "end of an era" into dramatic play through the creation of alternate mythologies, sometimes resistant to and sometimes complicit with more culturally dominant ones; and they are histories that, within elaborately constructed rhetorics of secrecy and revelation, contain the repressed yet unsilenced histories of still other kinds of secrets.

II.

As numerous critics and historians in the wake of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* have observed, "the 1880s and 1890s, in the words of the novelist George Gissing, were decades of 'sexual anarchy,' when all the laws that governed sexual identity and behavior seemed to be breaking down" (Showalter 3). Spasms of panic and exhilaration run through the literary and cultural productions of this deeply vexed historical moment:

the era of the imminent decline of the British Empire and the values of Victorianism and the rise of a self-conscious "modernity"; of the emergence of the literary/artistic movements of decadence and aestheticism and then modernism; of the proliferation, or the perceived proliferation, of "New Women" and effeminate men and of the introduction of the new words (feminism, homosexuality) to describe them and new laws to control them; of the increasing influence of the medical/scientific classification of racial and sexual "types" in the discourses of sexology and degeneration and then psychoanalysis. The most iconic moment of this restructuring of sexuality (specifically homosexuality) is, perhaps, the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde; and the most iconic analysis of this process remains Foucault's: "This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (*History* 43).

Although this "sexual anarchy" has received far more critical attention throughout the twentieth century, the fin de siècle was also characterized by what might be called,

equivalently, "spiritual anarchy." In late nineteenth century England, a large number of occult movements rose to social prominence, widening the scope of religious possibility for the public and disrupting categorical boundaries between history and mythology, science and magic, East and West. Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment* analyzes this "widespread emergence of a new esoteric spirituality and a proliferation of spiritual groups and identities that together constituted what contemporaries called the new 'spiritual movement of the age' " (4). Occult groups like the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (famous for the membership of W.B. Yeats), and the Society for Psychical Research attracted thousands of late Victorians seeking enlightenment, who "turned...to the heterodox spirituality of occultism, with its animistic sense of a living universe and broad range of teachings drawn from sources as diverse as those of mystical Christianity, the Hermetic traditions of the West, and the religions of the East " (5). Intimately and complexly engaged with contemporary reappraisals of science and religion, with emergent theories of sexuality and consciousness, and with the cultural and political ramifications of British imperialism, "the occult and the 'mysticism' with which it was synonymous were integral to the cultural milieu at the fin de siècle"

(Owen 28-29), despite being disavowed within a wider cultural insistence on the supposedly "disenchanted" rationalism of modernity. Owen echoes Eve Sedgwick's claim in her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet* that "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured - indeed, fractured - by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (1) when she proposes that occultism holds a largely unrecognized yet deeply influential place at the center of modernity and the modern consciousness that sees itself, broadly, as eschewing magic and mysticism in favor of rationality. Like many projects of queer theory and queer history, including Sedgwick's, *The Place of Enchantment* "explores what has been disregarded, marginalized, or forgotten" (6); the book argues that "occultism was constitutive of modern culture at the fin de siècle; conversely, it seeks to trace the lineaments of 'the modern' in the gestures and presumptions of the occult" (16).

In this paper, I would like to make some explorations into the rich, complicated, and critically underexplored relationship between occultism and homosexuality around the turn of the twentieth century. The structural connections between these two subjects extend much further than the already noted similarities

between the critical projects of their interpretation and their recovery from the margins of history and culture. As same-sex desire (most dramatically although by no means exclusively that between men) came to be newly defined, celebrated, pathologized, and prohibited through the various artistic, medical, and legal discourses that took shape in the late Victorian period, those who experienced it - or, more accurately, those for whom it appears to have had some kind of erotic or epistemological pull - experimented with how to represent a traditionally "unspeakable" desire that had begun to be compulsively spoken about and at the same time ever more stringently silenced; with how to restructure the rhetoric of a long-held secret that rather suddenly became, with results both expressively enabling and violently repressive, an "open secret" - *the* "open secret." Meanwhile, as homosexuality renegotiated its place within the discursive structures of secrecy, occultism - the term "occult," after all, being derived from the Latin *occultus*, meaning "hidden," "secret," or "concealed" (OED) - inserted itself into those structures and based its appeal on their manipulation.

Strikingly, many of the late Victorian "paranoid Gothic" plots in which twentieth-century critics have located a struggle to articulate (or to disarticulate; or to articulate precisely

through disarticulation) this conflicted position of homosexual desire¹ utilize or share the thematic energies, if not the specific vocabulary, of late Victorian occultism: a wary fascination with science and technology; the ancient but newly underscored problems of the division of the mind from the soul from the body; the pull of Orientalist seductions and degenerationist anxieties; utopian fantasy and dystopian horror; emergent (re)definitions of modernity and of history and of the place of the individual subject within each; and, perhaps most powerfully, the elusive, inexorable force of "the secret" - secret knowledge and secret sexuality, open secrets and empty secrets, secrets that must be revealed and secrets that cannot be revealed. By tracing the insertion of homosexual desires into the discourses of occultism (mainly through the case of C.W. Leadbeater) and the insertion of occult fixations into literary representations of homosexuality (through Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), I will argue that sexual desire between men, its longtime association with tropes of unspeakability and secrecy paradoxically reinforced by a newly

¹ Classic examples include Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The term "paranoid Gothic" is Eve Sedgwick's; see *Epistemology*, chapter 4, and *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, chapter 5 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

heightened place in public discourse, found a particularly potent and inevitably troubled avenue of expression in the structures of secrecy with which occultism shaped itself; and that the uncomfortable yet productive association between the two, the always-incomplete containment of one secret knowledge within another, suggests both the limitations of occultism's reconstructive project and the profound possibilities that it might present for the reimagination of narratives of history and desire.

III.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick argues that in the nineteenth century, "through a process that became most visible in, but antedated and extended far beyond the trials of Oscar Wilde, the discourse related to male homosexuality itself became for the first time extremely public and highly ramified through medical, psychiatric, penal, literary, and other social institutions" (164), and that, simultaneously and perhaps consequently, this discourse of male homosexuality became inextricably linked to an epistemology and rhetoric of secrecy:

[B]y the turn of the nineteenth century, when it had become fully current...that knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively

constituted as secrecy...The subject - the thematics - of knowledge and ignorance themselves, of innocence and initiation, of secrecy and disclosure, become not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole but ever more specifically, now, the homosexual topic. (73-74)

Sedgwick supports her claim by her tracing of the long history of the prohibition, in Western Christian society, not only of the act of sodomy but of speech about it, its definition as "that sin which shall be neither named nor committed" (quoted in Sedgwick 7)². Out of this repressive silencing, then, arose the practice of speaking about desire between men precisely *through* the rhetoric of unspeakability, climactically expressed by Oscar Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas in his 1894 poem "Two Loves": "I am the love that dare not speak its name" ("Trials").

Knowledge and ignorance, innocence and initiation, secrecy and disclosure - all of these terms are as epistemologically inseparable, in fin-de-siècle culture, from the discourse of

² More recent critics taking on the issues of male sexuality in the late nineteenth century, while acknowledging their debt to Sedgwick's groundbreaking work, have suggested that it is perhaps insufficiently nuanced. James Eli Adams notes that Sedgwick's "marvelous literary readings are relatively impoverished historically" (15), while Christopher Lane argues that "since nineteenth-century literature is replete with hetero- and nonsexual secrets, we can't accept Sedgwick's claim" that, to paraphrase reductively, the secret is almost always a homosexual one. While these criticisms of Sedgwick are valid and important, I remain convinced by her insistence that in late Victorian literature the "secret" is very often, if certainly not always, suggestive of homosexual meaning.

occultism as from that of homosexuality. If the representation of homosexuality has been historically structured around secrecy because of homophobic prohibitions against openly acknowledging it, occultism is structured around secrecy because it derives its power and appeal from the promise of the revelation - or the partial revelation, or the revelation only to those initiated - of hidden knowledge. Clearly, these are drastically different motivations for the deployment of secrecy. Yet, as many critics have argued, homosexuality, too, at a historical moment when everyone seemed fanatically interested in all kinds of secret things, discovered a certain power and appeal, a certain license for fluid and erotically enticing expression, from its relegation to secrecy. As Harry Cocks puts it: the "tactics and vocabularies of evasion, along with the stringent legal sanctions available to punish male homosexuality...suggest a landscape of simple repression. Yet I want to suggest instead that this climate also provided, paradoxically, a series of opportunities for those who felt attracted by the possibilities of same-sex desire" (192). What kinds of opportunities and difficulties, then, might arise when the "tactics and vocabularies of evasion" of late Victorian homosexuality collide with those of late Victorian occultism?

Anthropologists and other scholars who research occult and esoteric religious traditions struggle with what Hugh B. Urban calls " 'the double bind' of secrecy," the problem of studying "a religious tradition that practices *active dissimulation*": as an outsider, a researcher will not have access to the religion's knowledge, but if the researcher manages to become an insider he or she will be barred by definition from sharing the knowledge with outsiders; "[i]n short, if one 'knows,' one cannot speak; and if one speaks, one must not really 'know' " (209-210). Urban suggests remedying this problem with a "shift in our approach to esotericism," arguing that secrecy "is better understood, not in terms of its content or substance - which is ultimately unknowable, if there even is one - but rather in terms of its *forms* or *strategies* - the tactics by which social agents conceal or reveal, hoard or exchange, certain valued information" (210). To an extent, Urban's proposal applies to my project here. Although the content of certain parts of fin-de-siècle occult doctrines will be relevant, I am not aiming to uncover any hidden aspects of them, nor to debate whether there is any "truth" in occultism or whether, has frequently been alleged, it's all a "sham." Likewise, I am certainly not interested in the question of whether a given author or historic figure was "really" homosexual (nor, for that matter, the question of

whether homosexuality itself - or any other category of gender or sexuality - "really" exists). Rather, like Urban, I am interested in the ways that the formal structures and the rhetoric of secrecy and disclosure are deployed; specifically, in what happens when two rhetorics of secrecy encounter one another, when one secret knowledge is contained - inserted into or repressed by - another, or when their imaginative energies work concurrently to reveal or to produce previously unexplored realms of knowledge.

Jacques Derrida's *The Gift Of Death*, interpreting an essay by Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, describes the history of European Christianity as that of the "exchanging of one secret for another" within "a history of truth as a history of dissimulation, within a genealogy that is a cryptology or general *mystology*" (20). The successive replacements of the ancient secrets of "demonic" or "orgiastic mystery" - in other words, occultism - with that of Platonism and then with that of the Christian "*mysterium tremendum*" (the mystery of God and Christ's sacrifice) work by the psychoanalytic mechanisms of repression and incorporation, with their necessarily attendant specters of incompleteness and return: "the mystery that is incorporated, then repressed, is never destroyed. This genealogy has an axiom, namely, that history never effaces what it buries;

it always keeps within itself the secret of whatever it encrypts, the secret of its secret. This is a secret history of kept secrets" (21). History thus contains not only multiple layers of secrecy but multiple *histories*, a pile of narratives that results in a "blurring of the lines of every epoch": "the incorporation of one mystery by the other also amounts to an *incorporation* of one immortality within another, of one eternity within another" (11). Both of these points are crucial here: that competing histories exist simultaneously within one another, and that a secret incorporated within another secret is never really annihilated. The dominant rationalist and homophobic discourses of Christianity and modernity, then, always contain the repressed secrets of occultism and homosexuality; and its dominant history always contains the secrets of their alternate histories. "And what one keeps inside at the very moment that there comes into play a new experience of secrecy and a new structure of responsibility as an apportioning of mystery, is the buried memory or crypt of a more ancient secret" (9).

IV.

The Theosophical Society, perhaps the best known and most influential of the late Victorian occult movements, was founded

in New York in 1875 by the Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, "an enigmatic and charismatic figure with a suitably mysterious past" (Owen 29). Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical doctrine, supposedly passed on to her from Tibetan masters, was based in what Alex Owen calls "an unruly amalgam" of Western and Eastern philosophical and religious tradition, driven by an anti-Christian cultivation of a diverse pluralism and by an Orientalist fascination with the exotic East (29). Theosophy quickly installed itself in the imagination of American and British spiritual seekers; the first edition of Blavatsky's *Issis Unveiled* (1877) sold out in ten days. The title of that book, along with that of her 1888 masterwork *The Secret Doctrine*, points to the importance of tropes of secrecy to occultism's self-definition and to its widespread allure; to its belief in, and promise of unveiling to the initiated, "a hidden body of revelatory knowledge, part of a secret tradition that has been preserved and transmitted over the ages by an enlightened illuminati" (Owen 22).

Although much recent analysis of the fin de siècle ignores the occultist craze, contemporary observers saw it as one of the major symptomatic trends of cultural transformation. Edward Carpenter, who flirted with Blavatsky's teachings early on though later rejected them (Dixon 414), categorizes it with

better-known social, sexual, and artistic movements: "It was a fascinating and enthusiastic period...The Socialist and Anarchist propaganda, the Feminist and Suffragist upheaval, the huge Trade-union growth, the Theosophic movement, the new currents in the Theatrical, Musical and Artistic worlds, the torrent even of change in the Religious world - all constituted so many streams and headwaters converging, as it were, to a great river" (*Days* 245). Carpenter, best known today for his progressive views on homosexuality, was (along with Havelock Ellis) among those who believed in a kind of inherent connection between the homosexual and the mystical "temperaments." In the introduction to his 1914 study *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk*, echoing contemporary debates over the relationship between sexual orientation and gender characteristics³, Carpenter observes that while in some societies homosexuality corresponds to hypermasculinity and military prowess,

it would seem that where the homosexual tendency was of a more effeminate and passive sort, it led to a distaste, on

³ As Elaine Showalter points out, although today we tend to associate fin-de-siècle conceptions of homosexuality with the inversion model, there was in fact much debate over whether the figure of the homosexual should be considered effeminate or hyper-masculine; an "intermediate sex" or "woman's soul trapped in a man's body," or "the highest, most perfect evolutionary stage of gender differentiation" (173). Proponents of the second model, including Oscar Wilde, tended to also view sex between men as embodying high Greco-Roman ideals of aesthetic and moral superiority. See Showalter 172-177.

the part of those individuals or groups who were affected by it, for the ordinary masculine occupations and business of the world, and to an inclination to retire into the precincts of the Temples and the services (often sexual) of Religion...not only the religious life in our sense, but the dedication to such things as Magic, learning, poetry, music, prophecy, and other occupations not generally favoured by the normal man, the hunter and the warrior. There are also some considerations which go to show that this class of Intermediate did actually tend to develop faculties like divination, clairvoyance, ecstasy, and so forth... (12)

Making striking connections between religions, sex, and art, Carpenter goes on to suggest that the remarkable achievements of these "intermediate types" in these various "occupations" might be a direct result of their exclusion from mainstream society ("finding himself different from the great majority, sought after by some and despised by others...he would be forced to *think*...He would become one of the first thinkers, dreamers, discoverers" [59]) and of the unique perspective enabled by their bisexuality (in the Freudian sense of the word, meaning not attraction to both sexes but the containment of "male" and "female" qualities in a single body and/or psyche): "I believe that the blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments would in some of these cases produce persons whose perceptions would be so subtle and complex and rapid as to come under the head of genius, persons of intuitive mind who would perceive

things without knowing how...diviners and prophets in a very real sense" (63).

In certain points, Theosophical doctrine appears to echo the correspondence that Carpenter traces between clairvoyant abilities and non-normative sexuality; suggesting that, also given their strong associations with progressive causes like feminism and socialism and their general resistance to social and religious orthodoxies, occult societies might logically have been a site of acceptance of homosexuality (Dixon 415). A crucial aspect of Blavatsky's secret doctrine involves the idealization of a "divine hermaphrodite," and the existence of a primordial bisexuality that preceded humanity's division into separate male and female entities, and that - given that "humanity is the child of cyclical destiny" (*Stanzas* 230) - will eventually return. Theosophy's highest Deity is neither male nor female, and "one of the most important goals of spiritual development, according to Blavatsky, was to realize and manifest something of the balanced, bisexual unity of the Absolute in one's earthy existence" (Dixon 418). Although her doctrine wavers between a deification of asexuality and of bisexuality and tends towards the former, Blavatsky consistently reject the Judeo-Christian privileging of two distinct and embodied genders. "The present race is on its ascending arc;

and the sixth will be rapidly growing out of its bonds of matter, and even of flesh" (*Stanzas* 229), she says, appearing suggestively aligned with queer reimaginings of the limits of the human body. She likewise reimagines the limits of history, claiming that the evolution of the human race is a cyclical process that stretches back many millions of years before the supposed start of geographic time: "We are convinced that our present modern civilization is but the latest dawn of that which already has been seen an innumerable number of times upon this planet" (*Land* 10).

Blavatsky's version of the histories of the planet and the species varies, but the following outline can be taken as representative:

As regards the evolution of mankind, the secret doctrine postulates three new propositions, which stand in direct antagonism to modern science as well as to current religions dogmas: it teaches (a) the simultaneous evolution of seven human groups on seven different portions of our globe; (b) the birth of the *astral*, before the *physical* body: the former being a model for the latter...There are two "creations" so called. These "creations," according to occult teachings, refer respectively to the formation of the primordial seven *men* by the Progenitors or the Fathers: and to that of the human groups after the "fall" [the separation of the sexes]. The first race, which was *imperfect*, was before the "balance" (sexes) existed. They were "destroyed," as a race, by being merged in their own progeny...that is to say, the sexless [first] race reincarnated in the [potentially] bisexual [second race]; the latter in the androgynes [the early third race]; these again in the sexual, the later third race. (*Stanzas* 159)

Even in this one passage Blavatsky wavers between conceptualizing the onset of gender difference as something to be celebrated, a "balance," and something to be mourned, a "fall"; but in either case what it is *not* is a certainty or an eternal given. The secret doctrine's reinterpretation of the history of humanity and the earth, standing "in direct antagonism to modern science" and religion, includes a reinterpretation of the history of gender; one which, significantly, begins with androgyny rather than a male/female binary. Despite its frequent theoretical instability and self-contradiction and its apparent (although maybe more so to us than to the Victorians) scientific unviability, not to mention its insidious manifestations of classic Victorian Orientalism and the racist theories of degeneration which were a widespread fixation in the late nineteenth century⁴, I would suggest that there is something to be savored not only in Madame Blavatsky's religious pluralism but in the passionate virtuosity of her revisions of embodiment and geography and temporality, stretching across countless millennia and multiple planes of consciousness. In a moment of striking eloquence she says,

⁴ Blavatsky writes, for example: "We, Europeans, are just emerging from the very bottom of a new cycle, and progressing upwards, while the Asiatics - Hindus especially - are the lingering remnants of the nations which filled the world in the previous and now departed cycles" (*Land 11*).

"This may be regarded as poeticized fiction now; but it was poeticized *truth* then" (*Stanzas* 163), and there is something marvelous - and something which, as I will discuss further, resonates deeply with certain practices of queer representation - in this defiant "poeticization" of history, of memory, across the lines between truth and fiction, science and mysticism.

The poetic promise of Blavatsky's fabulous narratives of primordial androgyny aside, though, the Theosophical Society's relationship to the question of homosexuality was in reality deeply troubled. For all of its commitment to social progressiveness, the Society was not eager to fall into the "long tradition in Christian Europe that links religious with sexual unorthodoxy and heresy with homosexuality" (Dixon 416). Among the many avant-garde literary figures who were attracted to Theosophy, whether for its resistive potential or for its exoticized glamour or both, Oscar Wilde attended some meetings and was apparently welcomed by Madame Blavatsky, whom Owen claims cultivated a certain androgyny in her own image (107). But Annie Besant, who succeeded Blavatsky as president of the Theosophical Society after a controversial career campaigning for women's rights and birth control, would later say, disapprovingly, "I heard [Blavatsky] warmly invite Oscar Wilde

to come into the T.S. at the very time when, as afterwards proved, he was practicing the *nameless abominations* that landed him in jail" (quoted in Owen 112; italics mine). The anecdote is indicative of the extent to which, despite the apparent discursive affinities between mysticism and homosexuality that I have outlined, "occult societies evinced the same anxieties and divisions around questions of gender and sexuality that fractured the general cultural landscape" (Owen 111). For Besant and many of her colleagues, homosexuality remained a "nameless abomination," an unspeakable sin that occultism largely preferred to keep repressed under its own secret doctrine of the ancient mysteries that it claimed, in turn, modern science and religion had repressed, adding a fascinating twist to Derrida's evocation of Christianity's effort "to maintain control over orgiastic mystery, to have it work in its very subordination, like a slave or servant, in other words to set to work one secret by pressing it into service for another - but also to put the demonic secret of Eros to work within this new hierarchy" (12). Within a psychoanalytic paradigm, not only must the repressed secret - whether that of occultism within Christianity or that of homosexuality within occultism - "return" to disrupt its container, but its energies must in

fact "motivate subterraneously" (Derrida 19) that very structure of containment.

V.

Charles Webster Leadbeater, who authored of dozens of Theosophical books and pamphlets after joining the movement in 1884 (after a career as an Anglican minister), was widely revered for his close alliance with Annie Besant and for his allegedly unsurpassed clairvoyant powers. In 1906, he was accused by some members of the American branch of the Society of sexual impropriety towards his young male students - teaching them about masturbation, and possibly engaging in sexual contact of some kind with them - and was forced to leave the Society. Although his membership was reinstated two years later and his reputation largely redeemed, allegations continued to follow him throughout his career, and the Leadbeater scandals shook the Theosophical Society deeply, heightening external scrutiny and internal fractures over leadership, doctrine, and sexual mores. According to a 1924 pamphlet by a Margaret Thomas: "At period intervals from the first revelation of trouble in 1906 right up to the present day, there have been certain dark periods in the life of the Theosophical Society connected with the moral character of Mr. C. W. Leadbeater...*They pertain to his sex*

teachings to boys - there are other sinister inferences" (35; italics mine). That last sentence, with its awkward shape, its grammatically disjointed second half, with those "sinister" yet unspecified "other...inferences" following that evacuated and evocative dash, seems stylistically charged with a containment of the "open secret" of homosexuality. While it seems impossible to determine what if anything actually happened between Leadbeater and these boys, whether almost exactly a hundred years later we would consider him a preternaturally enlightened sex educator or a criminal (and, in either case, I certainly am not suggesting an argument which might seem to equate homosexuality and pedophilia), I would like to emphasize the complicated interplay in the available record of the Leadbeater case between conflicting secrecies, between the interception of occultism into the "centuries-long historical chain of substantive uses of space-clearing negatives to void and at the same time to underline the possibility of male same-sex genitality" (Sedgwick 202) and of the interruption of the possibility of male same-sex genitality into the "secret tradition that has been preserved and transmitted over the ages by an enlightened illuminati" (Owen 22).

Mrs. Helen Dennis wrote to Annie Besant in January 1906, listing the charges against Leadbeater:

First: That he is teaching boys given into his care habits of self-abuse and demoralizing personal practices.

Second: That he does this with deliberate intent and under the guise of occult training or with the promise of the increase of physical manhood.

Third: That he has demanded at least in one case, promise of the utmost secrecy. (Quoted in Tillett 77)

As distressing as the fact that he was preaching masturbation to the boys (which he did not deny, expressing a firm belief in its importance for adolescent sexual health), apparently, is the fact that he used the secrets of "occult training" as a vehicle for communicating the secrets of a forbidden sexuality. Moreover - and perhaps, being last, worst - he added another layer of discursive masquerade to the matter, seducing a promise of secrecy from his students (a powerful method: "Asked his reason for concealing these facts so long from his parents, he said, 'He made me promise not to tell'" (Dennis, quoted in Tillett 78). Further evidence, and the suggestion that there might have been something more than instruction going on, was provided by a letter supposedly sent by Leadbeater to one of the boys, with a certain damning passage written in "cypher," in a code of rearranged letters: "I am glad to hear of the rapid growth and strength of the results...Spontaneous manifestations are undesirable and should be discouraged...Tell me fully. Glad sensation is so pleasant. Thousand kisses darling" (quoted in

Tillett 82). Confronted with the document, Leadbeater did not disavow authorship entirely but also said he did not recognize it in "its present form"; he later refused to give a full explanation, saying that it was a "gross impertinence" (quoted in Tillett 83; impossible to ignore, here, the shades of the charge of "gross indecency" against Oscar Wilde) that he should even be asked to do so. Running throughout the complicated chain of allegations, denials, and changes of opinion that led to Leadbeater's forced resignation and eventual readmittance to the Society is this elaborately construed rhetoric of secrecy and concealment. "Truth" is essentially inaccessible, thanks to the doubling unspeakability of the silent specter of sodomy - "Nothing was done to him. You can't be suggesting what seems to be the obvious suggestion," Leadbeater said at one point during his "trial" (Tillett 84) - contained within the protected silence of occult authority.

Leadbeater's occult authority was significant, and relevant to these issues, as a passage from *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (1938) implies:

To the first boy he had written in cypher, not only about his sex problems, but also on another matter of higher import, the development of which was contingent not only upon controlling the physical distress but also on the mental necessity of outgrowing it. On the nature of this higher purpose Mr Leadbeater was pledged to secrecy and did not divulge it however fierce the attack upon him or

the misunderstanding of his motives..." (quoted in Tillett 86-87).

Gregory Tillett claims in his 1982 biography of Leadbeater that "evidence was found" (access to which, typically, "was closed almost as soon as it had been given" [282]) proving the above paragraph true, suggesting that Leadbeater possessed, and then transmitted to a chosen few pupils, occult knowledge about an ancient and deeply obscured (and controversial within Theosophy) tradition of sex magic, which put sexual arousal and orgasm to powerful clairvoyant use. Tillett concludes that if Leadbeater was in fact practicing sex magic, then "this occult knowledge of sex was regarded as too dangerous to give to the average person...It was reserved for the select few, who were sworn to secrecy...It was so sacred a matter that a dual standard of morality - that of the ordinary man, and that of the spiritually evolved occultist - applied" (282), thus complicating the charges against him by introducing another kind of motivation for his silences and those he urged onto his students. Situated within two conflicting rhetorical realms of secrecy, Leadbeater could activate a version of what Derrida calls the "logic of secrecy": "If one holds to the logic of (inauthentic) dissimulation that dissimulates (authentic) dissimulation by means of the simple gesture of exposing or exhibiting it, of

seeing in order to see or having it seen in order to see...then one has here an example of the logic of secrecy. It is never better kept than in being exposed" (38). The encoded letter, the legitimacy of which cannot be either affirmed or denied because of either the "gross impertinency" (under the Victorian discursive regime) of speaking of the sexual act it might suggest or because of the absolute injunction (under the Theosophical discursive regime) against speaking of the occult act that it might suggest, is emblematic of the remarkable workings of secrecy in the Leadbeater case: the "higher purpose" of occult knowledge is buried under the "fierce attacks" of the sex scandal; or, conversely, that "higher purpose" serves as a kind of cover for scandalous sexuality. Or, I would suggest, occultism itself takes on an erotic charge driven by and magically encircling and potentially enabling a kind of desire at once recognized and prohibited with unprecedented energy by shaken and restructured discourses of sexuality, spirituality, and secrecy.

Tillett's indicates the vastness of the occult powers attributed to Leadbeater by the devout, both before and after the charges against him:

The history of Man and the earth held few secrets from him. He had followed human evolution from its beginnings

with his clairvoyant gaze...[H]e traced the rise and fall of earth's civilization from its earliest times until the present day. He saw Lemuria and Atlantis come and go, and followed the root races of mankind as they evolved and progressed...He traced the past lives of many of his associates, friends and enemies, in graphic detail, describing their inter-relationships over hundreds of thousands of years...Leadbeater could see thoughts, and described them in vivid detail to artists who enthusiastically painted them. He could observe the inner constitution of man, and was a noted authority on...all those aspects of anatomy and physiology unseen by and unknown to orthodox science. Death held no mysteries for him...He was given to speaking quite casually of conversations not only with the dead but with angels and archangels, with nature spirits and *devas*; he observed the consciousness of rocks, and discovered one large rock that had fallen in love with a young boy and enjoyed having him sit on it. (2-3)

Leadbeater's gifts, then, revolved around his ability to access and then to reveal (or, crucially, *not* to reveal) secret, hidden realms of knowledge: to see - *visuality* is repeatedly emphasized - things that are by definition invisible. Derrida writes of "absolute invisibility, the absolutely non-visible that refers to whatever falls outside of the register of sight, namely, the sonorous, the musical, the vocal or phonic...also the tactile and odoriferous": the absolute invisibility of "unseen and unknown" things like legendarily lost civilizations, past lives, thoughts, the dead and inanimate, the oddly - queerly - beautiful desire of a rock for a young boy's touch. "And desire, like curiosity, like the experience of modesty and the unveiling of secrecy, the revealing of the *pudenda* or the fact

of 'seeing in secret,' all those movements that take secrecy beyond the secret necessarily come into play" (90), says Derrida; and indeed, *desire*, the eroticism of the "secrecy beyond the secret," circulates through Leadbeater's purported investigations of the realms of absolute invisibility.

Leadbeater published his masterwork on reincarnation, *Man: Whence, How, and Whither*, co-authored with Annie Besant, in 1913. Its aim is to unlock the mysteries of human existence, "the problem of Man's origin, of his evolution, of his destiny," as it is conceived within Theosophical doctrine, by means of extensive "research" (carried out almost entirely by Leadbeater himself) into the aforementioned "unseen" reaches of a vastly expansive "history of Man and the earth" and the "inter-relationships over hundreds of thousands of years" of a small group of characters⁵. This history, enormous as it is, is

⁵The work begins with a query that reveals the extent to which it, like much occult doctrine, is grounded in the wider fin-de-siècle obsession with degeneration, the theory that humanity was slipping backwards in the evolutionary trajectory: "Whence came he, this glorious Intelligence, on this globe, at least, the crown of visible beings?...And what is his future destiny? Is he evolving onwards, climbing higher and higher, only to descend the long slope of degeneration till he falls over the precipice of death, leaving behind him a freezing planet...or is his present climbing but the schooling of an immortal spiritual Power...a veritable God in the making?" Degenerationist theory was inextricably bound up in discourses of ethnography and sexology and their classifications of racial and sexual "types," and its tropes cast alternately (and often intersectingly) as pathologies and as pleasures, indicatively by the Decadents. Furthermore decadence and degeneration were both

also intensely personal: "In order to throw ourselves back into the earliest stages, we sought for our own consciousnesses, present there, and easier to start from than anything else, since no others were recognisable. They gave us, as it were, a footing in the first and second Chains. From the latter part of the third Chain and onwards, we traced humanity's story by following a group of individuals" (Foreword). In 1909, Leadbeater had "discovered" a little Indian boy named J. Krishnamurti and declared him as the next body that Lord Maitreya, one of the highest Theosophical deities, would inhabit in order to speak to humankind. Krishnamurti remained Leadbeater's chief disciple and companion until for years, although in 1912 and then again in 1922 constantly simmering allegations of "unnatural acts" (Tillett 149) between them flared up in renewed scandal, and eventually Krishnamurti rebelled against the Theosophists and their cooption of his childhood, becoming a renowned religious philosopher in his own right⁶. Whatever happened or did not happen between them

euphemistically tied to homosexuality. See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*.

⁶ The colonialist implications of the relationship between the older British man and his young Indian disciple - not to mention those of Theosophy as a whole - are obvious and troubling. The situation is a kind of reversed (and, therefore, even less potentially subversive of normative power dynamics) version of that between that of the lama and

physically or emotionally, Leadbeater's mythologizing of the body of his disciple suggests a displacement of his own interest, with whatever erotic currents it may have contained, onto divine figures like Lord Maitreya and Master K.H., who in Leadbeater's own account makes sexually suggestive jokes to the boy and creates "a living image of the pupil - that is to say, He moulds out of mental, astral, and etheric matter an exact counterpoint of the causal, mental, astral and etheric bodies of the neophyte, and keeps that image at hand, so that He may look at it periodically" (quoted in Tillett 109). Leadbeater could therefore, perhaps, conceal his own desire for the boy precisely through a revelation of those of a divinity or of a rock; deftly manipulating the content of various spaces of secrecy and invisibility.

Leaving the Indian boy's body to the use of higher powers, Leadbeater takes his soul, renames it "Alcyone," and casts it

title character of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, of which Sara Suleri, provocatively, writes: "While it would be unnecessarily reductive to read the desire that obtains between between the lama and Kim as a figure for the submerged homoeroticism that attends on colonial encounter, it would be equally injudicious to ignore the passion that describes their connection" (120). My purpose, here, is not to untangle the strains of colonial desire and violence tangled up in the connection between Leadbeater and Krishnamurti or in Theosophy itself, but it seems essential to acknowledge them; and, echoing Suleri, I would suggest that homosexual desire and colonial desire are interconnected here, and that imperial strategies of knowledge and repression might supply yet another layer within the structure of secrecy here.

in the starring role of *Man: Whence, How and Whither* (and later its sequel *The Lives of Alcyone*). Part textbook of Theosophical doctrine and part sci-fi epic romance, with a list of characters out of a multicultural mythology pageant, the work traces the reincarnations of a select group of Theosophical, historical, and world-religious luminaries; Julius Caesar, Thomas More, Buddha, and Jesus (under the names Corona, Vulcan, Mahaguru, and Brihaspati) cavort through the eons of the Theosophical chain of evolution with Leadbeater, Besant, Blavatsky, Krishnamurti (Sirius, Herakles, Vajra, and Alycone, respectively) and their colleagues. Starting out as mineral entities, taking on various plant and animal then finally human forms, the characters play out a cross-millennial, cross-planetary, cross-gendered, incestuous network of marriages and begettings. "Alcyone" is incarnated variously as the son, father, brother, sister, brother-in-law, etc., of "Sirius," and is with odd frequency the husband or wife of his real-life brother J. Nityananda, or "Mizar" (also a disciple of Leadbeater's). In one striking incident, set in Atlantis, a key location of occult mythology, Alcyone finds himself caught between his vision of "the stately figure of Mars, a general of the White Emperor, Corona," and his evil father, who has "conceived the plan of drawing him into the secret mysteries by the allurements of a maiden,

Cygnus, dark and beauteous as the midnight sky star-studded...Between her dusky brilliant eyes and his half-fascinated gaze would float the splendid face of his vision, and he would hear again the thrilling whisper: 'Thou art mine.' " The tension between Alcyone's homoerotic, mystical attraction to Mars (underwritten by the Forces of Good) and his heterosexual attraction to Cygnus (underwritten by the Forces of Evil) is ultimately played out in a cosmic conflagration of bloody battles and orgiastic rituals "better hidden than described."

Contemporary readers found the work largely decipherable as a roman-à-clef. Four of its villains were taken to represent Theosophists who had lobbied for Leadbeater's expulsion during the 1906 scandal, while the most malicious of all, Scorpio, "was retained as a mysterious, never-specified villain, capable of being recognized in anyone who filled the role at the time, a subtle threat to any would-be enemies who might have perhaps found it uncomfortable to have been so identified in Theosophical gossip" (Tillett 117). "Gossip" is an indicative word here: *Man: Hence, Where and Whither* is, indeed, a bit like a juicy society drama dressed up in mythological drag. Ernest Wood, who worked with Leadbeater on the project, observes that "as Krishnamurti became more and more a favourite of Leadbeater's so the lives he was said to have lived became

progressively more exalted as history was investigated backwards...When Leadbeater was attracted to, and became interested in, new people, especially young boys, their names would suddenly be added to the list and places found for them in the Lives" (Tillett 119). Ostensibly a revelation of secret knowledge accessible only through Leadbeater's remarkable visionary powers, the book is perhaps most readable as a genealogy of this one man's emotions - his scandalous love for other men, his resentment of those who had tried to punish him for that love - transformed into a fantastic genealogy of human history which seems to revel in the possibilities of the impossible structures of relationality it brings into being in defiance of all established laws. Individual souls crossing in and out of human and non-human forms and in and out of sexual and familial relationships with one another, free from prohibitions of incest, age, or gender - and death - in a mythologized spectacle of promiscuity that raises questions like those that Judith Butler locates in the story of Antigone:

How do we understand this strange place of being between life and death, of speaking precisely from that vacillating boundary? If she is dead in some sense and yet speaks, she is precisely the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position...What emerges is a melancholia that attends living and loving outside livable and outside the field of love" (78).

And those who, like Antigone and like Leadbeater and his reincarnated characters, insist on putting into language these "vacillating boundar[ies]" between life and death and between relational categories, embody not only this "melancholia" but within it a kind of tremendous, tremulous possibility: "if kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human...the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founds on its own founding laws" (82).

Foucault, in an essay on Nietzsche, writes that "if the genealogist...listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" ("Nietzsche" 137), that "the world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning...On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events...[which] began and continues its secret existence through a 'host of errors and phantasms'" (155). On the one hand, then, Leadbeater's project of occult genealogy resonates with

Foucault's definition of genealogy; he and his fellow Theosophists find "something altogether different" behind the dominant historical narrative, and they set out to trace the multifarious, fragmented strands of their own narrative, one which - quite literally - sees humanity as "fashion[ed] from alien forms." On the other hand, though, Leadbeater's genealogy - which does precisely that which Foucault's definition of genealogy prohibits: it "resemble[s] the evolution of a species and...map the destiny of a people" (146) - reaffirms and even magnifies the importance of "essence" and "origin," with each human soul retaining its integrity throughout the ages.

Thus, Foucault's discussion of genealogy suggests both the profound possibilities and the profound limitations of occult histories. While it would be misguided to suggest that the genealogical knowledge that Leadbeater produces has the same kind of weight or import for our own self-knowledge as that which Nietzsche or Foucault produces, it would be equally misguided to disregard the seriousness with which Leadbeater and his Theosophical colleagues (by all appearances) viewed their enterprise - and, moreover, to disregard the presence of the *other* "something different," the secrets behind the secrets, the unspeakable desires hidden beneath the invisible histories, to which the occult genealogy gives unacknowledged expressive

possibility *and* by which the occult genealogy is, despite itself, seditiously energized. "There is first demonic mystery in itself, one might say. Then there is the structure of secrecy that keeps that mystery hidden, incorporated, concealed but alive, in the structure of free responsibility that claims to go beyond it and that in fact only succeeds by subordinating mystery and keeping it subjugated" (20) writes Derrida; and "demonic mystery," which of course actually refers to ancient (occult) religion, might easily be imagined to be one in the long list of fin-de-siècle evocative euphemisms for homosexuality. The occult project of revelation - achieved through the construction of an elaborately detailed "structure of secrecy" - allows Charles Leadbeater, mapping out with supposed clairvoyant capacities and certainly with extraordinary imaginative ones a network of impossible relational ties around the impossibility of that between him and Krishnamurti, to conceal the secrets of desire within the "secret history" of mankind, where that desire can not only be kept alive but in fact dizzyingly expanded; and to infuse the records of occultism with the unspoken pleasures of the "nameless abominations" it tries to occlude.

VI.

"In various ways," writes Edward Carpenter in his ethnography of *Intermediate Types*, "we can see...the probability of the intermediate man or woman becoming a forward force in human evolution...[N]ot wholly belonging to either of the two great progenitive branches of the human race, his nature would not find complete satisfaction in the activities of either branch, and he would necessarily create a new sphere of some kind for himself." Carpenter's thesis here can be linked to a powerful tradition in queer representation of the invocation of "new spheres" resulting from "not wholly belonging" in this one (whatever *that* is), of utopian imaginings of *other* places and other ways of being and feeling. In the words of the French novelist Dominique Fernandez, writing in 1989: "The homosexual is not only someone who sleeps with boys, instead of sleeping with girls; [he] is also someone who feels and thinks differently from the mass of his fellows...someone who cuts himself off from his time, his country; who seeks outside the beaten paths of opinion, who is not satisfied with the system in place, and who aspires ceaselessly to another world, an unknown elsewhere" (quoted in Showalter 204).

Recent work in queer theory, questioning the political efficacy of this utopian model, has emphasized the importance of looking not (or not only) forward into an "unknown elsewhere"

but backward into an also often unknown or silenced past. Christopher Castiglia, in a 2000 article, urges resistance to a normalizing "discursive operation that has instigated a cultural forgetting" in the wake of AIDS by means of what (borrowing the term from Foucault) he calls countermemory: "a competing narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history" (168). Castiglia argues for "a recognition of the important role memory plays in the making and breaking of queer worlds...In telling different stories of the past, in other words, we are avoiding unnecessary loss and becoming present to ourselves" (175). For gay men, whose histories of pleasure have either been erased or rewritten as histories shame, the creation of countermemory is also the creation of a kind of transhistorical community: it "shifts queer community from a spatial to a temporal location, signifying both the past and the future" (171) and unites gay men "both living and dead" (173) and presumably not yet born through a reclaimed history of their shared desires.

Castiglia's argument is passionately politicized and situated in the realities of the late twentieth century, and thus decontextualizing it is admittedly problematic. But, recalling Elaine Showalter's - and Madame Blavatsky's - suggestion of cycles of history and myth, there are nonetheless

compelling parallels to be drawn between this fin-de-siècle and the previous one⁷. Castiglia's term "sex panic" - defined as "a profound shift in sexual subjectivity...that...has also involved a systematic operation of amnesia" (150) - also applies to the drastic redefinition of sexualities that, as I have discussed, reverberated through British culture at the end of the nineteenth century. A crucial difference, though, is the status of gay history and gay memory in each period: Oscar Wilde and his contemporaries, unlike Castiglia and his, could not reshape the discourse surrounding their collective history in the same way, because that history, quite literally, did not exist collectively in any visible form, but was rather composed of silences, secrets, and invisibility. Thus, although for Castiglia the purpose of counter-memory is specifically not "to idealize or to reinvent the past—an impossible enterprise even if it were desirable—but to think critically about which stories are credited with access to the truth, to the social 'real'" (175), a similar affective project - the envisioning of a community that exceeds utopian narratives in its longing not only to imagine the future but to reclaim the past, the

⁷ The final chapter of Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* is, in fact, a comparison of syphilis and AIDS as diseases that "have occupied similar positions at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as diseases that seem to be the result of sexual transgression and that have generated moral panic" (188).

politically and personally compelling construction of what a young man quoted by Castiglia calls an "eternal, carnal, homoerotic and brotherly stream of consciousness" (151) - might, a hundred years earlier, require a different shape. It might require an interception of the self into an invisible and silent "secret history of kept secrets" - and, I want to suggest, occultism, so extremely potent in the fin-de-siècle imagination as means of expansion of the reach of the individual mind and of historical knowledge, might provide a dramatic set of technologies through which to achieve, or at least to suggest representationally, such an interception. As Madame Blavatsky, refusing the authority of dominant history and grandiosely invoking what could be called occult countermemory, writes:

" [The secret doctrine] confronts the purely speculative hypotheses of modern science, based upon the experiences of barely a few centuries, with the unbroken tradition and records of its sanctuaries; and brushing away that tissue of cobweb-like theories, spun in the darkness that covers a period of hardly a few millenniums back, and which Europeans call their 'history,' the old science says to us: Listen, now, to my version of the memories of humanity. (*Stanzas* 221)

Blavatsky's schism between "their 'history,'" drastically limited in scope and point of view yet nonetheless inscribed into dominance by the authority of "modern science," and "my version of the memories of humanity," which opens up deep "sanctuaries" of alternative knowledge - and we could think

here about the difference between "history," concerned with (supposed) objectivity and factuality, and "memory," something much more personal and fluid - can be transposed from a conflict between occult and mainstream narratives into one between heteronormative/homophobic narratives and the homosexual/antihomophobic ones that have been violently repressed.

VII.

In the late nineteenth century, according to Sedgwick, the fictional site of negotiation of the troubled territory of homosexual and homosocial bonds between men shifted from the explosive psychosis of the Romantic Gothic's "plots where one man's mind could be read by that of the feared and desired other" (187) to the domesticated neurosis of "bachelor fiction," in which "male homosexual panic was acted out as a sometimes agonized sexual anesthesia that was damaging to both its male subjects and its female non-objects" (188). Although Sedgwick does recognize that "the paranoid Gothic...returned in some of these works as a formally intrusive and incongruous, but notably persistent, literary element" (188), she places much more emphasis on the "deflationary tonal contrast to the eschatological harrowings and epistemological doublings of the

paranoid Gothic" (189) represented by mid- and late-Victorian plots revolving around urban bachelor heroes (or anti-heroes). It seems to me, though, that numerous fin-de-siècle novels and stories feature a kind of re-Gothicization, a re-entrance (after their exile from Victorian realism) onto the fictional scene of the vampiric and monstrous doubles that terrorized the heroes of earlier Gothic novels; a re-entrance which is effected through, maybe inspired by, the fin-de-siècle's renewed interest in occultism. Perhaps these Gothic plots seem oddly domesticated, their uncanny struggles relocated from the eighteenth-century Gothic's crumbling abbeys in medieval France or Italy to the townhouses and alleyways of contemporary London (although, importantly, almost always, with the vast reaches of the empire as explicit or implicit background geography), because at this moment of the explosion of new theories in both mainstream science and esoteric science the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, or between science and fiction, were not so easily demarcated, resulting in the emergence of the genre of science fiction - the earliest versions of which, like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, could also be classified as fictions of occultism.

Alex Owen points out that the "occult tradition claimed by 'mysticism' was... 'invented' - or; perhaps more accurately,

reinvented - and played to a Victorian fondness for archaic origins, secret societies, and the Gothic that was perhaps best exemplified by the success of fiction like Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)" (28). Oscar Wilde, whose *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) could have replaced either of those titles on Owen's list, shared his era's enthusiasm for such structured secrecies, leading him while a student at Oxford to join the Freemasons, a prototypical brotherhood whose exclusive masculinity has at various historical moments been read as explicitly or suggestively homosexual⁸, and to attend meetings of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society (inciting Annie Besant's disapproval, as discussed previously). *Dorian Gray's* rhetorical obsession with the secret - hidden paintings, double lives, unspeakable desires; secret vices, secret pleasures, secret crimes, secret secrets - creates, throughout the novel, a particularly intense "homosexual-homophobic path of simultaneous epistemological

⁸ James Eli Adams argues that earlier in Victorian period ambivalence towards and disapproval of Masonry and other men-only brotherhoods was driven not by homophobia but fears of political and religious sedition. However, by later in the century, as definitions of masculinity and homosexuality shifted in the processes I have discussed here, "this fear becomes sexualized: secrecy among men becomes the sign less of potential insurrection than of sexual deviance. And that transition is vividly encapsulated in the widespread Victorian preoccupation with secret societies and brotherhoods, real and imagined" (62).

heightening and ontological evacuation" (Sedgwick 174). But if it is the secret of homosexual desire which seems to modern readers (as well as to many fin-de-siècle readers, both those who read it as a kind of underground handbook of a homosexual aesthetic and those who used it as evidence against Wilde at his 1895 trial) to speak most pressingly out of the intricate network of secrecy drawn in the text, it is the occult secret - the secret of the mystical properties of the titular portrait - that not only, obviously, provides the novel with narrative structure but that, in perhaps less obvious ways, mobilizes, at the same time as it is mobilized by, the expression of the homosexual secret.

Strictly speaking, occultism only enters the text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* once, but that one mention is instructive. It occurs in Chapter XI, the "prodigally extravagant guide to lifestyle, interior decoration, and textiles" (Sedgwick 174) in which Wilde details the various objects of Dorian's promiscuous interest: "Mysticism, with its marvelous power of making common things strange to us, and the subtle antinomianism that always seemed to accompany it, moved him for a season" (128). Although like all of Dorian's fixations this one passes quickly, it seems, as defined here, to

occupy some kind of meta-position in the list of the channels through which Dorian seeks "the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life," the ultimate aim of "his search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance" (127): the creation of "a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret" (127). Dorian's relationship to the past is, as I will argue, much more complicated than the one implied here; but for the moment note how conducive mysticism's "marvelous power of making common things strange to us" and its "subtle antinomianism" are to the passionately aestheticized projects in Dorian Gray's life and Oscar Wilde's fiction of seeking out and taking pleasure in a "refashioned" world full of "*other secrets.*"

Wilde's novel is fascinated throughout with what Lord Henry Wotton calls the "mysteries of life," with the boundaries or lack thereof between body and soul, between science and mysticism, between the possible and the apparently impossible: as Lord Henry muses, almost as if channeling Blavatsky or

Leadbeater, "ordinary people waited till life disclosed to them its secrets, but to the few, to the elect, the mysteries of life were revealed before the veil was drawn away...Soul and body, body and soul - how mysterious they were!...Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists!" (57). The portrait that reflects Dorian's age and his sins while his physical body remains eternally young and pure, that "was to bear the burden of his shame" (102) is, on the one hand, simply a Gothic plot device, but it is one that partakes substantially and significantly of the disruptions in the order of knowledge suggested by Lord Henry's reflections on "soul and body" and insisted upon by occult doctrines. And Dorian can indulge in "pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins" (102) *only within* the structure of secrecy supplied by the occult technology of the portrait:

For a moment he thought of praying that the horrible sympathy that existed between him and the picture might cease. It had changed in answer to a prayer; perhaps in answer to a prayer it might remain unchanged. And, yet, who, that knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught? Besides, was it really under his control? Had it indeed been a prayer that had produced the substitution? Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without

thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity?
(102-103)

Like the Theosophists, Dorian is here questioning the definitions and boundaries of fantasy, religion, and science, inserting the possibility of a "curious scientific reason" between them ("curious," of course, being yet another euphemism for homosexual, and one of Wilde's favorite adjectives); seeking to trace out an avenue through which human thought, conscious or unconscious, can access the *unseen*, the absolutely invisible, "things external to ourselves" (recall the particulars of Leadbeater's clairvoyant powers), and locate in that connection a "secret love or strange affinity." Unlike the occultists, though, Dorian doesn't care to extend his speculation into a doctrine, preferring to draw a "real pleasure," as well as a protection for his pursuit of *other* pleasures and "secret places" out of his unexpected and incomprehensible encounter with the mystical: "But the reason was of no importance...If the picture was to alter, it was to alter...For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places...He would be safe. That was everything"
(103).

The portrait does indeed provide a structure of "safety" under which Dorian can indulge and Wilde can suggestively represent "the terrible pleasure of a double life" (167), but the workings of the layers of secrecy in the novel are by no means simple. Dorian, terrified that Basil Hallward is going to exhibit the painting and that the public is "going to be shown his secret...to gape at the mystery of his life" (109), forces a confession from the artist - "Basil...we have each of us a secret. Let me know yours, and I shall tell you mine" (109) - suspecting that their secrets might be the same, that the painter's "something curious" (110) the same as his own. But, of course, Basil's secret is his desire for Dorian, rendered in passionately explicit terms: "Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me ...I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke...Of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it..." (110). Basil's "strange" (111) and "disappointing" (112) confession can elicit from Dorian only pity both for his friend's embarrassingly excessive love and embarrassingly deficient knowledge, and relief that Dorian himself is "safe for the time" (111) as the sole possessor of the painting's *other* secret: "Poor Basil! how little he knew of the true

reason! And how strange it was that, instead of having been forced to reveal his own secret, he had succeeded, almost by chance, in wresting a secret from his friend!...The painter's absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion...he understood them all now, and he felt sorry. There seemed to him something tragic in a friendship so coloured by romance" (113). At this moment of overlapping secrecies, it is the secret of homosexual desire that conceals and protects the secret of occult knowledge.

What is so problematic for Basil, though, is not his desire per se, but the particular ways in which it is figured in his art. As he explains to the younger man, all was well as long as he disguised both his subject in historic costume:

Weeks and weeks went on, and I grew more and more absorbed in you. Then came a new development. I had drawn you as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with the huntsman's cloak and polished boat-spear...You had leant over the still pool of some Greek woodland, and seen in the water's silent silver the marvel of your own face. And it had all been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote. One day, a fatal day I sometimes think, I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time. Whether it was the Realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself into it. (110-111)

Like Ernest Wood complaining that "as Krishnamurti became more and more a favourite of Leadbeater's so the lives he was said to have lived became progressively more exalted as history was investigated backwards," Basil accuses himself (and fears that others, with potentially punitive results, will in turn accuse him) of putting too much of his own desires into his artistic production. Markedly unlike Leadbeater, though, Basil's transgression is not putting Dorian into history but rather taking him out of it: transforming an "unconscious, ideal, and remote" - buried, unspoken - expression of desire into a disconcertingly direct, unconcealed one, "without mist or veil." The moment at which physicality too directly and too obviously enters the relational field between two men, the moment at which sanctioned homosociality becomes or threatens to become prohibited homosexuality, is, of course, the crux of homosexual panic; I would argue that, at the fin-de-siècle, clubs and societies and other bonds between men became sexually suspect precisely because the new taxonomy of "the homosexual" gave the possibility of sex between men a heightened and discomfoting reality - and the traumatic reality of Basil's portrait of Dorian might be taken as emblematic of this crisis.

But the issue is further complicated by contemporary debates over the status of "reality" - what Basil calls "the

Realism of the method" - in art and in sexuality. When prosecutors at his 1895 trial pointed to this speech of Basil's as a criminally indecent representation of homosexuality, Wilde responded that they have misunderstood both literature ("It is a work of fiction," not autobiography) and desire, that his novel depicts not some kind of base sexuality but "that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo...It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it...That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it" ("Trials"). Voicing the terms the conflict between those who viewed homosexuality as "unnatural" and degraded and those who viewed it as exalted and idealized (Showalter 174-178), Wilde defends love between men as historic, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic - the same qualities valued in art and literature by the Decadents - against his prosecutors' and "the world['s]" interpretation of it not only as criminal and perverted but as purely physical and vulgar and modern. Basil's mistake is to degrade a love which originally (Dorian recognizes) "had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual" (115) with the physicalized and dehistoricized immediacy of his "Realism,"

turning it into a pathetically sentimental "friendship so coloured by romance" and subjecting it not just (potentially) to the kind of misunderstanding and persecution from "the world" that Wilde would himself face, but to the pity and contempt (and later the murderous hatred) of Dorian himself, who resents the blatancy of the "painter's absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion," his directness that divests objects of the erotic and aesthetic allure of indirection, of mythology, of secrecy.

Dorian Gray, Sedgwick argues, "can be read either as having a thematically empty 'modernist' meaning or as having a thematically full 'homosexual' meaning" (166), and "Realism" like Basil's becomes necessarily suspect within what she describes as:

the prefiguring manifesto of a modernist aesthetic according to which sentimentality inheres less in the object figured than in a prurient vulgarity associated with figuration itself...But insofar as there is a case to be made that the modernist impulse toward abstraction in the first place owes an incalculable part of its energy precisely to turn-of-the-century male homo/heterosexual definitional panic...the "figuration" that had to be abjected from modernist self-reflexive abstraction was not the figuration of just any body...but, rather, that represented in a very particular body, the desired male body (166).

And yet, of course, that "desired male body," the explicitly sexualized object of both attraction and fear, is far from

obliterated, either in homophobic texts or in those that idealize homosexuality by divesting it of physicality: Basil's painting, despite or because of its problematically realist "figuration" of Dorian's body, is a gorgeous piece of art until it becomes *literally* abjected and its beauty turned into horror - which happens only when Dorian's "desired male body" itself becomes the central object of the novel, but one that Wilde (unlike Basil) encircles with the erotically and aesthetically arousing signifiers of both homosexual desire and modernist abstraction. I want to suggest, then, is that it is the introduction of the occult technology into the plot of the novel - loaded with mysticism's promise of "making common things strange to us," with the exoticized intellectual and spiritual and aesthetic energies characteristic of fin-de-siècle occultism - that allows for a renegotiation of the terms of reality, mystery, modernity, and history; and then consequently for a representation of homosexual desire that eludes the various kinds of stigmas and persecutions attached to "realism" from both (all) sides. Fantasy, of course, often provides a space for the representation of things which both realism and "reality" forbid; but the difference is that in this case fantasy, in the form of occultism, proposes itself not just as an alternative to realism, but, insistently, as an alternative *version of reality*,

a version infused with the erotics and aesthetics of secrecy and metaphor. So if for "poor Basil," ignorant of the "true" secret of the occult nature of his painting, homosexual desire must either be veiled unsatisfactorily in historical costume or abjected as too realist and sentimental, history as reconstrued within art serves a very different purpose for Dorian himself - to whom, crucially, an additional layer of secrecy and knowledge, an entirely different mechanism for deconstructing reality, is available. While Basil must rephrase his desires in the terms of history and art, Dorian, empowered by his occult technology, can rephrase history and art in the terms of his desires.

One need not put too much pressure on Wilde's skillful deployment of what Sedgwick, evocatively, calls "representationally vacant, epistemologically arousing placemarkers" (95) - secret, curious, unnatural, shameful, queer, etc., etc - in order to deduce that the "wild joys and wilder sins" in which Dorian, under cover of his portrait, indulges include specifically homosexual ones. As Basil Hallward, with the directness that the novel permits only to him, asks: "Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" (144). Earlier, more obscurely, Lord Henry prophesizes: "You,

Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that made you afraid...day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame" (21). Lord Henry's desire for Dorian, figured in terms of a quasi-mystical "influence," takes on a kind of occult dimension, reminiscent of Leadbeater's influence over Krishnamurti and Kipling's narrator's over Charlie: "There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence...To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment...He would seek to dominate him...He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death" (38). Opposing drives of pleasure and violence, control and desire, domination and adoration - Love and Death - are brought into discomfoting proximity here, in the kind of sadomasochistic empowerment of conventionally negative terms that surges through this passage as it does through much of the novel. Dorian, for whom the occult possibilities that are only theoretical for Lord Henry are literalized by the painting, takes a pleasure made both possible and powerful by its secrecy in exerting this kind of seductive, "fatal" influence not only on the young men of London, but much further, backwards, into history.

Removed from the normal progression of history by the absence of "the signs of sin or the signs of age" (124) upon his body (the latter, as conceptualized within the theory of degeneration, almost as inescapable a reality as the former), Dorian can consequently reshape it. He is inspired in his historical fantasies by the "poisonous book" sent to him by Lord Henry: "a psychological study of a young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed" (121). Feeling with the young Parisian that the dull and disenchanted nineteenth century is lacking in "passions," or in other words that "reality" is deeply impoverished, Dorian also longs to reignite the "world-spirit"; aspiring, like the occultists, to re-enchant modernity, but to do so in deeply intimate ways. Dorian longs for the lost grandeur of past ages - "How exquisite life had once been! How gorgeous in its pomp and decoration! Even to read of the luxury of the dead was wonderful!" (132) - and compulsively, fetishistically, collects its material manifestations: perfumes and robes and tapestries and books and "ecclesiastical vestments," described by Wilde in profusely textured detail. Dorian attempts, quite literally, to

recover what time, leaving him miraculously untouched, has effaced or buried: "he was almost saddened by the reflection of the ruin that Time brought on beautiful and wonderful things...Summer followed summer...and nights of horror repeated the story of their shame, but he was unchanged. How different it was with material things! Where had they passed to? Where was the great crocus-coloured robe, on which the gods fought against the giants...?" (132).

The unspecified desires played out in his own "nights of horror" and "stories of shame" are inextricably tied here to these theatrically overspecified, erotically overdetermined, desires for the most intimate objects of the past, the robes and the beds, the sets and costumes and props with which the undeniably sexy "nights of horror" of the past were played out: "He longed to see the curious table-napkins wrought for the Priest of the Sun, on which were displayed all the dainties and viands that could be wanted for a feast...Catherine de Médicis had a mourning-bed made for her of black velvet powdered with crescents and suns...The state bed of Sobieski, King of Poland, was made of Smyrna gold brocade embroidered in turquoises with verses from the Koran" (132). Inspired by the ritualistic histories and occult significations of these gorgeous objects - "In the mystic offices to which such things were put, there was

something that quickened his imagination" (134) - Dorian endows them with a different kind of "mystic office": "these treasures, and everything that he collected within his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (134) - the fear that "the world would know his secret" (135). Thus, on the one hand, all of these the unearthed and flamboyantly displayed and described objects, which make Dorian's house (and Wilde's text) as much an "unruly amalgam" (Owen 29) of East and West and culture and religion and different historical moments as Madame Blavatsky's occult doctrine, conceal the one secret object that must not be displayed: "the terrible portrait whose changing features showed him the real degradation of his life" (135), curtained off not only by "the purple-and-gold pall" (135) hung in front of it but by all of his "strangely figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings;...veils of *lacis* worked in Hungarian point; Sicilian brocades and stiff Spanish velvets" (133). The secret passions of history conceal the painting on which is inscribed the history of his own secret passions and which in turn conceals (but only insofar as it remains undiscovered) his actual indulgence of those secret passions; history hides and enables the occult, the occult hides

and enables homosexuality. Recall Derrida: "And what one keeps inside at the very moment that there comes into play a new experience of secrecy...is the buried memory or crypt of a more ancient secret" (9).

Yet, I would suggest, there is something further to be read in Dorian's obsession with all of these gorgeous recovered objects and the passions of their original owners: not only the longing to escape the conceal of the secrets of the present but the longing to reveal the secrets of the past, to reposition himself within history, to rewrite his own genealogy, and thus both to relive the pleasure of history *and* to reinsert unspoken and unrealized desires into it. Driven by both the horror and "the passionate pleasure in mere existence" that his magical painting inspires and enables, Dorian in fact creates (in an admittedly a metaphorical yet nonetheless affectively powerful sense) an occult *and* homosexual counter-memory, "a competing narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history," and a competing narrative of the self composed of those very memories:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. He loved to stroll

through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed through his veins. Here was Philip Herbert, described by Francis Osborne...as one who was 'caressed by the Court for his handsome face, which kept him not long company. Was it young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?...Had the lover of Giovanna of Naples bequeathed him some inheritance of sin and shame? Were his own actions merely the dreams that the dead man had not dared to realize? (137)

Dorian's versions of genetics and psychology, giving a kind of Gothic twist to unsettling fin-de-siècle theories like degeneration and sexology, intuit the "complex multiform" subjectivity, the container of "strange legacies of thought and passion," that Freud would theorize into modernity's (and modernism's) fractured replacement for the Victorian "simple, permanent, reliable" self. Theosophy, unbound by the rigors of mainstream science but not unaffected by its biases, suggests a similar influence of the past upon the present, both in terms of individual life (reincarnation) and world history (cycles of evolution). Wilde, through Dorian, rephrases all of this in language stylistically abstracted yet full of the meaning of prohibited sexuality: "the monstrous maladies of the dead," the "sin and shame," the "strange stories," the "infamous" passions, the "curious" secrets, that Dorian reads in the portraits of his ancestors and that he, liminally poised by the occult technology of his own portrait between reality and

fantasy and thus able to manipulate each, is unlike them empowered to live out. His own pleasures become "the dreams that the dead man had not dared to realize," his own desires those that either his ancestors (literal and figurative; "one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one's own race" [138]) themselves repressed or that their biographers silenced. Dorian reimagines the silenced and shamed passions of the dead not only to take pleasure from them but also to give pleasure to them.

Thus, Dorian's unique access to occult knowledge and power, not entirely unlike Leadbeater's, inspires and gives license to an extravagantly detailed reimagination of history, and of the position of the self within history:

There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions. He felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvelous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own. (138)

The vision outlined here is one of reincarnation, of conceptualizing the story of "the whole of history" as that of "his own life." Dorian figures himself not only as having been a witness to the exploits of these "strange terrible figures," but in fact, like the characters in Leadbeater's *Man*, as having

existed as them; he imagines not only that "he had known them all" but that "their lives had been his own." History itself becomes profoundly unfixed, containing not only "act and circumstance" but what "imagination had created"; recall Blavatsky's fusion of "poeticized fiction" and "poeticized truth." Freed from the demands of temporality and social norms by the occult technology of the painting, as the text itself is freed from some of the demands of ideology and genre by the occult technology of its plot, Dorian can not only live a "double life" in the present moment of fin-de-siècle London, but also multiply that life again and again "across the stage of the world." Like Blavatsky he counters "their" version of history with his own, rewriting the history of the world as the history of "the awful and beautiful forms of those whom Vice and Blood and Weariness had made monstrous or mad" (139) - and blurring not only Derrida's "limits of every epoch" but the lines shame and pleasure, madness and desire, awfulness and beauty. He reinterprets "evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (140) - which, depending upon what one categorizes as "evil," is something horrible or something wonderful; and which - given the abundance of conspicuously contradictory phrases like "awful and beautiful" and of double meanings in the text of *Dorian Gray*,

given the repressive weight and expressive possibility of this vocabulary of evil and sin and secrecy within the discursive history of homosexuality that coalesced at the fin-de-siècle around this novel and its author - can here be read, perhaps, as a kind of troubled containment of the latter within the former.

VII.

"Evil" is a complicated notion within the history and literature of occultism, given the close links in the popular imagination, especially in the Christian imagination, between mysticism and devil-worship; as well as the highly unstable borders between what is considered "magic" and what is considered "black magic." Richard Cavendish gives the traditional definition of "high" or "white" magic as "an attempt to gain so consummate an understanding and mastery of oneself and the environment as to transcend all human limitations," whereas "low" or "black" magic is "comparatively minor and mechanical, undertaken for immediate worldly advantage. The distinction between the two types is blurred in practice and many magicians have engaged in both" (quoted in Sutin 8). The kinds of occult technologies that structure the plot of *Dorian Gray* and other fin-de-siècle

fictions might also be placed on either or both sides of a boundary that, like the one between "good" and "evil" or "occultism" and "religion," can easily be unsettled. After all, "in the course of human history, the dividing line between 'respectable' religion and 'disrespectable' magic has depended less upon careful analysis than upon the fiat of the governing belief system of society" (9); and something quite similar might be said about the dividing line between respectable and disrespectful sexualities.

The infamous British occultist Aleister Crowley prolifically practiced both high and low magic (Sutin 9), but is most strongly associated, thanks both to societal prejudices and to his own provocative manipulation of his image within those prejudices, with black magic. Crowley began his magic career while a student at Oxford in the 1890s, rebelling against his father's strict brand of Christianity (the Plymouth Brethren) and attracted by the secretive glamour of occult brotherhoods. By 1907, he had broken with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and established his own order of "Magick"; by the time of his death in 1947, impoverished and addicted to heroin and cocaine, the British press had dubbed him "the wickedest man in the world," and his self-cultivated image as the "Beast 666" inspired both loathing and cultish fascination. I would like to

conclude with a glance, much briefer than he deserves, at Crowley, in whose biography and writings homosexuality and occultism intersect in remarkable ways. Crowley is best known for his voracious sexual promiscuity and for the sex magic he theorized and practiced, and there is no doubt that many of his hundreds of lovers were men. In his writings (an enormous output including dozens of books of poetry and even more of Magick doctrine, novels and plays, extensive letters and journals) he frequently defends homosexuality and champions sexual freedom in general, as suggested by the central motto of his occult philosophy - "Do what thou wilt" - and his explorations of the magic potential of various kinds of sex acts. And yet in his 900-page autobiography, or "autohagiography" as he titles it, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, he not only entirely omits his sexual relationships with men but repeatedly denies them. He writes, for example, that his intense relationship with a female impersonator named Jerome Pollitt (who was also, incidentally, tied to Decadent artistic circles) at Oxford "was, in a sense, passionate, because it partook of the white heat of creative energy...But for this very reason it was impossible to conceive of it as liable to contamination by any grosser qualities" (142-143), historicizing it as "that ideal intimacy which the Greeks considered the greatest glory of manhood," and blames any more

prurient interpretation on the regrettable "moral state of England." But six years after the affair ended he published a volume of explicit and celebratory homosexual poetry (his biographer Lawrence Sutin calls it, disputably but suggestively, "some of the most daringly original - and unrecognized - homoerotic poems of this century" [4]) entitled *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz*, purportedly written by a seventeenth-century Persian poet translated by one Englishman and edited by another, but clearly marked as Crowley's own work not least by an encoding of the names "Aleister Crowley" and "Jerome Pollitt" in acrostic form in the final poems, in lines like "Ye cypress-breasted boys of birth,/attend the coming of the bloom!/Expose your breasts of jasmine, show/your lily buttocks all abloom!" (136). Crowley embeds his sexual desire for Pollitt (which was by all other accounts consummated), denied and its very possibility made abject in the autobiography, into a volume of poetry that partakes of the structures of secrecy - discovery of ancient texts, translation and revelation of Eastern wisdom, linguistic codes and ciphers (recall Leadbeater's letter) - integral to fin-de-siècle occultisms, including Crowley's own Magick. As Martin P. Starr puts in his introduction to the facsimile edition of the work: "In addition to all the Eastern lore,

occultism, and facetiae with which the text is loaded, a close reading of *The Scented Garden* gives one access to part of the author's psyche that could only find expression under a series of veils, penetrable only by those of empathic interest or personal acquaintance" (5).

In 1909, Crowley, a lifelong mountaineering and adventure enthusiast who idolized Sir Richard Burton, traveled to Algiers with his "chela...Frater Omnia Vincam, a neophyte of the A..A.. disguised as Victor Neuberg" (611); or, in other words, Crowley's friend and lover Victor Neuberg taking on the occult identity of his "chela" (disciple) Frater Omnia Vincam. The two men performed a ritual initiation on a mountain in the desert, of which Crowley writes in his *Confessions*:

Suddenly came the command to perform a magical ceremony on the summit. We accordingly took loose rocks and built a great circle, inscribed with words of power; and in the midst we erected an altar and there I sacrificed myself. The first of the all-seeing sun smote down upon the altar, consuming utterly every particle of my personality. I am obliged to write in hieroglyph of this matter, because it concerns things of which it is unlawful to speak openly under penalty of the most dreadful punishment; but I may say that the essence of the matter was that I had hitherto clung to certain conceptions of conduct which, while perfectly proper from the standpoint of my human nature, were impertinent to initiation. I could not cross the Abyss till I had torn them out of my heart. I remember nothing of my return to Bou Saada...All things had become alike; all impressions were indistinguishable...As I came to myself, I found myself changed...I did not merely admit that I did not exist, and that all my ideas were illusions, inane and insane. I felt these as facts. (621)

This "sacrifice," of which it is "unlawful to speak" except in "hieroglyph," was in fact a sex ritual in which Neuberg sodomized Crowley (an act these two would repeat dozens of times in a series of rituals called the "Paris Workings" in 1913). Crowley's elusive description implies, then, that the "certain conceptions" which he must overcome in order to "cross the Abyss" - an occult principle defined by Owen as "a terrifying chaos in which there was no center and no controlling consciousness" (201) - and emerge out into a higher level of power and knowledge are, precisely, personal and societal prescriptions against homosexuality; and that his radical transcendence of his own selfhood - "*I did not exist*" - is achieved precisely through taking part in that prohibited sexuality, through being penetrated by another man, taking on the role of the passive "sacrificed" victim in the sex ritual.

The layers of secrecy, denial, and revelation are, as ever, complicated here. While this may have been Crowley's first experiment with ritualized homosexuality, there is no doubt that he had had male lovers (including Pollitt). But his autobiography relegates sex between men to the context of highly esoteric rituals that permit - in fact, demands - a break with the moral standards that are "perfectly proper" in general but

unsustainable within occult practice, "impertinent to initiation;" and yet even there it can only be represented in "hieroglyph," in the evasive and suggestive language of secrets. In the *Confessions* of a man famous for his erotic decadence, whose occult doctrine extolled the possibilities mystical revelation through sex, who by all accounts engaged in a panoply of ritual and non-ritual kinds of sex, who writes towards the end of his autobiography that "mankind must learn that the sexual instinct is in its true nature ennobling...The feeling that it is shameful and the sense of sin cause concealment, which is ignoble, and internal conflict which creates distortion...Each individual has an absolute right to satisfy his sexual instinct as is physiologically proper for him" (851), it seems deeply contradictory that homosexuality remains somehow unspeakable, that precisely against Crowley's own injunction it is rendered "shameful" and concealed. Even for this self-proclaimed libertine, apparently, homosexuality is only approachable (rhetorically, at least; and perhaps in some sense also psychologically), within the (purported) "realism" of the autobiography, through the technologies of occult ritual and representation, veiled by an Orientalist mystification of authorship and agency that takes shape in the pseudonymous verses of a Persian poet or the exotic landscape of the North

African desert; and yet within these structures of secrecy it pulsates as one of, if not *the*, absolute location of transcendent experience, buried in an abyss of layered silences and yet the key to "crossing" the great "Abyss" of a perplexedly destabilizing moment of modernity. Owen concludes her analysis of Crowley's adventure in the desert: "Whatever the merits and demerits of Crowley's magical work, his struggles in the desert...signified an extraordinary attempt on the part of this Edwardian bourgeois to understand the full implications of his own subjectivity" (220).

Leo Bersani's article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" proposes a radical reevaluation of the meaning of sex, gay male sex in particular, rejecting conventional valuations of sex and sexuality and arguing for "the inestimable value of sex as - at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects - anticomunal, antinurturning, antiloving" (215). He paraphrases Bataille's suggestion that "there is finally, beyond the fantasies of bodily power and subordination...a transgressing of that very polarity which...may be the profound sense of both certain mystical experiences and of human sexuality" and Freud's definition of "the sexual...as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is 'pressed'

beyond a certain threshold of endurance" (217), eventually concluding:

[I]f the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal...of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death...Gay men's 'obsession' with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated...because it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of asceticism. (222)

Even using this same language of "sacrifice," Crowley's ritual in the desert embodies precisely this sort of "self-shattering" sexual submission, this ecstatic desecration of phallic male subjectivity enacted when the man, "unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman" (Bersani 212), is penetrated by another man: "There was an animal in the desert," writes Crowley, the hypermasculine Beast himself, "but it was not I...As I came to myself, I found myself changed. I knew who I was and all the events of my life; but I no longer made myself the center of their sphere, or their sphere the standard by which I measured the universe" (621). Crowley, who diagnoses himself early in his autobiography with a "congenital masochism" and a kind of bisexual awareness resulting from his having "certain well-marked feminine characteristics" despite the fact that "his masculinity is above the normal" (45), exemplifies

Bataille's claim that both mystical and sexual ecstasy involve a kind "violation of the very being of its practitioners" (17) while, like Bersani, putting into question the essentialized gender terms of his argument: "The act of violence that deprives the [sacrificial] creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things is with its profound logic an intentional one. It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires, and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim" (90).

For Crowley, who later in his life would be accused of orchestrating all sorts of blood-and-drug-soaked sexual and sacrificial rituals at his infamous Abbey of Thelema in Italy, this moment of shattering and transcendent spiritual ecstasy is achieved through, perhaps constituted by, a moment of shattering and transcendent sexual ecstasy that is specifically *homosexual*, pointing not only to Bersani's insistence on the sacrificial meaning of gay male sex but, I think, back to Edward Carpenter's suggestion that "intermediate[s] did actually tend to develop faculties like divination, clairvoyance, ecstasy, and so forth." This idea - that the homosexual, due to his "not wholly

belonging," embodies a unique potential for mystical insight and experience that reaches beyond the "normal" perspective - might appear rather old-fashioned now, but is perhaps not really all that far from proposals like Bersani's, or like Foucault's: that "homosexuality is a historic opportunity to reopen affection and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual, but because the [homosexual's] 'slantwise' position...as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light" ("Friendship" 138). And *that* - the project of allowing "virtualities," alternate or potential versions of reality, of affective and relational ties (recall Butler's expanded "field of love") and of historical narratives, to "come to light," to be revealed - is a crucial goal, along with the "attempt to gain so consummate an understanding and mastery of oneself and the environment as to transcend all human limitations," of occultism. Therefore, placing the radically self-effacing transcendence that Bersani theorizes and Crowley evidently experiences in the act of the penetration of one man by another beside the possibility of transformative insight located by Carpenter and Foucault in the "slantwise" social position of homosexuality, I would suggest that homosexuality itself might be uniquely capable of the

achievement of the most radical goals of occultism at the fin-de-siècle and beyond. Which, finally, makes it all the more pointedly problematic that, for Crowley, as for Leadbeater and others, homosexuality is the term that remains unspeakable in fin-de-siècle occultism even as it both finds expressive possibility within occultism's structures of secrecy and technologies of expansion and provides a particularly powerful kind of activation for those structures and technologies.

A gleefully adept performance artist of sorts, well-aware of the theatrical qualities of his occult magic and reveling in its alternate holds of fascination and repulsion over the public imagination, Aleister Crowley masterfully self-styled himself as the Beast 666 and as dozens of other occult personas, and yet also, apparently, viewed his magic as profoundly serious and "true," leading to question that I have not addressed yet but would like to point to in conclusion: the relationship between sincerity and camp in fin-de-siècle doctrines and fictions of occultism. Where does sincerity end and camp begin; and then is there sincerity within camp? Sedgwick claims that unlike "kitsch-attribution," which necessarily distances the viewer

from the "debased" audience for whom the object or spectacle on view is created,

camp-recognition [asks]: What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction of the person...who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same 'perverse' angle?...The sensibility of *camp-recognition* always sees that it is dealing in reader relations and in projective fantasy (projective though not infrequently true) about the spaces and practices of cultural production. Generous because it acknowledges...that its perceptions are necessarily also creations, it's little wonder that camp can encompass effects of great delicacy and power in our highly sentimental-attributive culture. (156)

In a sense, this is the effect for which I have been arguing in these queer-occult revisions of history and relationality: Leadbeater's genealogy of humanity written around his forbidden desire, and Wilde's depictions of Dorian Gray both seeking and (re)placing forbidden pleasures in a reimagined history (pleasures which, I should note, like Crowley's in the desert, are located precisely in violence and danger), are ultimately quite campy displays of this *identification* - what if that person in that distant and hidden moment of the past shared my pleasure, or could have, if it had been allowed? - that Sedgwick describes, and are certainly involved in "projective fantasy...about the spaces and practices of cultural production."

And, indeed, as she aptly points out, their being either projective or fantasies does not render them untrue. Allowing for the kind of manipulations of realism, mythology, desire, and sentimentality demonstrated in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, occultism might represent a potent avenue for these campy identification of "resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction" between authors and readers, occultists and disciples and believers, modern individuals and their incarnations back through history.

Like Leadbeater before him, Crowley at one point in his undeniably (and surely intentionally) campy *Confessions* constructs a genealogy of his past lives, described in terms that resonate both with Dorian Gray's historical fantasies and with the psychoanalytic theory which Crowley in fact found extremely compelling (although with characteristic hubris he claimed that magicians had come up all of the insights of psychoanalysis long before Freud): "I soon began to acquire Magical Memory, to recall my past incarnations. I refuse to assert any theory of what this really means. All memory is a re-awakening of ancient impressions. What I was really doing was penetrating to the deeper layers of my unconscious self" (838). Like the other figures I have discussed here, Crowley destabilizes the relationship between memory and history,

historicizing the scope of personal memory and personalizing the reaches of world history deep into a past composed of "ancient impressions" that also compose the "layers of [his] unconscious self," creating a kind of "countermemory" and inserting his own subjectivity into it. Occultism, to a cultural imagination poised anxiously on the brink of modernity, provides technologies with which to explore and expand both the self and the world far beyond the self, and proposes with its campily seductive spectacles of revelation and recognition avenues of secret identification between the self and the world: technologies with which to speak with the dead and with inanimate objects, to map out impossible networks of kinship and love, to create alternate narratives of genealogy and time and history; and, at the intersection of occult desires with the queer ones often contained within them, to affectively or expressively approach objects of desire that are forbidden even within occultism itself - to conceal or reveal or share these secrets concealed within other secrets, these histories buried one beneath the other, and to locate within and infuse into these processes of concealment and revelation variegated and powerful kinds of pleasure.

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