

THEOSOPHY AND THE DISSENTING WESTERN IMAGINATION

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The title of this paper owes its origins to a remark made by the development scholars Ashis Nandy and Shiv Visvanathan, who once referred to the writings of the pioneers of the modern Theosophical² movement as the most important archive concerning the ‘dissenting Western imagination in alliance with indigenous knowledge systems in India’.³ This is an exceedingly apt expression. It not only pinpoints one of the main features of Blavatsky’s Theosophy which appealed to the spiritual (and iconoclastic) inclinations of a generation of artists, poets, scientists and philosophers; it also possesses a relevance to the history of ideas that extends beyond the history of the Theosophical Society.

There is little argument that the influence of Theosophy has been pervasive in art, music, architecture, popular culture and most of all the New Age. In introducing into everyday speech concepts such as karma, reincarnation, meditation and the spiritual path, it provided almost the entire foundation of the New Age movement.⁴ It was mainly within the fold of the Theosophical Society that non-Christian religions and spiritual practices could be openly discussed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Theravada Buddhism came to Australia with the Chinese in the 1850s gold rush; but it was not until the establishment of the Theosophical Society in 1895 that widespread public discussion of the teachings took place.⁵ And whereas the Theosophical Society can hardly lay claim to the introduction of the concept of meditation, it was not then practiced by good Christians who had been taught that meditation and yoga were the work of the devil. The Theosophical Society, not the Church, was where people meditated. As to karma, the doctrine was not unknown to Western scholars before authors associated with the Theosophical Society came upon it; but certainly, the Theosophical Society was the first organisation to ‘preach and teach’ karma and reincarnation in the modern West.⁶ These two notions, coupled with the idea of the evolution of consciousness, underpin the New Age movement to the present day.

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² Following what has become almost standard practice, I use Theosophy and Theosophical to refer to the post-1875 theosophy associated with the Theosophical Society; and theosophy and theosophical to refer to the wider tradition.

³ Ashis Nandy and Shiv Visvanathan, ‘Modern Medicine and Its Non-Modern Critics’, in *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture, and Resistance*, eds F.A. Marglin and S. A. Marglin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.155.

⁴ Jocelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.379.

⁵ Yvonne Malykke, *In Pursuit of the Spiritual Cosmos* (Sydney: Cosmos Periodicals, 1996), p.117.

⁶ Ronald Neufeldt, ‘In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement’, in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. R.W. Neufeldt (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.233.

The present paper will situate the achievement of H.P. Blavatsky in context of the dissenting Western imagination,⁷ with the dissent largely concerning the marginalisation of esotericism, and—in a cultural sense—the soul. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, and increasingly from the seventeenth century, the world came to be viewed through the lens of Cartesian dualism, which excluded all psychic elements; and based on Newtonian mechanics it came to be viewed as a clockwork mechanism. For a number of reasons, including the runaway success of the experimental method and advances in technology bolstered by the new science, the model of mechanism was soon taken to apply to just about everything, including the way human beings function—mind, body and soul. If this were a play, we might now say “Enter Madame Blavatsky,” for if the scientific revolution involved a steady march of progress away from superstition, alchemy and the occult, then Blavatsky’s Theosophy represents a milestone on the way back: a voice of dissent against both dogmatic theology and materialistic science, and, equally stridently in favour of the Hermetic underdog.

Here it must be said that although the emphasis in the present paper is on the work of H.P. Blavatsky, she was by no means solely responsible for the occult revival of the late nineteenth century. The year 1848 saw the birth of modern spiritualism in North America; in 1875 the Theosophical Society was founded; and in 1888 The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was established in London. Many other events could be listed in this context. There was most definitely something in the air. Joscelyn Godwin cites three seminal publications of that era, each authored by remarkable women: *Art Magic* (1876) by the actor and medium Emma Hardinge Britten; *Old Truths in a New Light* (1876) by Lady Caithness; and Madame Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877 but mostly written in 1876.⁸ Influential though she undoubtedly was, Blavatsky was not entirely alone in bringing Hermetic and occult principles to light in this period. Nonetheless, the breadth of her writings and the depth of her insights mark her as quite without equal in this field; especially in context of the history and philosophy of science.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the word *occult* simply meant hidden (one of the meanings of *esoteric*). In this sense it is still used in medicine, for example in cases of occult hepatitis. In the field of philosophy, the distinction between esoteric and occult arose only in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹ In common usage the word occultist usually has a greater practical connotation—as in magic, alchemy and astrology; but as Faivre points out, there is a practical side also to esotericism. Madame Blavatsky often used the terms interchangeably, but not always.

⁷ This motif was previously employed in Dara Tatray, ‘Theosophy and the History of Dissenting Western Thought’, *The Theosophist*, vol. 124 (2003).

⁸ Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, p.303-5.

⁹ Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p.34.

In the Middle Ages occult meant *unintelligible* in a somewhat technical sense, to refer to: ‘properties and powers for which one could offer no rational explanation’, such as the power of a magnet to attract iron.¹⁰ It also connoted *insensibility*. The term was used to distinguish between qualities evident to the senses and qualities which were not evident to the senses. As Keith Hutchison puts it:

If a drug like aspirin ... manages to relieve a headache, it does so by virtue of qualities which are imperceptible, and its effect is no direct or indirect reflection of its being a silent, white powder of bitter taste and medium density.¹¹

The Scholastics argued that science should trade in the perceptible qualities and leave the field of the imperceptible to occultism: just as Aristotle did not find it necessary to discuss occult properties. By the sixteenth and seventeenth century however, it became increasingly necessary for the mechanical philosophers to resort to occult properties, in order to explain the generation of motion in inert matter, or the origin of change. So occult properties and active principles were eventually incorporated into the mechanical philosophy and the experimental method. Some aspects of alchemy were incorporated into chemistry, and the Hermetic ideal of an occult brotherhood of the wise, who would probe the depths of nature, eventually became the Royal Society. At the same time, however, the overall worldview of occultism and Hermeticism—the law of correspondences, macrocosm/microcosm theory, the promise of divine intuition, and the practice of transmutation—were sidelined and pushed underground.

The nineteenth century occult revival ushers in a new style of occultism, which Antoine Faivre has described as an attempt ‘to combine into one single worldview the findings of experimental science and the occult sciences cultivated since the Renaissance’; as well as an attempt to demonstrate the limitations of materialism.¹² The nineteenth century occult movement was also heavily oriented towards personal development through magic, and sex magic, especially in the works of Beverly Paschal Randolph and, later, Aleister Crowley.

Brief though it may be, the above discussion perhaps gives some feeling for the range of what is meant by the word *occult*. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary also to define *theosophy* and *esoteric* as far as space will permit.

¹⁰ Ron Millen, ‘The Manifestation of Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution’, in *Religion, Science, and Worldview: Essays in Honor of Richard S. Westfall*, eds Margaret J. Osler and Paul Lawrence Farber (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.186.

¹¹ Keith Hutchison, ‘What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?’ *Isis*, vol. 73, no. 2, June (1982), p.234.

¹² Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000),

The term theosophy admits of various interpretations and enjoyed a long history prior to the formation of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Most historians place the first use of the word theosophy, or *theosophia*, in the third century, among the Neo-Platonists. Antoine Faivre cites Porphyry (234-305) as the first to use the term.¹³ Taking her cue from the Platonist Alexander Wilder, Blavatsky names Ammonius Saccas (d. 240) and his Eclectic Theosophical system as its originator. Justification for taking *theosophia* back to at least Ammonius Saccas is given also by H. Langerbeck in 'The Philosophy of Ammonius Saccas'.¹⁴ In *The Key to Theosophy*, again referring to Wilder, Blavatsky suggests that followers of the Eclectic Theosophical system were also known as Analogeticists, due to:

... their practice of interpreting all sacred legends and narratives, myths and mysteries, by a rule or principle of analogy and correspondence: so that events which were related as having occurred in the external world were regarded as expressing operations and experiences of the human soul.¹⁵

This puts the doctrine of correspondences and microcosm/macrocosm theory at the centre of Neoplatonism and Theosophy, just as they are at the centre of occultism and Hermeticism.

The word theosophy came to be used widely by German philosophers in the sixteenth century, especially with reference to the work of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), repeatedly cited by H.P. Blavatsky. Boehme is normally described as a theosopher, whose writings represent a blend of Kabbalah, alchemy, and Paracelsian magic. Finally, the term theosophy enters the mainstream philosophical lexicon in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ It has been argued that what distinguishes theosophy from the wider field, is the simultaneous presence of three fundamental features of esotericism, both as theory and practice: the God/Human/Nature triangle; the primacy of the mythic; and the notion of direct access to superior worlds.¹⁷ These three elements are clearly prevalent in the Theosophy of Blavatsky, her teachers (the authors of *The Mahatma Letters*) and those who more or less followed her (for example Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner).

Within the Theosophical Society, Theosophy is treated principally in three ways:

- To mean divine wisdom, from the Greek, *theosophia*, the wisdom of the gods: with even a little reflection suggesting that this must refer to a state of consciousness or a state of being that is limitless.

¹³ Antoine Faivre, 'The Theosophical Current: A Periodization', *Theosophical History* vol.7, no.5 (1999), p.167.

¹⁴ H. Langerbeck, 'The Philosophy of Ammonius Saccas', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 77 (1957), at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/628636>, Accessed 30 May 2011.

¹⁵ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: The Theosophy Company, 1889/1987), p.2.

¹⁶ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p.25.

¹⁷ Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*, p.7-8; Faivre, 'The Theosophical Current', p.173.

- To refer to a vast collection of teachings about divine wisdom and the way to it, to be found in the East and in the West, in schools of thought as seemingly diverse as the Kabbalah, Taoism and Platonism.
- To refer to a specific set of teachings on the subject of divine wisdom gathered from a variety of the above-mentioned sources by H.P. Blavatsky, her teachers and her followers.

In practice, the term Theosophy can be used somewhat indiscriminately within the Theosophical Society, with some of its members equating Theosophy with the writings of Madame Blavatsky, her teachers and her followers. By contrast, the founders of the Theosophical Society regarded it with somewhat more humility, as a repository of teachings about the nature of reality uttered by sages and prophets of all ages, with no special wisdom of its own to propound. As H.P. Blavatsky put it in *The Key to Theosophy*: ‘We hold to no religion, as to no philosophy in particular: we cull the good we find in each’.¹⁸ Consequently, in its publications one will find the core teachings of Vedānta, Buddhism, Platonism, the Kabbalah, Alchemy, and the ancient Mysteries, put together in a new synthesis, frequently drawing upon the science of the day. The result is a comprehensive outline of a vast evolutionary scheme embracing the whole of nature—physical and spiritual—pertaining to matter and to psyche.

The literature of the various Theosophical publishing houses present teachings on spiritual evolution; the primacy of consciousness; the doctrine of karma; theories about reincarnation; the law of correspondences; the art of meditation; the subtle bodies or energies of the human being and much more. Belief in any of these is not incumbent on members of the Society, which has long styled itself as an enquiry-based Society, free of dogma. Rather are they offered as propositions to be studied, explored, and if considered of value, then assimilated. The territory covered could basically be categorised as esoteric.

In *Access to Western Esotericism*, Antoine Faivre identified four fundamental components to esotericism as a form of thought: the doctrine of correspondences, the notion of a living nature, imagination and participation, and the experience of transmutation.¹⁹ Characteristically, esoteric philosophy deals not only with hidden truths about the material world, but equally with hidden elements of the psyche. Throughout the literature, there is an intrinsic connection between esoteric knowledge and the inner nature of the human being. This is perhaps best explained by borrowing from Jacob Needleman:

... To speak of a hidden knowledge is also to speak of a hidden part of ourselves which is more truly ourselves than the personal identity which we acquire in society. Esoteric knowledge and practices refer, therefore, to the

¹⁸ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, p.19.

¹⁹ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p.8-13.

struggle that is necessary in order for man to penetrate beneath the carapace of the surface personality to ... [the essential man] so that a relationship can be built between the inner and the outer elements of the human structure.²⁰

... psychological change, in its deepest and most basic sense, is not merely a subjective process that takes place apart from the laws of nature. On the contrary, it too occurs according to objective laws, the same laws by which the world we see, as well as the worlds we cannot see, are born, preserved, and destroyed. The evolution of consciousness is both a cosmic fact and a human possibility.²¹

That is the esoteric in a nutshell: the nexus of God, Human and Nature; the mythic element (with the human being, the Hero, overcoming the ego, as part of the evolutionary process); and the promise of direct access to superior worlds.

We are now in a better position, perhaps, to see the nature of the intense interest in Theosophy and in H.P. Blavatsky during her lifetime. Validating the esoteric dimension of the great religious traditions—especially of the pre-modern era—was one of her chief aims in compiling *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* in which she gathered together neglected and marginalised teachings scattered throughout thousands of volumes of Asian and early European religious texts. As part of that project, she attempted to restore to the Hermetic tradition ‘credit for its achievements which has been too long withheld’; calling for ‘a restitution of borrowed robes, and the vindication of calumniated but glorious reputations’.²² In *Isis Unveiled*, her first major work, Blavatsky lauded the virtues of the Platonic philosophy, the Oriental Kabbalah, ancient science, the works of Paracelsus, Egyptian wisdom, and the arts and sciences of India—all in contrast with materialistic science and mainstream Christianity. Her critique appealed to a wide range of intellectuals and artists over the years, including the scientist, Sir William Crookes; the Platonist, Alexander Wilder; and the poet, W.B. Yeats. The subjects of her choice formed the basis for the writings of a number of subsequent influential authors, including Annie Besant, Rudolf Steiner and C.W. Leadbeater. Their writings also represent an important archive of the dissenting Western imagination as such, and a testament to what Nandy and Visvanathan called ‘the other West of William Blake and Paracelsus’ in the following remark:

Parallel to the opposition between white and black, the colonizer and the colonized, was a deeper dialogical encounter in which the Western participants saw in India a possibility to be lived out. India to them was a

²⁰ Jacob Needleman, *Consciousness and Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p.132.

²¹ Needleman, *Consciousness and Tradition*, p.135.

²² Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology Volume 1- Science* (California: Theosophical University Press, 1877/1972), p. v.

place within which the other West of William Blake and Paracelsus could be revived.²³

This perhaps also says something about the nature of spiritual tourism today: the notable interest in India displayed by twentieth century counterculture groups, and by spiritual tourists, was in no small measure, due to the fact that modes of thought and practice marginalised in the West since the seventeenth century still lay very close to the surface of the cultures and religions of South Asia. Excellent monetary exchange rates in the second half of the twentieth century no doubt lent support to this interest; but the spirituality of the place exerted a tremendous pull towards the East. Certainly there are numerous instances from the literature of the Theosophical Society where early visitors to the international headquarters at Adyar, Madras have echoed the words of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jehan: ‘If there be a heaven on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this’.

Reviving that ‘other West’ was H. P. Blavatsky’s life-long aim, as indicated in the 1889 article ‘The Tidal Wave’, in which she referred to: ‘the Spirit in man, so long hidden out of public sight ... and so far exiled from the arena of modern learning ... loudly re-demanding its unrecognized yet ever legitimate rights’.²⁴ That recognition of the spiritual dimension of the psyche resonated with Yeats who once remarked: ‘I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world’.²⁵ Blavatsky had her finger on the pulse of this renaissance, presenting the first model of psychological and spiritual evolution to appear in the modern West.²⁶ Based on Hermeticism, the Kabbalah, Platonic thought, Madyamaka Buddhism (the philosophy of Nagarjuna), and Advaita Vedānta, that model presented a viable alternative, took a firm stand against the status quo, and raised the profile of Western Hermeticism.²⁷

In order to make any judgement at all about her achievements, it is first necessary to situate Madame Blavatsky’s writing in the wider context of science historiography. In the mid to late nineteenth century Hermeticism was regarded as an outmoded form of thought, a nest of superstition exterminated by modern science, once and for all. Given the fact that it was not until the 1930s that academics slowly began to credit Hermeticism and alchemy with more than a minor role in the development of modern science, and more than a minor degree of sanity, Blavatsky was certainly ahead of her time in seeking to restore that ‘lost reputation’.

²³ Nandy and Visvanathan, ‘Modern Medicine and Its Non-Modern Critics’, p.156.

²⁴ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Collected Writings Volume 12 - 1889-1890* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), p.1.

²⁵ S.J. Graf, *W.B. Yeats Twentieth Century Magus* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 2000), p.13.

²⁶ Theodore Roszak, *Unfinished Animal: The Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p.18.

²⁷ For an insight into Blavatsky’s approach to Buddhism and Vedānta see David Reigle, *The Doctrinal Position of the Wisdom Tradition: Great Madhyamaka* (Eastern Tradition Research Institute, 2008). Available at <http://www.easterntradition.org/>; and Dara Tatray, ‘The Buddhism of HPB and the Masters: Reconciling the Self of Vedanta and the No-self of Buddhism’, *The Theosophist*, vol. 128 (2006).

The first major biographies of Newton were written by Sir David Brewster: *Life of Sir Isaac Newton* (1831) and *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton* (1855). A physicist of note, concerned with the properties of light, Brewster was an able and knowledgeable biographer. Fortunately, he was also too honest a biographer to ignore the evidence of his subject's by then unfashionable and questionable interests. Brewster thus reported that amongst the great man's papers had been found an autographed transcript of John de Monte Snyder's *The Metamorphosis of the Planets*; pages and pages of alchemical verse from Thomas Norton's *Ordinall of Alchimy*; Basilius Valentinus' *Mystery of the Microcosm*; as well as a heavily annotated copy of Eiraneus Philaethes' *Secrets Reveal'd, or an Open Entrance to the Shut Palace of the King*.²⁸ Having made this embarrassing confession on behalf of Sir Isaac Newton—Master of the Royal Mint and author of what is still regarded as the greatest work of science *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687)—Brewster then proceeded to explain away the curious alchemical and astrological works as anomalous facts in an otherwise exemplary record.

An apologetic tone can still be discerned in works dealing with Newton's wide-ranging interests. In *The Library of Isaac Newton*, for example, John Harrison seems to feel compelled to warn the reader:

It is tempting to pass facile, ready-made judgements based on an examination of the volumes he had on his shelves, but this way could well lead us in particular instances to too easily distorted or even broadly false conclusions should we ever forget that very little is straightforward about Newton and that he remained a law unto himself ... his library as a whole should not necessarily of itself and without supporting external evidence of his mass of surviving autograph writings be taken as a precise index of the quality and range of his mind ...²⁹

There is no doubt that Newton was a law unto himself, a complex and troubled character—a tremendous genius whom it would be folly to pigeon-hole. However, I am fairly certain that what is at issue in Harrison's remark are the Kabbalistic, Hermetic and alchemical works; as well as a number of texts on the Church and the Bible that would raise the eyebrows of even the most fervent conspiracy theorist today.

In 1832, Brewster had attempted to finally de-bunk occult qualities in *Letters on Natural Magic*,³⁰ in which he tried to establish that all magic was explicable either by fraud or by the known laws of nature: in other words, by purely physical (not psychic or super-sensible)

²⁸ Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy or The Hunting of the Greene Lyon* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975/1983), p.10.

²⁹ John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.78.

³⁰ Sir David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1832).

causes.³¹ Both Joscelyn Godwin and Arthur Conan Doyle relate the story of the embarrassing disclosure of Brewster's realisation that this is not in fact the case. Despite widespread instances of fraud, there exists a body of mediumistic and psychic phenomena that is genuine, and not explicable within the framework of scientific materialism. Brewster witnessed at least one such event—an example of D.D. Home's extraordinary mediumship—and to his later regret, confessed as much, remarking: 'this upsets the philosophy of fifty years'.³²

Daniel Dunglas Home was the most impressive physical medium of the nineteenth century, a man whose psychic phenomena had been investigated innumerable times without ever having been found to have committed a fraudulent act (or to have taken any payment). He performed séances for the likes of Napoleon III, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Bulwer Lytton; and repeatedly performed remarkable feats of self-levitation witnessed by a host of Lords, Sirs and Earls. Several witnesses reported Home floating up to the ceiling, and on one occasion out of one window and back in through the adjacent window. Home was painstakingly investigated by Sir William Crookes (President of the Royal Society). In 1870 Crookes still believed that all mediumistic phenomena were either a trick or a delusion, but to his credit as a scientist he agreed to investigate the matter. He gave the following reason:

It argues ill for the boasted freedom of opinion among scientific men that they have so long refused to institute a scientific investigation into the existence and nature of facts asserted by so many competent and credible witnesses, and which they are freely invited to examine when and where they please. For my own part, I too much value the pursuit of truth, and the discovery of any new fact in Nature, to avoid inquiry because it appears to clash with prevailing opinions.³³

The importance of investigating the more credible instances of alleged psychic phenomena can be expressed no more eloquently than in the following comment of Carl Gustav Jung's, on coming to know of parapsychology:

The limitation of consciousness in space and time is such an overwhelming reality that every occasion when this fundamental truth is broken must rank as an event of the highest theoretical significance, for it would prove that the space-time barrier can be annulled ... This possible transcendence of space-time, for which it seems to me there is a good deal of evidence, is of such

³¹ Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, p.191.

³² Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, p.191.

³³ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism, Volume One* (Surrey: The Spiritual Truth Press, 1926/2008), p.238.

incalculable import that it should spur the spirit of research to the greatest effort.³⁴

By contrast, when Brewster first related what he had observed at Home's séances he stated that the phenomena were inexplicable by any of the known laws of nature or any conceivable act of fraud. Once this became public, however, he attempted to backtrack (equally publically), leading the then editor of *The Spectator* to remark:

It seems established by the clearest evidence that he felt and expressed, at and immediately after his séances with Mr Home, a wonder and almost awe, which he afterwards wished to explain away. The hero of science does not acquit himself as one would wish or expect.³⁵

Brewster was not alone in his persistent attempt to explain away every fact and every phenomenon that did not accord with prevailing scientific "beliefs". It was and is a commonplace procedure. For her part, Blavatsky made something of a habit of collecting instances of scientists, such as Alfred Russel Wallace, who had been converted by the facts to spiritualism; for example in, 'The Evidence of Science'.³⁶ Her trophy-scientists were numerous.

Another aspect of Madame Blavatsky's programme, with a wide and continuing appeal, was the attempt to prove the widespread existence and the validity, of what she and later Theosophists called the Ancient Wisdom or the Wisdom Tradition. In *Isis Unveiled*, she argued that:

... underlying every ancient popular religion was the same ancient wisdom doctrine, one and identical, professed and practiced by the initiates of every country, who alone were aware of its existence and importance...³⁷

In the 1870s, this central pillar of Blavatsky's Theosophy was a daring claim, which might still sound preposterous to some. Having thrown down the gauntlet, Madame Blavatsky then went on to argue that denying validity to this doctrine 'is to cast an imputation of falsehood and lunacy upon a number of the best, purest, and most learned men of antiquity and of the middle ages'.³⁸ Subsequent research into the history of science reveals this to have been a far more sober remark than at first it might seem. Among the best and brightest of antiquity and the middle ages, who would support her assertion, we can confidently include Plato, arguably the greatest philosopher who ever lived (judging by Alfred North Whitehead's remark that all of Western philosophy has

³⁴ Remo N. Roth, 'Wolfgang Pauli and Parapsychology', at http://www.psychovision.ch/synw/pauli_parapsychology_pl.htm. Accessed 26/11/2010.

³⁵ Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism, Volume One*, p.197.

³⁶ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings 1881-1882* (Wheaton, USA: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1968), p.233-8.

³⁷ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* Volume 2, p.99.

³⁸ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* Volume 2, p.113.

been a footnote to Plato); and from later times Isaac Newton, Marsilio Ficino, Ralph Cudworth and Henry More: each of whom are on record as having affirmed much the same belief in the existence of an ancient wisdom into which the “wise” of all ages had been initiated.

The Renaissance Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) believed that the writings of Plato were the culmination of a long development from more ancient times, amounting to a “learned religion,” a sacred philosophy. The provenance or lineage of this religious philosophy, according to Ficino, is reflected in the following:

In those things which pertain to theology the six great theologians of former times concur. Of whom the first is said to have been Zoroaster, head of the *magi*; the second is Hermes Trismegistus, originator of the priests of Egypt. Orpheus succeeded Hermes. Aglaophemus was initiated to the sacred things of Orpheus. Pythagoras succeeded Aglaophemus in theology. To Pythagoras succeeded Plato, who in his writings encompassed those men’s universal wisdom, added to it, and elucidated it.³⁹

The Cambridge Platonists Henry More (1614-1687) and Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) are on record as having believed much the same as Ficino and other compilers of such lists in the seventeenth century, always homing in on the same collection of thinkers. For example while attempting to prove the pre-existence of the soul in *The Immortality of the Soul*, More also affirmed the existence of an esoteric brotherhood, a hidden “science” and what amounts to a lineage of initiates:

In Egypt, that ancient Muse of all hidden Sciences, that this Opinion (of the *Praeexistency of the Soule*) was in vogue amongst the wise men there, those fragments of *Tresmegist* doe sufficiently witness ... of which Opinion not onely the *Gymnospohists* and other wise men of *Egypt* were, but also the *Brachmans* of *India*, and the *Magi* of *Babylon* and *Persia*; as you may plainly see by those *Oracles* that are called either *Magicall* or *Chaldaicall* ... And in the first place, if we can believe the *Cabala* of the Jewes, we must assign it to *Moses*, the greatest Philosopher certainly that ever was in the world; to whom you may add *Zoroaster*, *Pythagoras*, *Epicharmus*, *Empedocles*, *Cebes*, *Euripides*, *Plato*, *Euclide*, *Philo*, *Virgil*, *Marcus Cicero*, *Plotinus*, *Iamblichus*, *Proclus*, *Boethius*, *Psellus*, and several others ...⁴⁰

³⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *Opera* (Basel, 1576), cited in Charles B. Schmitt, ‘Perennial philosophy from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 24, no.4 (1966), p.508.

⁴⁰ Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s Alchemy*, p.106.

Similarly, Cudworth assembled fragments from dozens of sources, to refute Isaac Casaubon's thesis that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a Greek forgery, showing that the Hermetic texts recorded Egyptian beliefs, and that these doctrines were part of a Great Chain of Religious Tradition linking the Egyptians to the Jewish Kabbalists and the Greeks.⁴¹

Then there is Newton. He certainly regarded himself as heir to a tradition reaching back to Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes, Pythagoras and Plato: giving definite mathematical expression to the truths and problems with which they were all concerned. Like Blavatsky, More and Cudworth, Newton believed that there had once been a religion common to the entire world; and like Blavatsky, he spent considerable time assessing how the original truths of Christianity had been corrupted, regarding Catholicism as especially pernicious. Despite denial of the Trinity remaining illegal in Britain until 1813, Newton was a professed Arian, believing that Jesus was not of the same substance as God, the Lord of all; thereby denying validity to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Newton spent more time on interests such as the chronology of the ancient kingdoms, Church history, theology, prophecy and alchemy, than on optics, mathematics and physics.⁴² But when Newton's papers were examined after his death in 1727, the alchemical papers were marked 'not fit to be printed' and put back in their boxes, where the approximately 650,000 words in his handwriting languished in their consigned grave, until in 1936 the descendants of Newton's niece decided to sell the alchemical, theological and other papers in their possession.⁴³ This censorship enabled Newton to be touted as an exemplar of Enlightenment ideology, despite the nature of his interests, his beliefs, and the largest part of his work.

A re-conceptualisation of Newton began in earnest once John Maynard Keynes had gone through the papers he acquired at the Sotheby's auction, eventually to make the following observation:

Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians, the last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Anthony Grafton, 'Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism', *The New Republic*, vol. 217, no.21 (1997).

⁴² Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, 'Newton as Final Cause and First Mover', *Isis*, vol. 85 (1994), p.643; Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy*, p.6.

⁴³ Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy*, p.13.

⁴⁴ John Maynard Keynes, 'Newton the Man', (Newton Tercentenary Celebrations, The Royal Society of London, July, 1946) available at http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Keynes_Newton.html. Accessed 16/03/2011.

An insight into the way in which that mind worked has been afforded us by the record of Newton's foremost pupil, Colin Maclaurin, when describing the method of reasoning Newton generally employed, which was to argue from analogy:

After having established the principle of universal Gravitation of Matter in the first treatise, when he is not able to demonstrate the causes of the phaenomena described in the second more evidently, he endeavours to judge of them, by *analogy*, from what he had found in the greater motions of the system; a way of reasoning that is agreeable to the harmony of things, and to the old maxim ascribed to *Hermes*, and approved by the observation and judgement of the best philosophers, 'That what passes in the heavens above is similar and analogous to what passes on the earth below'⁴⁵

We can now plot a fairly distinct mini-history of the fate of Hermeticism and the occult at the hands of historians of science, within which to situate Blavatsky's key claims about the tradition which she described as Theosophy—using as milestones the attitudes displayed toward Newton by Maclaurin, Brewster and Dobbs. There are three distinct periods in this history. In 1748, Maclaurin was able to write, with no hint of apology or excuse, of his teacher's reasoning by analogy—much as Hermes had done before him—along the lines of the well-known maxim: 'That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below, to do the miracles of one only thing'.⁴⁶ This is the fuller version of the now clichéd 'as above so below'; from Newton's 1690 translation of the Emerald Tablet, the first English translation (which I would suggest repays close study). By the time David Brewster composed his Newton biographies, in roughly the first half of the nineteenth century, he was in defence mode, regretfully having to disclose his subject's bizarre pre-scientific interests. In 1936, Newton's alchemical papers and other material 'not fit to be printed' were auctioned at Sotheby's, leading the economist John Maynard Keynes to remark a decade later that Newton was not the first of the age of reason but the last of the great magicians. This was indicative of a new development in the history of science and in Newton studies, both of which underwent considerable revision, so that by the 1970s Newton could be well and truly "outed" as an alchemist in the ground-breaking work of B.J.T. Dobbs, Richard Westfall and others. Blavatsky's work was published in the late nineteenth century, in Brewster territory, when the norm in Newton studies was to defend the hero and to regretfully explain away his anomalous interests. Going well against the grain, Helena Blavatsky placed Newton firmly in the camp of the occultist, the magician, and the Kabbalist.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Colin Maclaurin, *An Account of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophical Discoveries in Four Books* (London: Patrick Murdoch, 1748), p.20.

⁴⁶ Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, 'Newton's Commentary on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: Its Scientific and Theological Significance', in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, eds Ian Merkel and Alan G. Debus (USA: Folger Books, 1988), p.183.

⁴⁷ See for example Blavatsky, 'Is Gravitation a Law?', *The Secret Doctrine* Volume 1, p.490.

Developments in the fate of the occult (and by extension, Theosophy) at the hands of modern science have taken an interesting turn. If what used to be known as the march of progress involved a sure and steady movement away from Hermeticism, then it would appear to be the case that beginning with the formulation of quantum theory by Max Planck in 1900, the twentieth century witnessed an equally steady march back to some of the theories, insights and practices of the seventeenth century Hermeticist, though generally not thought of in quite those terms. Indeed, the shape of the landscape changed so drastically in the twentieth century, that at this stage it looks to me as though future historians may see the past three centuries as a slight deviation to the norm, in terms of esotericism and occultism as outlined above—with a gradual return to the doctrine of correspondences and the notion of a living nature, a reinstated significance accorded to the place of imagination and participation, and a new understanding of the experience of transmutation. All this no longer eclipsed by the experimental method, but enhanced and placed into sharper relief. That is pure conjecture of course, but here is an outline of that future history.

In 1900 Max Planck discovered the quantum field, demonstrating that at the subatomic level Newtonian mechanics do not apply. The same year saw the publication of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This begins a significant twinning of physics and psychology, matter and psyche that continues throughout the twentieth century: a "marriage" that deserves close attention. A third party to this revived relationship between the occult and science—parapsychology—enters the picture in 1903 with the publication of the classicist F.W.H. Myers' *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*.⁴⁸ This was a good year for psychic research, with the publication of similar works in French and in Italian: but Myers is the one who has been compared with Francis Bacon, William James and Charles Darwin.⁴⁹

If it seems hasty to mention the occult in connection with Freud's dream analysis, then consider the fact that in 1922 Freud published his first paper on dreams and telepathy. At the time, he hastened to add: 'You will learn nothing from this paper of mine about the enigma of telepathy ... not even gather whether I believe in the existence of 'telepathy' or not'.⁵⁰ In point of fact, Freud was a "closet" believer. The year before this, he completed a paper titled *Psychoanalysis and Telepathy*, which was only published posthumously in 1941. Its second paragraph begins:

⁴⁸ Frederic W.H. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (2 vols) (London: Longmans, Green, 1903).

⁴⁹ Carlos S. Alvarado, 'On the Centenary of Frederic W.H. Myers's *Human Personality And It's Survival Of Bodily Death*', Available at http://www.survival-research.net/downloads/alvarado_myers_jp.pdf. Accessed 18/04/2011.

⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Great Britain: Vintage, 2001), p.197.

It is no longer possible to keep away from the study of what are known as ‘occult’ phenomena — of facts, that is, that profess to speak in favour of the real existence of psychical forces other than the human and animal minds with which we are familiar...⁵¹

The field of psychic research as a reputable branch of science seemed set to arrive with the establishment of the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in North Carolina, under the leadership of Dr Joseph Banks Rhine. In 1934 Rhine published *Extra-Sensory Perception* an academic title which became an unexpected bestseller. The vilification following the success of this publication led Rhine to observe that: ‘In the history of more than one branch of research, the stone which a hasty science rejected has sometimes become the cornerstone of its later structure’.⁵² I do not know whether this was a conscious or an unconscious reference to Psalm 118:22—the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone—but it may well turn out to be true. The rejected stone in this instance is the psychic element, dispensed with by Descartes, and the primacy of consciousness, both of which are creeping back into modern science, foremost in physics, but also of late in the biological sciences. In 1967, a research unit of the Department of Psychiatric Medicine was formed at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, headed by Dr Ian Stevenson, with the aim of investigating a wide range of phenomena including telepathy, near-death experiences and claimed memories of past lives: ‘that suggest that currently accepted scientific assumptions and theories about the nature of mind or consciousness, and its relationship to matter, may be incomplete’.⁵³

The field of medicine has also begun to trench upon the territory of the occult (in more than just medical terminology). In the early 1990s, Dr J. Andrew Armour introduced the idea of a functional brain in the heart,⁵⁴ echoing Helena Blavatsky’s outlandish assertion, in ‘Kosmic Mind’, that the heart has seven brains.⁵⁵ In 1996, the enteric nervous system (first described in 1921) was labelled a second brain in the digestive system by Dr Gershon, working in the new field of neuro-gastroenterology. Finally, to end this brief but indicative survey, the year 2008 saw the publication of the *New York Times* bestseller, *The Brain That Changes Itself*.⁵⁶ Making light reading of a complex subject, Norman Doidge relates current research showing that the brain is not fixed or hard-wired but forms new neuronal connections throughout life. If one part of the brain is damaged, another part may, with training, assume some of those functions. The

⁵¹ Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, p.177.

⁵² Elizabeth Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind* (New York: Random House, 2007), p.89.

⁵³ Division of Perceptual Studies, University of Virginia, ‘Who We Are’, Available at http://www.medicine.virginia.edu/clinical/departments/psychiatry/sections/cspdp/dops/we_are-page. Accessed 16/03/2011.

⁵⁴ J. Andrew Armour, *Neurocardiology: Anatomical and Functional Principles* (1991). Available at [http://www.heartmathstore.com/item/enro/heartmath-neurocardiology-\(e-book\)](http://www.heartmathstore.com/item/enro/heartmath-neurocardiology-(e-book)). Accessed 2/5/2011.

⁵⁵ H.P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings Volume 12 - 1889-1890* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), p.133.

⁵⁶ Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (Melbourne, Victoria: Scribe, 2007/2010).

damaged brain can reorganise and reshape itself, providing that it is stimulated to do so; following the normal behaviour of the undamaged brain, which is always making new neuronal connections to keep up with our interests. If ever there was a physical icon of the law of karma—as you sow, so shall you reap—then surely it is this.

In the 1990s, Paul Davies remarked:

The paradigm shift that we are now living through is a shift away from reductionism and toward holism: it is as profound as any paradigm shift in the history of science.⁵⁷

It is not only a shift towards holism, however, but also a significant shift towards the primacy of consciousness, so much so that it is now possible for a physicist or a biologist to speak in terms of consciousness creating the material world. There is also an emerging connection between science, psychology and Hermeticism that is largely unremarked upon. It comes to the fore explicitly in the correspondence between Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Jung, spanning the years 1932 to 1958, chronicling a sustained exploration of the connection between psyche and matter; atom and archetype; physics and psychology. Pauli won the Nobel Prize in physics for the Exclusion Principle, a theory that explains why the structure of matter is the way it is. He finally arrived at this principle through a close reading of Kepler and Fludd: especially the controversy on the relative significance of the numbers three and four—the question being, which of these two numbers is at the heart of the universe? Most of all, Pauli was occupied with the attempt to work out a unified framework for modern physics and depth psychology.⁵⁸ He strongly believed that these two fields were the same reality looked at from different points of view. Both Pauli and Jung believed that matter and mind, or matter and psyche, are complementary in their structure and reflect each other: the one reality from above and from below, the inner and the outer, being two reflections of the one only thing. An avid reader, and occasional author, of science history, Pauli was convinced that modern science has brought us closer than ever to ‘the redeeming experience of oneness’.⁵⁹ A little like Newton in this regard, Pauli believed himself to be giving mathematical and narrative form to what amounts to a “new dispensation,” which happens to coincide extremely closely with Blavatsky’s Theosophy.

Thus we come full circle. The Hermeticism of Paracelsus, Newton and Fludd has re-entered the contemporary scientific arena via the twinned areas of quantum physics and depth psychology. The other West of William Blake, Paracelsus and Madame Blavatsky is beginning to look more

⁵⁷ Paul Davies, *The Matter Myth: Dramatic Discoveries That Challenge Our Understanding of Physical Reality* (New York & London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p.28.

⁵⁸ C.A. Meier (ed.), *Atom and Archetype: The Pauli/Jung Letters, 1932-1958* (Princeton University Press, 2001), p.xxxvii.

⁵⁹ Arthur I. Miller, *Deciphering the Cosmic Number: The Strange Friendship of Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Jung* (New York and London: W.W Norton & Company, 2009), p.206.

and more like the regular West; with modern science, alienated from the psyche, starting to look more out of sync with each passing decade. The truth has really become stranger than fiction. Jung was not wrong to write to J.B. Rhine in 1942, that: ‘When we are in possession of all facts, science will look very peculiar indeed ... It will mean nothing less than an entirely new understanding of man and world’.⁶⁰ At the same time, it is quite likely that Theosophy—in every sense of the term as defined in this paper—will look less peculiar as the result.

⁶⁰ James A. Hall, ‘A Jungian Perspective on Parapsychology: Implications for Science and Religion’, in *Parapsychology, Philosophy and Religious Concepts: Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Rome, Italy August 23-24m 1985*, eds Betty Shapin and Lisette Coly (New York, NY: Parapsychology Foundation Inc., 1987), p.21.