

The Consolation of Theosophy II

By Frederick C. Crews

**The New York Review of Books
Vol. 43, No. 15 (October 3, 1996)**

Review

Among the books discussed in this essay

*The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology;
The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935*

by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke

New York University Press, 293 pp., \$15.95 (paper)

The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement

by Richard Noll

Princeton University Press, 387 pp., \$27.95

Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Mystification

by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, translated by Kirby Olson, in collaboration with Xavier Callahan

Routledge, 144 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

*Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who
Brought Spiritualism to America*

by Peter Washington

Schocken Books, 470 pp., \$14.00

1.

With the publication in 1995 of Peter Washington's admirable study *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*,^[1] readers now at last have access to a judicious as well as an entertaining account of Theosophy, a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century movement that conjoined religious syncretism to esotericism on the one hand and liberal idealism on the other. The Theosophical Society was created in 1875 by Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who exerted a charismatic sway over converts until her death in 1891. In England, the United States, and India as well as elsewhere, Washington shows, Theosophy generated much bizarre metaphysics, absurd pomp, and petty factionalism, but it also exerted a surprisingly invigorating effect within the lives of many adherents. And its political influence, too, appears to have been largely benign; Theosophy allied itself not just with moralizing personal betterment but also with pacific internationalism and the self-determination of colonized "natives."

Or so the indigenous activists were at first led to believe. But as they sooner or later discovered, Theosophy was never meant to be a catalyst of revolution. Madame Blavatsky had no taste for violence or even for social disorder, and her anti-imperialism was so flimsy and opportunistic that at different times she volunteered to serve as both a

British and a Russian spy. ^[2] And more generally, Theosophy sent the world a mixed message about human equality—a contradiction, we might say, between brotherhood and "the Brotherhood," those distant Mahatmas who allegedly served as deputies of the Rulers of the Universe and who deigned to communicate telepathically only with the top level of Theosophical initiates.

As Washington observes, furthermore, the emergence from Central Asian obscurity of the conflict-thirsty G.I. Gurdjieff during World War I suggested, however faintly, a potential opening of Theosophy toward the militant right. In practice, to be sure, Gurdjieff remained a one-man movement and took little interest in the great powers and their bloodbaths. Indeed, whether he found himself in the turmoil of revolutionary Russia or in Nazi-occupied Paris, he showed a notable talent for placating whichever Caesar happened to be ruling at the moment. But Washington perceptively glimpses an affinity between Gurdjieffian cruelty and the ethos of purgative primitivism that led D.H. Lawrence among others—and the later Yeats could have been mentioned in the same connection—to flirt with proto-fascist authoritarianism as an alternative to bourgeois soul-death.

Nor should we ever be surprised when occultism does link arms with reactionary ideologies. Sooner or later, the gnostic habit of thought battens upon vitalism, the belief in a life force that cries out to be unshackled from convention. And fascist doctrine stands ready to give vitalism a nationalistic and nostalgic twist: we must inhale the spirit of our warrior ancestors, who knew no democratic legalism and harbored no pity for the unfit and the foreign.

As it happens, this is something more than a theoretical scenario. If we retrace our steps to the 1880s and follow the vogue of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* (1888) not in England or America but in Germany, we encounter a sinister and portentous counter-history that rates only a passing footnote in *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* and no mention at all in books by esoteric devotees. Astonishingly, the most hellish of all totalitarian ideologies, Nazism, bore more than a casual relationship to ideas of Blavatsky's that she had promulgated with a very different politics in mind.

The second volume of *The Secret Doctrine* featured an evolutionary myth about our planet's seven "root-races," five of which had already made their successive debuts. Humanity, Blavatsky revealed, had declined to a spiritual nadir with race number four but was now on the rise again, as our own fifth root-race worked its way toward superior incarnations that would eventually produce the god-men of root-race seven. Our ancestors' greatest disgrace, furthermore, was thought to have occurred when the slimy Lemurians of root-race four had interbred with still lower creatures. And although that fateful miscegenation had occurred eons before the Theosophical Society began preaching racial harmony, the chief magi who dispensed wisdom to Blavatsky by thought transference from Asia, Koot Hoomi and Morya, had allegedly disclosed to her colleague A.P. Sinnett that one "sub-race" within the fifth root-race—namely, the Aryan—possessed the highest spiritual potentiality.

Of course, Theosophical notions about race hadn't been flashed directly from heaven or even from Tibet. They were related, however loosely, to academically fashionable

inquiries into the origins of modern languages, myths, and religions by such scholars as Jakob Grimm, August Schleicher, and Max Müller. Comparative linguistics appeared to show that a primordial ethnic group—often designated by that same name, Aryan—spoke the tongue from which every later Indo-European strain derived. And parallel investigations of folk tales and belief systems also yielded family trees, suggesting that modern cultural divergence, with all its potential for fatal scapegoating, was less a matter of geography and tradition than of persistent, indeed ineradicable, hereditary traits. Much Victorian academic discourse thus tended toward racist stereotyping, even before Darwinian theory inadvertently exacerbated matters by supplying a biological dimension to the game of invidious classification. With the advent of Social Darwinism, people who already felt that Africans, Chinese, and Jews were throwback types, and who correspondingly regarded their own Caucasian race as humanity's advancing edge, could couch their prejudices in the idiom of natural selection.

Such was the volatile climate into which Blavatsky's insouciantly improvised theology, history, and anthropology were launched. For a few years, to be sure, her influence looked harmless enough. When, with Olcott's assistance, the first German Theosophical Society was founded in 1884, its initial appeal was felt mainly by members of the left-liberal *Lebensreform* movement, who were typically fond of rural communes, vegetarianism, alternative medicine, nudism, and the like. But as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke shows in his fine 1985 study, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, Theosophy was to make its strongest impact on the *völkisch* right, which was nationalistic, hierarchical, authoritarian, racist, and obsessed with modern degeneracy from an ideal past that had supposedly been ruled by Aryans in the narrower Teutonic sense of the term.

The Secret Doctrine needed only minor revision to be accepted as a liberating gospel by radically reactionary "Ariosophists"—Austrian and German followers of Guido von List (1848-1919) and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874-1954), who in the years before the Great War began prophesying what Goodrick-Clarke calls "a coming era of German world rule." Like Blavatsky, the Ariosophists despised the Church, which they regarded as having empowered a sickly underclass and as having hijacked and corrupted a Germanic sun-worshipping cult that deserved to be revived as such. Blavatsky's fancy that humans had descended from gods became serviceable when it was scaled down to include only people of a certain lineage. As for her secret brotherhood, it found an exact counterpart in the German esotericists' posited corps of ancient Aryan man-spirits known as *Armanen*. And her idea of race mixing as the root of decadence struck a responsive chord in thinkers who were unsure of their own social credentials, eager to find an all-purpose explanation for the troubles of modernity, and vexed by the close Central European presence of Slavs and Jews, who impressed them as being ever more numerous, alien, and controlling.

The Occult Roots of Nazism traces the path by which Ariosophists, who were more interested in nostalgic gestures than in day-to-day politics, passed along their myths and symbols to more militant anti-Semitic and nationalist organizations, which in turn lent inspiration to the Nazi party after the bitter debacle of World War I. Among the symbols thus transmitted, none stirred more emotion than the swastika, which Blavatsky herself had helped to raise to prominence, incorporating it into the very seal of the Theosophical Society. Originally an Eastern sign of fertility and fortune, that emblem meant for Blavat-

sky's followers the spinning electro-spiritual force by whose means the Sons of God and their executive agent, Fohat, set and kept our universe in motion.

By the time that Hitler personally put his finishing touches on the Nazi emblem, Ariosophists had long since identified the swastika with a Teutonic rune whose meaning, it was thought, had been rendered inaccessible for millennia thanks to the supplanting of Aryans by inferior races. Hitler placed the swastika within a red field signifying the purity of Aryan blood and, within that, a white disk that stood for the sun. But the swastika itself still meant roughly what it had conveyed to Blavatsky, the principle of sun-based holy energy. Simply, that principle had now become the property of a single culture. For a fervent Hitlerite, to contemplate the Nazi flag was to be mystically transported into the Ur-German heroic past—and, not incidentally, to harden one's heart against groups that were disqualified by ancestry from an intuitive rapport with Wotan worship and its runes.

Goodrick-Clarke is scrupulously reluctant to conclude that the various lodges and orders of occult German nationalism directly produced the Nazi phenomenon. It is true that Heinrich Himmler retained his own private occultist and allowed him to develop much of the symbolic bric-a-brac of the initiatory, blood-conscious, mystery-minded SS. But as Goodrick-Clarke stresses, Hitler was from the outset a modernizer and a mass-party man; he ordered the lodges closed as soon as he took power, while mobilizing for his own ends the *völkisch* and xenophobic sentiment that Ariosophists had cultivated in a more backward-looking spirit. What Teutonic occultism offered the Third Reich, then, was chiefly a set of metaphors and legends that blended into a psychologically potent cocktail of resentment, pride, and longing for a homogeneous martial state. The eclectic, self-amused, live-and-let-live Blavatsky would have been appalled by what she had accidentally set in motion.

Even so, we should not overlook the broad epistemic likeness between Theosophical dreamers and the ideologues who smoothed the way for the terroristic Nazi state. The common factor was their shared rejection of rational empiricism. By pretending that reliable knowledge can be obtained through such means as clairvoyant trances and astrological casting, the original Theosophists encouraged their German colleagues to "uncover" in prehistory just what they pleased; and the resultant myth of how Aryan hegemony was broken by quasi-simian races formed a template for the infectious post-World War I story of betrayal by Jewish materialists and the vindictive Allies. The whole visionary apparatus—the vitalistic sun cult, the mystic brotherhood, the pygmy usurpers, the lost ancient continents, the millennial cycles, even the idea of a conspiracy by a cabalistic "Great International Party" of diabolical antitraditionalists—was already there in *The Secret Doctrine*. There needed only a specific historical grudge and a fevered demagogue to set in motion the march toward paranoid eugenics and actual extermination of the "polluting" social elements.

2.

We need to remind ourselves, after such an example, that esoterically acquired convictions are not always and everywhere a menace. In a stable democracy such as our own, manifest occultism tends to produce more amusement than terror. And, in fact, a direct line of descent connects Theosophy to an array of ludicrous and generally harmless

New Age practices that now surround us, from astrology, crystal gazing, homeopathy, and pyramid power to Wicca nature worship, prophecy, channeling, past-life regression, goddess theology, belief in extraterrestrial visitation, and obeisance to self-designated gurus and ascended masters. (Indeed, two of Blavatsky's own Masters have reappeared in person, ageless and helpful as ever, in the Great White Brotherhood that is said to guide our American contemporary Elizabeth Clare Prophet, a k a Guru Ma.) Although one can agree with Carl Sagan's contention, in his recent book *The Demon-Haunted World*, that such fads reflect a popular revolt against science and a lamentable resurgence of superstition, it would be perverse to mention them in the same breath with Nazi ideology.^[3]

Sagan does, however, single out one occult atavism that can bear deadly consequences: it is the psychotherapeutic practice, which I addressed in these pages two years ago, of persuading clients that their neurotic symptoms derive from repressed or dissociated memories of childhood sexual abuse and torture.^[4] Just what that practice has to do with occultism may not be evident to every reader. But as Sagan remarks, the trancelike state in which patients typically "retrieve memories" of previously unsuspected traumas brands recovered memory therapy as a modern variant of spiritualism; and that connection is only strengthened by the not infrequent "remembering" of subjection to devil-worshipping cults.

Sagan's point needs to be placed in a broader historical and conceptual frame, however, if the manifestly silly conjuring of Satanic "memories" is not to be mistaken for a rare departure from a therapeutic tradition that otherwise stands above reproach. Although many tend to assume that psychotherapy rests on authenticated discoveries about the mind, the talking cure was actually born in a climate of occultism, retained its gnostic affinities in the *anni mirabili* of its modern flowering, and has yet to make an altogether clean break from those affinities. Contemporary therapists who are struggling to render their profession more accountable to ethical and empirical norms may not realize it, but they are at war with an irrationalist legacy that deserves to be identified as such.

As several scholars have established in increasingly convincing detail, the key thinkers who pointed therapy toward the retrieval of forgotten trauma—Charcot, Janet, Breuer, and Freud—were deeply if indirectly indebted to a parlor healer, theorist of the paranormal, and proto-Theosophist, Franz Anton Mesmer, who enjoyed an enormous vogue in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.^[5] Not coincidentally, this was the same Mesmer who triggered the American and European craze of spiritualism, which in turn provided the young Helena Blavatsky with her livelihood as a medium. Thus Theosophy and psychotherapy share a key forebear—one who had written his medical thesis on planetary influences and who inspired the founding of a quasi-Masonic, symbol-mongering "Society of Harmony" that declared the human race to be capable of registering mystic sympathies with every cranny of the universe.

The theatrical Mesmer, clad in a robe emblazoned with Rosicrucian alchemical signs, had "magnetized" people who would later be classified as hysterics, supposedly redirecting their warped fields of electrochemical energy into wholesome channels. Like his institutionally sanctioned counterparts a century later, he put many of his subjects into hypnotic trances and provoked "crises" that were considered prerequisite to cure; and like

them, he placed truth value on the "information" that was thus speciously fed back to him from his own suggestions. And so did his immediate followers the Marquis de Puységur and the Chevalier de Barberin, who turned Mesmerism directly into the modern therapeutic path by minimizing the importance of imagined magnetic fluid and emphasizing instead both the psychic attunement of the healer to the patient's hidden illness and the providing of advice about everyday problems and relationships.

Jonathan Miller has traced the steps whereby medical and scientific thinkers gradually stripped Mesmerism of its occult trappings, reducing it to mere hypnosis and thus preparing the way for recognition of nonconscious mental functioning.^[6] As Miller emphasizes, the resultant "unconscious," corresponding to "the processes which are integral to memory, perception, and behavior," has little in common with the custodial and repressive Freudian unconscious, whose twentieth-century sway among theoreticians actually retarded the development of cognitive psychology as we now know it. The psychoanalytic unconscious, too, ultimately derived from Mesmerism, but from its subsequently discredited side—that is, from the unsustainable claim that hypnotic states bring to expression reliably veridical memories that must therefore have been stuffed away in some normally forbidden corner of the psyche.

In the practice of Mesmerism, the news that came back from hypnotized subjects tended to be reports of time travel and spirit contacts. Hence Mesmer's vogue among esotericists and his disrepute among the more secular-minded. His nineteenth-century medical avatars aimed lower, but they fell victim to his key fallacy of mistaking mere suggestibility for telltale evidence of buried trauma. Hypnotized subjects can produce quite real physical manifestations that arise entirely from compliance with the hypnotist's wishes. Overlooking that key fact, Charcot and his followers ingenuously accepted the symptomatology of "hysteria" as it was acted out under the influence of hypnotic collusion. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen puts it in a groundbreaking new book, *Remembering Anna O.*, the eventual hypothesis of the dynamic, repressing unconscious "was (and is) simply an end run around the hypothesis of simulation, by way of arguing that the hysteric's right hand doesn't know (or forgets, or represses) what the left hand is doing."^[7]

Borch-Jacobsen shows that Josef Breuer's "Anna O." case of 1880-1882—the fountainhead of all modern "cures" through memory retrieval—involved an especially egregious instance of such misinterpretation. Like other talented "hysterics" who honed suffering into a full-time reproach to family members and to a misogynistic social order, Bertha Pappenheim specialized in histrionics that were probably both inspired and amplified by hypnotism. Her symptoms largely reproduced the tics and convulsions that had been featured, just months before she began consulting Breuer, in sensational and much-discussed Viennese stage demonstrations of Mesmeric power by one Carl Hansen. And far from being permanently removed by Breuer's treatment, as Breuer and Freud would later deceptively maintain, most of those symptoms sprang up within the treatment, were rewarded with habituating doses of morphine and chloral hydrate that had been meant to alleviate a very real facial neuralgia, and partook of a doctor-patient *folie à deux* that would end only when, pressed to do so by his neglected wife, Breuer abandoned the fruitless "cure."

At that point Pappenheim, half in spite and half in self-reproach, ventured to assert that she had been simulating afflictions from the outset. If so, Breuer's much-vaunted ability to banish individual symptoms by encouraging her to talk about them becomes all too readily understandable. What we know for certain is that Pappenheim had stage-managed the course of treatment, which involved the hypnotic and autohypnotic production of fantasies and hallucinations to which she herself ascribed a purgative effect. The Anna O. case thus resembled, in Henri Ellenberger's words, "the great exemplary cases of magnetic illness in the first half of the nineteenth century....in which the patient dictated to the physician the therapeutic devices he had to use, prophesied the course of the illness, and announced its terminal date."^[8] In a word, the founding example of modern psychotherapy was just another instance of Mesmerism in the chatty mode of Puységur and Barberin.

From the mid-1880s through the early Nineties, Freud himself was renowned in Vienna as a suggestive healer. His practice then rested squarely on the use of hypnosis—a tool he would later sheepishly characterize as borderline "mystical"^[9]—to allay tumultuous emotional crises and induce supposedly cathartic memories. Some of his medical colleagues suggested that neither the memories nor the cures were authentic—a conclusion that Freud himself eventually embraced, but not before contracting a permanent fondness for the repression etiology of neurosis. Tellingly, when Freud and Breuer broached their theory of hypnotically deciphered hysteria in 1893, its earliest favorable recognition came from a paranormal enthusiast and a founder of the Society for Psychical Research, F.W.H. Myers.^[10] The same society would later welcome Freud as a corresponding member (Jones, 3:397).

As Peter J. Swales recounts, the children of Freud's most important patient in that period, Anna von Lieben (the "Frau Cäcilie M." of *Studies on Hysteria*), detested him as "'der Zauberer,' 'the magician,' come to put their mother into a trance yet again and to accompany her through her fits of ravings, screamings, and long declamatory speeches."^[11] Freud kept the immensely wealthy Anna's treatment going, without any discernible benefit on her side, for five years, often with twice-daily sessions.^[12] Interestingly, Anna was already a morphine addict, and Freud had no hesitation about feeding her habit. Indeed, that was his regular means of bringing her eruptions to subsidence. As Swales observes, the key insights that this inventive "hysteric," whom Freud repeatedly called his "teacher," gave him into repressed trauma, dream interpretation, sexual fantasy, transference, the conversion of ideas into symptoms, and cathartic "abreaction" were all contaminated not just by hypnotic suggestion but by Anna's chronically doped and dependent state—a factor that is never directly mentioned, much less duly weighed, in Freud's fragments of her case history in *Studies on Hysteria*.

The later abandonment of hypnosis by Freud and others by no means immunized psychotherapy against such epistemic folly; it merely rendered the question-begging effect of clinical suggestion harder for either the practitioner or the patient to recognize. Freud himself likened his "pressure technique"—the next method he used to extract the desired kind of memories—to both hypnotism and crystal gazing (SE, 2:271). And he candidly observed that his final and supposedly objective tool of free association also produced a state that "bears some analogy to...falling asleep—and no doubt also to hypnosis" (SE, 4:102). As Borch-Jacobsen emphasizes in a significant new article,

psychoanalysis never did adopt precautions against the visionary generation and misconstrual of pseudomemories.^[13]

Moreover, a gnostic tendency lay at the very heart of analytic work as the mature Freud conceived it. In drawing on a privately determined symbology to assign thematic meanings to dreams, associations, errors, and symptoms (productions that can easily be taken to signify anything whatsoever), and then in leaping inferentially from those arbitrary interpretations to putative childhood "scenes" that had to be "recalled" or at least acknowledged if a cure was to occur, classical analysis didn't just resemble divination; it was the very thing itself.^[14] And in this light, Freud's lifelong paranormal sympathies—almost always treated as a minor biographical curiosity—deserve to be considered an integral part of the record.

As Ernest Jones's otherwise flattering biography concedes in its startling chapter entitled "Occultism," Freud displayed "an exquisite oscillation between skepticism and credulity" where occult topics were concerned (Jones, 3:375). The expressions of doubt, however, were partly diplomatic and partly aimed at holding in check an embarrassing affinity for "the uncanny" and "the omnipotence of thoughts." Freud engaged in magical propitiatory acts and tested the power of soothsayers; he confided to Jones his belief in "clairvoyant visions of episodes at a distance" and "visitations from departed spirits" (Jones, 3:381); and he even arranged a séance of his own with his family members and three other analysts. He also practiced another hermetic art, numerology, attaching fated meaning to certain room, telephone, and ticket numbers and uncritically accepting such bizarre fancies as Wilhelm Fliess's assertion that the day of a woman's death ought to coincide with the onset of her daughter's menstrual period. Nor, though he and Fliess fell out at the turn of our century, did he ever renounce his allegiance to such notions.

Perhaps most significantly, Freud was strongly attracted to mental telepathy, an unconfirmed paranormal phenomenon which, though it needn't be linked to manifestly occult beliefs and practices, nevertheless entails the very power that Madame Blavatsky and others touted as their pipeline to Theosophical wisdom. Jones himself was barely able to dissuade Freud from publishing a credulous paper of 1921 entitled "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy" (SE, 18:177-193). But Freud, who plainly told his inner circle of his "conversion to telepathy" (Jones, 3:394), could not be altogether hushed.

In a 1922 paper called "Dreams and Telepathy," Freud tried to assume a neutral pose but let slip an affirmation of "the incontestable fact that sleep creates favourable conditions for telepathy" (SE, 18:219). In a 1925 paper on "The Occult Significance of Dreams," he speculated that a telepathic message might make itself known only by being incorporated into a dream (SE, 19:138). And in a chapter of his 1933 *New Introductory Lectures* entitled "Dreams and Occultism," he analyzed one such dream containing news that, he suspected, had traveled telepathically between a father and a distant daughter (SE, 22:31-56). He even surmised, as Blavatsky had done before him, that telepathy had been our "original, archaic method of communication between individuals" (SE, 22:55).^[15]

In his 1921 paper, Freud noted that both telepathy and psychoanalysis meet with disbelief from learned skeptics but appeal to a folk sense of uncanny causality, and he expressed solidarity with what he called "the obscure but indestructible surmises of the common

people against the obscurantism of educated opinion" (SE, 18:178). He went even further in "Dreams and Occultism," declaring, "It would seem to me that psycho-analysis, by inserting the unconscious between what is physical and what was previously called 'psychical,' has paved the way for the assumption of such processes as telepathy" (SE, 22:55). And having decoded to his satisfaction the telepathic dream I have already mentioned, he admitted that "it is only the *interpretation* of the dream that has shown us that it was a telepathic one: psycho-analysis has revealed a telepathic event which we should not otherwise have discovered" (SE, 22:38).

Now, believing in telepathy is by no means the same thing as subscribing to the existence of an astral plane; Freud was no Theosophist. On the contrary, by expanding his sense of what the mind can discern on its own and of what two minds can accomplish at a distance, he hoped to forestall any need to invoke the supernatural within his "science." But that science itself rested largely on conclusions gleaned uncritically from fantasy-producing trance states—and not just from those of drugged and hypnotized patients like Bertha Pappenheim and Anna von Lieben. There was also Freud's own cocaine-aided "self-analysis," a rash of visions supposedly granting him access to memories from the earliest years of his life—memories that, in fact, his undeveloped brain would have been incapable of storing at all, much less of preserving for decades in pristine form. Without such self-telepathy, as it were, we would never have learned about the parricidal and incestuous urges that secretly tyrannize every human mind.

Freud's sense that unconscious power can annul the strictures of physics and biology remained one of the peculiarities of his thought.^[16] In that sense, despite many eloquent protestations to the contrary, he decisively cast his lot with occultism and against science. And likewise, a hermetic strain in Freudian speculation, whereby fanciful instinct theories are extended analogically from the personal psyche to prehistory and thence to the totality of organic nature, has remained prominent from Freud himself and his fervently occultist disciple Sándor Ferenczi—the "Court Astrologist of Psychoanalysts," as he jestingly called himself (Jones, 3:386)—through Geza Róheim and Norman O. Brown. The most recent exemplar of that tradition is the American philosopher-psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, who perceives between Freud's lines a revelation that "the divine is immanent in nature" and that all forms of life are suffused with a love that seeks to articulate itself.^[17]

It is not Freud, however, but his rival and sometime protégé C.G. Jung who affords us the most arresting insight into the linkage between occultism and the therapeutic ethos. Among the formative influences on Jung were writings on ancient mysteries by the Theosophist G.R.S. Mead, who had actually served as Madame Blavatsky's secretary. As Richard Noll reminds us in an important study published in 1994, *The Jung Cult*, Mead

viewed his impressive scholarly work as a personal path to spiritual renewal and wisdom (gnosis). All of his writings are focused on bringing the reader closer to his or her own personal mystical experience of gnosis through the ideas of the ancient adepts. For Mead, as for Jung, scholarship was holy work. Jung's post-Freudian work (after 1912), especially his theories of the collective unconscious and the archetypes, could not have

been constructed without the works of Mead on Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and the Mithraic Liturgy. (p. 69)

Noll leaves us in no doubt that Jung was himself an esotericist—not just a scholarly student of the alchemical and astrological traditions but a believer in a solar-based life force and in the power of hermetic symbols to reorganize the psyche and even provide a kind of salvation. His collective unconscious and his archetypes, nominally scientific entities, are in fact occult constructs, since no known physical process can explain how the individual can tap into the memory bank of the entire species and summon powers that reside nowhere in particular. As Jung himself put it, "the main body of the collective unconscious cannot be strictly said to be psychological, but psychical" (Noll, p. 102). Furthermore, the therapeutic regimen that Jung began to develop around 1912 constituted a full-fledged *völkisch* mystery cult, featuring a buried pagan layer of the unconscious mind, direct experience of God as what Noll calls "an inner sun or star that was the fiery core of one's being" (Noll, p. 141), and communion with one's ancestors in the Land of the Dead.

These were all standard features of Ariosophy and its fellow back-to-Wotan movements in Germany and Austria. Indeed, Jung drew several of his vitalistic and race-conscious notions from leading exponents of those movements, and he taunted the Jewish Freud by making pointed references to them in his letters. Though Anglo-American Jungians continue to deny it, Jung's thought, in Noll's words, "arose from the same Central European cauldron of neopagan, Nietzschean, mystical, hereditarian, *völkisch* utopianism out of which National Socialism arose" (p. 135). Thus it is surely no coincidence that Jung initially welcomed Hitler's ascension and, at least for a while, cheerfully accepted the challenge of hewing to "Aryan science" in matters of psychology, declaring that Jewish notions were incapable of answering to the creative Germanic soul.^[18]

It should also be clear by now that Jung was a far more committed occultist than Blavatsky herself. We know that Blavatsky slapped together her claims from published sources and faked her mediumistic feats. As Noll relates, however, beginning in 1913 Jung began to cultivate private visionary experiences through a trance technique that he later named "active imagination":

In these visions he descends and meets autonomous mythological figures with whom he interacts. Over the years...a wise old man figure named Philemon emerges who becomes Jung's spiritual guru, much like the ascended "masters" or "brothers" engaged by Blavatsky or the Teutonic Brotherhood of the Armanen met by List. Philemon and other visionary figures insist upon their reality and reveal to Jung the foundation of his life and work.... These visionary experiences... form the basis of the psychological theory and method he would develop in 1916. (p. 210)

Sometimes, however, Philemon had to be put on hold while other voices, especially an insistent female one, clamored to be heard:

Jung then wondered if his unconscious was forming an alternate personality.... He decided to interact with the voice,...[employing] a technique used by the spiritualist mediums: "I thought, well, she has not the speech centers I have, so I told her to use mine, and she did, and came

through with a long statement. This is the origin of the technique I developed for dealing directly with the unconscious contents." (p. 203)

Thus was born the notion of the anima, every man's female second self. (A woman's corresponding "animus" appears to have been a chivalrous afterthought.)

But before he generalized and psychologized the spirit-woman in that manner, Jung took her to be an ancient matriarchal deity who had literally taken up residence in his mind. It only remained for him to conclude that he himself, in Noll's words, "had undergone a direct initiation into the ancient Hellenistic mysteries and had even experienced deification in doing so" (p. 213). As Jung eventually revealed to his followers, that is exactly what he thought had occurred during one of his many trances in 1913. In fact, he was inclined to believe that he had temporarily occupied the being of Jesus Christ himself.

By comparison with that apotheosis, all of Theosophy's transcendental claims appear fairly modest. After all, Blavatsky, Sinnett, and the others never asserted that they themselves were divinities. But they did assert that pagan mysteries contain the necessary means of restoring psychic integrity to wan victims of modern materialism, and that was exactly Jung's message as well. As he put it forcefully in a letter to the stunned Freud, psychoanalysis ought to

revivify among intellectuals a feeling for symbol and myth, ever so gently to transform Christ back into the soothsaying god of the vine, which he was, and in this way absorb those ecstatic instinctual forces of Christianity [to make] the cult and the sacred myth what they once were—a drunken feast of joy where man regained the ethos and holiness of an animal. (Noll, p. 188)

Freud's own lesson—that the ego should make peace with its buried demons, the better to control them—was rather more dour and conservative. However, it was no less a product of romantic speculation about ancestral memory, impish inner personages (the ego, id, and superego, each with its own motives, knowledge, and tactics for getting its way), and the grave consequences of trying too hard to deny expression to our instincts. And, of course, one must be a spiritualizing philosopher in the first place to conceive of animality as something to be bargained with rather than as a pervasive fact of our constitution. In this sense Jung, Freud, and Blavatsky were all closer to one another than any of them was to Darwin or Pavlov.

3.

None of this means that psychotherapy is doomed to be a hermetic art or that it serves no useful function, nor even that contemporary Freudians and Jungians, whom I have thus far ignored, retain Freud's and Jung's own predilection for the paranormal. Nor does the genealogical link between Ariosophy and Jungianism condemn the latter as a tool of reactionary indoctrination. All such pronouncements on the basis of origins alone must be resisted as illogical and antihistorical.

At the same time, an awareness of the gnostic strain in Freud and Jung does cast a suggestive light on the central issue that now confronts, and radically polarizes, the therapeutic community throughout the West: whether caregivers should address

themselves to helping clients cope with their current dilemmas as they perceive them or, rather, send those clients on a regressive search for a hypothetical early past and initiate them into "knowledge" of repressed traumas and introjected personages. There is all the difference in the world between "taking a history"—investigating the relationships and vicissitudes that have predisposed the patient to act in self-defeating ways—and *producing* a previously unsuspected, artifactual history that is dictated by boilerplate diagnostic expectations. The cabalistic penchant lingers precisely insofar as therapists insist that true healing must entail a confrontation with some predetermined class of memories, powers, insights, buried selves, or former incarnations. And it is no coincidence that the dangers of drastic harm are all clustered at that end of the therapeutic spectrum.

The worst of those dangers is surely the evincing of "multiple personalities" from a patient who came to therapy with a far milder complaint. As Carl Sagan recognizes, this is a fairly common though not inevitable outcome of recovered memory treatment, which can pass the disintegrating victim along to the snakepit of a "dissociated identity" ward from which the only exit may be either suicide or the exhaustion of insurance benefits. What Sagan doesn't realize, however, is that a growing number of certified psychoanalysts, having found it more ideologically attractive to smoke out long-past sexual abuse than to rehearse the same old oedipal fantasies, have now enthusiastically joined in the bringing of "split-off selves" to cathartic expression in therapy.^[19]

Some analysts have thus reverted, shockingly, to the recovered memory quackery that Freud himself was practicing in the mid-1890s, when he brutally overrode his patients' denial of having been molested in early childhood and told them that he detected the nature of their traumas in their current symptoms of constipation, sores in the mouth, and so on. In that period, when Freud had already passed from hypnotism through the pressure technique to reliance on free association, he was convinced that merely by attuning his psyche to a patient's speech he could hear what two adults had been saying in her presence when she was eleven months old.^[20] Amazing—but scarcely more so than the contemporary analyst's feat of getting to know little girls, grown-up molesters, and skittish adolescents through acts of empathy with the adult patient whose mind harbors all of these dissociated "introjects":

As I come to occupy my patient's internal world, to reside experientially within it, I surely come to know, in the most intimate of ways, my fellow inhabitant's [*sic*], her internal objects and their accompanying self-representations. I interact with them, I act like them, ultimately I will become them! I need to know the multifaceted dimensions of what I have become in relationship to a particular person, to allow the past literally to impress itself on the treatment—to know the patient... "from the inside out."^[21]

Nothing but a crystal ball need be added to this scene to render its spiritualist premises explicit.

Whether practiced by Freud in 1896 or by his memory-scouring heirs in 1996, the combination of coaxed belief and induced crisis, with the therapist's conjectures then "verified" by the agitated patient's discomfiture on the couch, amounts to a perfect recipe

for creating panic and delusion. Empathetic therapy, it seems, has made no lasting gain in prudence since the eighteenth century. Indeed, Mesmerism looks like a pleasant diversion in comparison with modern treatments that result in the destruction of families and the prosecution of innocent people.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that therapeutic harm does not correlate directly with the degree of outlandishness in a practitioner's diagnosis. Take, for example, the patients who form the research base for the sublimely gullible Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, who accepts UFO abduction stories at face value.^[22] Having been hypnotically reinforced in the belief that alien kidnappers once played doctor with them in hovering spacecraft, those patients must be regarded as classic victims of therapeutic occultism. Yet they tend on the whole to be only mildly dysfunctional. The explanation is simple: these people weren't raised by the creatures who supposedly diddled them. In contrast, the relatively plausible allegation that one must have been raped by one's father characteristically shatters the identity of the patient who falls prey to such a staple notion in the professional folklore of our time.

If occult concepts per se were psychologically noxious, we would expect Jungian ministrations in particular to wreak havoc on their clients, many of whom come away from therapy believing in fortune telling, mystical "synchronicity," communion with pantheistic sources of wisdom, and similar willful notions. But those beliefs seem to render them only more cheerful, self-trusting, and tedious at parties. Once again, then: as we saw in the case of Theosophy versus Ariosophy, it is not a weakness for illusions that renders a doctrine or a therapeutic regimen deadly but a preference for illusions that blame a live human "perpetrator" for whatever discontents are being magnified.

But social harm apart, we might venture to hope that psychotherapy, as an institution that likes to maintain good-neighbor relations with science, will someday make a full reckoning with its gnostic component. All those therapists who acquire "knowledge" by first applying suggestive pressure and then disregarding its influence on their findings are more akin to mediums than to physicians. Do they really want to continue down the yellow brick road that has led from Mesmer and Puységur through Freud and Jung to the latest promises of cure via channeling, rebirthing, and past-life regression? And will their guilds never tire of issuing discreet caveats about "going too far" with diagnostic procedures that actually go in circles?

If I remain pessimistic about the thoroughgoing reform of psychotherapy, it is because of a powerful factor that we have remarked throughout this two-part essay: the unquenchable human thirst for meanings that can ease our doubts, sanction and regulate our urges, and flatter our self-conception. Established religion, Theosophy, and psychotherapy as it is often—by no means always—practiced have all plied the same trade, and with degrees of success that owe nothing to the demonstrable cogency of their assertions.

Of those three competitors for our spiritual allegiance, psychotherapy would appear to suffer a handicap by virtue of its mundane secular character. But this too may be an illusion. Freud put matters backwards when he called the discovery of the unconscious a great blow to human narcissism. As the shrewd if occasionally delirious Jung was quick

to perceive, we needn't defer to Rome or the Himalayas to learn about divinity. The gods, Jung told the dissatisfied and yearning Western bourgeoisie, already reside within our heads, they find us quite interesting and lovable, and they are eager to impart their secrets to us. Does mere empirical rationality stand a chance against an appeal that speaks so directly to our needs?

This is the second of two articles.

Notes

[1] See my review in the last issue.

[2] See K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 213-214, 226-227.

[3] Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (Random House, 1996).

[4] See Crews, "The Revenge of the Repressed," *The New York Review*, November 17, 1994, pp. 54-60; December 1, 1994, pp. 49-58. The essay is reprinted in Crews et al., *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (New York Review Books, 1995).

[5] See, e.g., Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (Basic Books, 1970); Malcolm Macmillan, *Freud Evaluated: The Completed Arc* (North-Holland, 1991; second edition forthcoming from MIT Press, 1997); and Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (Yale University Press, 1993). Unfortunately, Crabtree's book fails to take cognizance of the methodological excesses that characterize the entire Mesmeric tradition.

[6] Jonathan Miller, "Going Unconscious," in *Hidden Histories of Science*, edited by Robert B. Silvers (New York Review Books, 1995), pp. 1-35.

[7] Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O.*, p. 71. It should be pointed out that hypnotherapy per se needn't entail any assumptions about the mind beyond its suggestibility. Hippolyte Bernheim, professor of medicine at the University of Nancy, in whose commanding presence Freud became a passionate believer in posthypnotic suggestion, sharply dissented from the causal inferences that Charcot and, later, Freud himself drew from the subject's ability to produce manifestations expected by the hypnotist. Freud turned out to be at once Bernheim's most eager and most perversely obtuse pupil.

[8] Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 484. As Ellenberger observes, Pappenheim had enlisted Breuer in trying out the Aristotelian idea of catharsis as it had been famously expounded by Freud's future father-in-law, Jacob Bernays, in a book of 1880: "For a time catharsis was...the current topic of conversation in Viennese salons. No wonder a young lady of high society

adopted it as a device for a self-directed cure, but it is ironic that Anna O.'s unsuccessful treatment should have become, for posterity, the prototype of a cathartic cure."

[9] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 volumes, translated by James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), Volume 11, p. 22. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "SE."

[10] See Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 3 volumes (Basic Books, 1957), Volume 1, p. 250. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Jones."

[11] Peter J. Swales, "Freud, His Teacher, and the Birth of Psychoanalysis," in *Freud: Appraisals and Reappraisals: Contributions to Freud Studies*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul E. Stepanky (Analytic Press, 1986), pp. 3-82; the quotation is from p. 50.

[12] Incidentally, Freud almost certainly had Anna von Lieben in mind when he wrote to Fliess on August 1, 1890, that he would have to cancel a planned reunion in Berlin, since "my most important patient is just now going through a kind of nervous crisis and might get well in my absence." See *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 27.

[13] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, "Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory," *October* (Spring 1996), pp. 15-43.

[14] This point could be disputed on the grounds that a psychoanalyst, after all, draws inductive hypotheses from the behavior of an interlocutor. That, however, is just what mediums do as well, tailoring their message to a "cold reading" of the subject's likely traits and problems. In both practices—one conducted spontaneously and cynically, the other earnestly and at great length—dogmatic assertions are rendered believable by being intermingled with disarmingly accurate ones.

[15] Something more than politeness may have been involved when, in turning down the proffered editorship of a journal devoted to ESP, Freud wrote, "if I had my life to live over again I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis" (Jones, 3:392). One can see why Freud's predilection for telepathy made Jones so uneasy. As the latter told his colleagues in a circular letter, public knowledge of the fact would serve those whose "opinion has always been that psychoanalysis is a branch of occultism" (Jones, 3:394).

[16] See, e.g., Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, edited by Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, translated by Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer (Harvard University Press, 1987), especially the editor's discussion on pages 75-107.

[17] Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990), p. 221. Lear voices the familiar irrationalist cry that if Freud's insights cannot be scientifically corroborated, then the "bounds and methods" of science will have to be "redrawn" (Lear, p. 220). As he elaborates, "If science is to treat archaic mind as its subject matter, the science should be conceived as growing out of and completing the archaic expressions it is striving to understand" (Lear, p. 97). Madame Blavatsky would have heartily concurred.

[18] C.G. Jung, "Zur gegenwärtigen Lage der Psychotherapie," *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie*, Volume 7 (1934), pp. 1-16.

[19] See Crews, *The Memory Wars*, pp. 14-29.

[20] For discussion, see *The Memory Wars*, pp. 206-213.

[21] Jody Messler Davies, "Dissociation, Repression, and Reality Testing in the Countertransference: The Controversy over Memory and False Memory in the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, Volume 6, No. 2 (1996), pp. 189-218; the quotation is from p. 209.

[22] See John E. Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (Scribner, 1994).

Biographical Note

Frederick Crews is Professor of English Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

Source

"The Consolation of Theosophy II" was originally published in *The New York Review of Books* Vol. 43, No. 15 (October 3, 1996) and is also contained in *Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays* (Emeryville, Ca.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007) and is reproduced here with the permission of the author.

The Consolation of Philosophy (Loeb Classical Library). by. Boethius (Author). â€º Visit Amazon's Boethius Page. Find all the books, read about the author, and more. See search results for this author. Are you an author? Learn about Author Central. Boethius (Author), H. F. Stewart (Translator), E. K. Rand (Translator), S. J. Tester (Translator) & 1 more.Â The book's impact cannot be measured. Boethius himself cast a long shadow against the centuries, his translations and commentaries of classic Greek philosophical texts were used by the educated Christian world during the Medieval Scholastic period and beyond. The Consolation is a fusion of Christian and Classical Greek and Roman thought that quite literally changed the world. Read more. 37 people found this helpful.