

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Occult Americans:

Invisible Culture and the Literary Imagination

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Lana Louise Finley

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Occult Americans:
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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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My dissertation argues that a symbiotic relationship between fiction and the occult existed in nineteenth century America. American authors reproduced occult ideas culled from the ancient systems of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism in their texts, and these fictions in turn inspired speculative traditions in America. “Occult Americans: Invisible Culture and the Literary Imagination” also provides a connecting link between ancient, magical ideas about the cosmos that were brought to America by its first colonists, and the later nineteenth century occult resurgence. Occult ideas did not go out of existence when Enlightenment dawned in America, but only shifted their terrain, and my dissertation sketches these new loci of occultism in antebellum America.

In my first chapter, “The Triumph of Unreason: Charles Brockden Brown’s Occult Moment,” I examine the discourse of revelation as it was presented by several eighteenth century occult groups. This chapter isolates the religious threat implicit in the “Illuminati Panic” of the 1790s, and argues that Brown explored the occult claims of secret fraternities in his unfinished novella, *Carwin*, and in his novel, *Ormond* (1799).

My second chapter, “Discursive Failure and Imaginative Genesis: Occult Narration in the Corpus of Edgar Allan Poe,” performs a close reading of Poe’s 1848 cosmology, *Eureka*, the writer’s earnest attempt to prove the coequality of matter and spirit and man’s innate divinity. Poe’s novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), is a more successful realization of Hermetic ideas in its narrative form; unlike *Eureka*, *Pym* embeds the central Hermetic tropes of revelation, secrecy, and initiation in its ambiguous ending, symbolic language, and fantastic imagery.

My third chapter, “Masonry, Anti-Masonry, and the Brotherhood of the Union: George Lippard’s Fraternal Dialectic,” recounts the history of Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism in early America. Lippard’s 1848 novel, *Paul Ardenheim*, stages the occult anointing of George Washington, and many of the novel’s Rosicrucian vignettes appear as sacred books in the order Lippard founded, the Brotherhood of the Union. This occult context also provides fresh insight into Lippard’s most popular novel, *The Quaker City* (1845), which dramatizes the antebellum discourse of Anti-Masonry in the corrupt “Monks of Monk Hall.”

The dissertation of Lana Louise Finley is approved.

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Dedicated to Joe Rezek
For keeping me on the path ...

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Introduction

Arguments

“Disliking all long exordia, we propose to enter at once upon the work before us, by inquiring: Is there such a thing as real magic – not the ordinary, chemical, ambidextral jugglery, that passes current among the vulgar as magic – but the real old mysterious thing, whereof we read in old black-letter tomes?”¹ No mere work of literature, fictional or scientific, could ever definitively answer the above question, posed by African American occultist, Paschal Beverly Randolph, in 1863. But at times it might appear as if this is precisely my object. This dissertation is a study of occultism in antebellum American literature. Of the many unconventional features such a line of inquiry suggests, chief among them is a commitment to approaching the occult as a real and identifiable phenomenon, whether of history, ontology, or practice. This attempt to redeem the occult as an appropriate object of academic study, and to interpret occult appearances in literature as such, without recourse to the mitigating discourses of psychology and social class, or even the comforting distance from the real provided by literary theory, often puts me in dangerous proximity to the irrational methodologies which characterize the occult itself. My painstaking, treacherous process has been to historicize American occultisms without closing down on their splendidly imaginative and fecund irrationalisms. The transgressive nature of my subject matter (transgressive for being irrational) is contained by an equally fierce commitment to historical rigor and methodical close readings.

This dissertation puts forward three major, related arguments which are interdisciplinary in scope. The first of these applies chiefly to American religious history. As Yale historian Jon Butler has argued in several places, the grand narrative of religious life in America as the transi-

¹ Paschal Beverly Randolph, *The Wonderful Story of Ravalette* (New York: S. Tousey, 1863) iii.

tion from Puritan piety to recurring Great Awakenings of evangelical Christianity is hardly representative of the totality of the populace, has been greatly exaggerated, and may simply be wrong.² Though the current generation of religious historians is making great strides toward reconstructing the diversity and complexity of American religious life, the idea of an American metaphysical *tradition* is so unfamiliar to most scholars, that it would be impossible for me to proceed in my inquiry without reconstructing, somewhat, this unfamiliar and often surprising history. This project began with a question: “What happened to the occult in the nineteenth century?” Grand narratives of occultism begin in the ancient world, traverse the alchemical speculation of the medieval era, celebrate the Neoplatonic revival of the Florentine Renaissance, and bemoan the excoriating progress of Enlightenment, whose rational and empirical ideals supposedly obliterated the woolly world of the occult by the end of the eighteenth century. Then, suddenly, the occult returns, flowering anew as the nineteenth century draws to a close, in the Theosophical writings of Madame Blavatsky, and in the ceremonial magic of William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley. Surely, pre-Enlightenment, occult traditions had been kept alive by unsung practitioners and transmitted to these harbingers of the twentieth century New Age, and did not just arise spontaneously. Such, at least, was my assumption, and by shedding light on what Jon Butler has called the “Dark Ages of American Occultism” (1760-1848), I was proven correct.

Thus, the first and most visible argument of my dissertation (in terms of the attention paid to it) is that historically unrecovered occult practices informed major works of early American and antebellum American literature. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were rife

² Jon Butler, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760,” *American Historical Review* 84.2 (April 1979): 317-346; *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990); “The Dark Ages of American Occultism,” *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Chicago: Illinois UP, 1983) 58-78.

with occult alternatives to both Enlightenment rationalism and evangelical Christianity. I explore the presence of these alternatives through the writings of three prominent American authors: Charles Brockden Brown, America's first professional novelist; Edgar Allan Poe, America's most celebrated, nineteenth century literary export; and George Lippard, largely unknown today but a best-selling, antebellum novelist. While the preoccupations of these three authors reveal the presence of occult alternatives to the epistemological mainstream, the potent and unsettling presence of the occult can and should transform the way we read Brown, Poe, and Lippard. In other words, tracking the contemporary, occult movements which influenced and inspired these writers performs a historical function, in that it alerts us to a heretofore unknown context for early American literature. But the context that the occult offers transcends the bounds of historical knowledge and invites transhistorical, experiential readings, and also works to undermine the epistemological assumptions that dominate the modern academy. My practice in this project has been to emphasize both the historical presence of the occult in early and antebellum America, and the literary references to occult practices and ideas among my sample of primary texts, because here we stand on familiar academic terrain. Yet the invocation of occult realities by these writers prompts us to entertain truly interdisciplinary claims, by blurring the line that separates fiction from religion, and revelation from literature.

Before proceeding any further with claims of interdisciplinarity, it bears mentioning that the occult as an academic discipline does not exist as such. Nor is it especially developed under any of its variant terms: Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Esotericism, Metaphysics, etc. Historically, Religious Studies has not recognized Western occultism as a religion but has treated it more as aberration, as primitive and proto-religious perhaps, but a more fit subject for the social sciences. Thus, the occult is always interdisciplinary by default, popping up as an object of study in both

the sciences and the humanities, and among the latter spanning fields as diverse as philosophy and music, literature and anthropology. There are compelling reasons why the occult has yet to emerge as a distinct, academic discipline, and why it is often met with controversy and professional disdain when it is treated as an academic subject. Beyond the air of taboo which still envelops the occult, its valorization of transrational states and direct modes of knowing (revelation), and its privileging of “correspondences” or morphological similarity as comparative method over linear and historically contiguous developments, pose an implicit, epistemological threat to the academy’s most cherished values. Both anti-rational and anti-empirical, the occult flagrantly resists analytical interpretation with its impenetrable and otherwise inaccessible texts, and flouts historicization with imaginative histories and secret practices. Catherine Albanese notes that “historians of the metaphysical” must undertake the difficult work of assessing “networks that appear especially temporary, self-erasing, self-transforming.”³ Such a portrait of the occult as the antithesis of the academy’s *raison d’être* (rational, objective inquiry) suggests a subject matter that will always and ever be marginal, barely tolerable within the edifice that reason built.

Yet it would hardly have been possible to complete the present project without the conviction that the academy’s prudishness as regards the occult is ripe for challenging and reassessment. One of the ancillary arguments of this dissertation is that “reason” is a highly unstable term and intensely culture-specific. This is not to say that reason does not exist or cannot be identified; rather, my intent is to call attention to the fact that “reason” is a term of (positive) value, and its application often has less to do with objective rationality or logic than with affirming the truth-claims of the status quo. Prior to the rise of Deistic ideas during the Enlightenment,

³ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007) 8.

to believe in Christianity was considered a reasonable position, if not the *most* reasonable position. Reason often appears insidiously in discussions of goodness and rightness, especially as a defensive posture; “we,” especially we in the academy, are “reasonable,” while our enemies are “irrational” and “illogical.” Reason as the sign of an unchallenged, self-defined assumption of rightness cries out for deconstruction, as much as equally historically-embedded terms of value like “white” and “heterosexual.” The most influential post-structuralist texts of the 1990s, Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, alerted us to the fact that culturally sanctioned positions of power are always defined through and against reference to certain discreditable others whose difference makes those identities possible.⁴ Whiteness needs the idea of blackness in order to define itself, and the discourse of homosexuality as degraded or immoral behavior functions to establish the rightness and goodness of heterosexual identity. The occult is reason’s other. Reason knows itself through what it is not: it is not superstition, it is not belief in the invisible, it is not unsubstantiated claims of immediate knowledge, it is not, in short, the occult.

The occult is a doubly othered knowledge-system. Not only has it come to embody the antithesis of the Enlightenment project of rational empiricism, the occult has also historically been the demonized other of the inexorable and ubiquitous force of Christianity. As the storehouse of all that Western culture wishes to define itself against, the occult haunts us with classified knowledge and forbidden realities. Whether these occult realities are, in fact, real, is not my purpose to decide; the relevant point here is that our collective aversion to the occult’s claims is not entirely *rational* but rather represents the functioning of powerful, cultural taboos. In a universe redefined by quantum mechanics, many of the occult’s claims about the nature of matter,

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: California UP, 1990).

energy, and time are in fact inherently logical. The postmodern critique of Enlightenment has paved the way for the reconsideration of epistemologies demonized and discarded by a strict, empirical model. Perhaps most importantly, the rise of the Information Age has shed light on much formerly “occulted” material, demystifying occult traditions and knowledge claims by making them widely available to the public. We cannot be haunted (or amazed) by something that may be both explained and explored via an internet search, leading theorist Joshua Gunn to prognosticate the “death of the occult” in the twenty-first century.⁵ In spite of these developments in science, critical theory, and secular culture, there are currently only a handful of academic forums where it is both possible and acceptable to engage seriously with the epistemologically transgressive claims of the occult. Yet the rise of new humanities disciplines like African American Studies, Women’s Studies, and Queer Studies suggests that the academy has become receptive to critical analysis of historically marginalized positions. While the occult is a system and body of knowledge and not a social identity, it shares with these marginalized social identities a history of distortion and demonic projection by the cultural hegemony. (It is no accident, of course, that accusations of occultism are almost always directed at these same socially marginalized and disempowered classes, and that occultism rarely gains traction as a descriptor of the activities of able-bodied, heterosexual, white men).

While much of this project is necessarily concerned with establishing a neglected religious history, the basic premise of the occult’s historical viability is put into the service of my other, central arguments about the role and function of the occult in literature. The rise of the novel in the eighteenth century bore directly on both the forms the occult would take in the nineteenth century, and its transmission systems. Leading academic esotericist, Arthur Versluis, ar-

⁵ Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2005) 143-171.

gues here that the Western occult tradition is unique in that it has privileged *textual* initiation over transmission via community and the teacher-student relationship:

What makes Western esotericism different [from an Eastern tradition] is the pervasive lack of initiatory lineages and thus of the immediate reproof or approval of a living teacher. In the absence of a well-recognized line of historical masters, the weight of initiatory transmission is transposed to literary and artistic works, and thus also to the individual. This is not to say that the West had or, for that matter, has no one capable of discerning a right understanding from a wrong one, nor to say that there are no examples of initiatory lineages at all like those of Zen Buddhism. Rather, I am arguing that in the West, esoteric literature and art can function ... as means of initiation, and that this is in fact the primary means of initiatory transmission in the West – through word and image.⁶

My intervention in this idea, that the Western occult tradition is comprised of a lineage of texts, is to isolate popular fiction as a particularly potent vehicle for the occult's transmission in the nineteenth century.

Religion's debt to fiction is not a novel premise in the history of ideas. The world's oldest and most established religions rest on powerful myths which are accepted as truth by the faithful. More pertinent to the study before us, the nineteenth century's most successful occult religion, Theosophy, borrowed heavily from the *oeuvre* of popular novelist, Edward Bulwer Lytton.⁷ As Victoria Nelson explains, the "present postreligious intellectual stance" of the West has led to increased reliance on popular fiction to meet the human needs and drives once served by religion:

The arts, now regarded as homocentric secular territories ruled entirely by the human imagination, have come to serve as a kind of unconscious wellspring of religion instead of the other way around. Most obviously, the precepts of many marginal religious cults derive from science fiction and fantasy films. Less obviously, the rest of us also seek from the arts what we once sought from religion,

⁶ Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004) 12.

⁷ This oft-cited fact in histories of nineteenth century occultism derives primarily from this study: S.B. Liljegren, *Bulwer-Lytton's Novels and Isis Unveiled* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957).

from the cultish worship of “stars” at one extreme to the genteel passion for extracting moral exempla from novels at the other.⁸

Nelson’s identification of the religious status allotted to popular books and films within a culture which understands itself as secular points to why the religious afterlife of a novel functions, in this project at least, as more than mere extra-literary anecdote. Religion professor Jeffrey J. Kripal, whose several books exploring the relationship between fiction and the occult lie at the theoretical heart of this project, quips that “what we now call ‘religion’ is closer to what we now call ‘fiction’ than anyone is willing to admit.”⁹ This evident connection between religion and popular culture authorizes my argument that the religious tradition of occultism both contributed to, and was sustained by, the gothic tradition in literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Western occultism spawned hundreds of Masonic fictions in the eighteenth century alone, following the publication of Terrasson’s *Sethos*.¹⁰ In this era, the great, imaginal force of the occult tradition was subsumed by the Enlightenment vogue for learned societies, exemplified in the popularity of Freemasonry. These societies, widely variant in practice, yet shared a common ground of metaphysical speculation and a pressing desire to mythologize their own inceptions, and Masonic writers exploited the new medium which lent itself so well to both private meditation and rational reflection: the novel. According to Scott Abbott in *Fictions of Freemasonry*, the “ancient, ritual esoterica” of nineteenth century secret societies, “had in fact been drawn from

⁸ Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001) 8-9.

⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2010) 33-34.

¹⁰ Scott Abbott, *Fictions of Freemasonry: Freemasonry and the German Novel* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991) 34.

the public pages of fictions like *Fama Fraternitatis*, *Sethos*, and *Homesickness*.”¹¹ Such a statement invites the question of whether the influential Rosicrucian manifesto, *Fama Fraternitatis*, should be considered a religious text or a work of fiction. Abbott’s claim also reveals that mutual borrowings between occult texts and fiction consumed by the public at large had an earlier provenance than that imagined by either Nelson or Kripal. Freemasonry did not cohere as a nationally and internationally organized body, with codified rites and mythology, until late in the nineteenth century, and so it is fair to argue that the occult novel was both an outcropping of the society, as well as a shaping factor. The challenges of distinguishing a work of occult fiction from a work of occultism proper, coupled with fiction’s power to propagate religious occultisms, motivates my practice of contextualizing American occult fiction with the esoteric movements these texts both referenced and inspired.

While Charles Brockden Brown’s conspiracy fictions, *Ormond* and *Carwin*, have an immediate source in the public outcry against the briefly active Bavarian Order of the Illuminati, these texts were also composed while the speculative, Masonic novel was enjoying a peak of popularity on the Continent. Friedrich Schiller’s novel *Der Geisterseher*, translated and reprinted in America as *The Ghostseer* in 1795, greatly influenced Brown, and “in many ways Schiller’s novel serves as a paradigm for all later novels in which Freemasons play a role, for it features the politics and semiotics [which are] key to the independent relationships between historical and fictional Freemasonry.”¹² Brown’s borrowings from Schiller exceed the subject matter of secret societies and mysterious adepts, and extend to a discrete form which characterizes the Masonic novel. It is therefore appropriate to read Brown within the context of the intellec-

¹¹ Abbott 37. The authorship of the *Fama Fraternitatis* is still disputed. Jean Terrasson’s *Sethos* (1731) may be considered the first Masonic novel. *Homesickness* (*Das Heimweh*, 1794) by Heinrich Jung-Stilling perpetuated the myth of a worldwide secret society.

¹² Abbott 40.

tual preoccupations of his milieu, particularly the fascination Freemasonry held for his transatlantic cohort. Yet this chapter looks not to a specific, occult movement as Brown's source for metaphysical meditation in *Ormond* and *Carwin*, but rather to the welter of late eighteenth century occult activity, which was an integral, if little known, feature of Enlightenment culture.

In Chapter Two, I eschew Edgar Allan Poe's known familiarity with the contemporary, esoteric movement of mesmerism (which largely lacked a dogma), in order to argue his initiation by occult text, namely the *Corpus Hermeticum* of late antiquity. Recalling Versluis's claim that the Western esoteric tradition is constituted by a progression of readers and writers of the metaphysical, I note Poe's influence by the Greco-Egyptian tractates, and demonstrate the relatedness of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to Poe's own cosmology, *Eureka*. I then acknowledge the failure of *Eureka*, a little-read and much-mocked treatise, as a work of expository occultism, in order to highlight how Poe's imaginative treatments of occultism generated far more inquiry and inspiration than his discursive reiteration of Hermetic tenets. Poe's novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, launched a franchise of speculation about dwellers in hollow earth, and thus provides ready evidence of fiction's role in the creation of modern occultisms.

George Lippard was deeply impacted by the Anti-Masonic movement of the mid-nineteenth century. His *oeuvre* is filled with depictions of nefarious secret societies, placed alongside cryptic, suggestive portraits of the benevolent societies which counterbalanced the forces of human evil and greed in the world. Lippard resolved this internal tension, between an attraction to fraternal rites and a hatred of Masonic corruption, by founding his own secret order, the Brotherhood of the Union, which purported to be an improvement upon the ritual style of both Masons and Rosicrucians. Lippard's novel *Paul Ardenheim* is the exemplar of my argument that an occult novel may double as an occult mythology and personal, initiatory text.

Though presented as a work of fiction, several vignettes from *Paul Ardenheim* appear verbatim in the private, ritual book of the Brotherhood of the Union. Furthermore, much of *Paul Ardenheim's* imaginative history of Rosicrucianism is drawn directly from the seventeenth century Rosicrucian manifestoes, pointing to Lippard's own initiation by text and his participation in the esoteric tradition. The fact that many of Lippard's fictions about the occult history of America became established "truths" within the pervasive mythology of twentieth century Rosicrucianism, alerts us to the uncanny power of fiction to create and sustain new cultural beliefs. While we as literary scholars might frown upon the inappropriate reading or mobilization of what we consider to be "just texts," it is the precise object of the present study to challenge the notion of reading as a strictly rational and isolated pursuit. Furthermore, fiction's ability to generate new belief systems and cultural forms is, for me, a healthy indicator that literary studies in general may find safe harbor for posterity.

The last of my principal arguments is that occult novels replicate (or replace) the experience of ritual in both their content and narrative form. It follows that, if a tradition of Western occultism in America began in the era of first contact, and if that tradition was carried forward in part by fictional texts, then those texts would signal their participation in this tradition via certain conspicuous concerns and rhetorical devices. Chief among the thematic criteria I followed in selecting texts for this project was the plot of initiation. This term can be given a very wide interpretation (any new experience might be termed an initiation), and yet initiation has a very specific application within the occult world of ritual magic, as a ceremony marking the difference between one who is excluded from occult mysteries, and one who is on the path to accessing the secrets of the universe. Formal organizations like Masonry staged elaborate, theatrical rites, in which the initiate enacted his own death and resurrection in the craft, in order to solemnize the

various transitions from novice to adept. Freemasonry owes its emphasis on ceremony to a tradition of Western occultism reaching back to antiquity, one which predates its own Enlightenment-era inception. Thus, though Freemasonry provides the most recognizable context for initiation, a ceremony dividing the initiated from those unaware of such experiential mysteries is a regular feature of Western occultism, in all its multifarious manifestations. This project is centered around three unusual American novels, in which the bizarre and often epic adventures of the protagonist culminate in the moment of initiation, or transition from one state of consciousness to another. The telltale sign of initiation, in all three texts, is a sudden break in narrative continuity, a formal gesture which replicates the initiate's solemn vow not to speak of occult mysteries which are themselves, in large part, incommunicable.

In Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Ormond*, the young heroine Constantia undergoes severe trials such as an outbreak of yellow fever in her city, her mother's death and father's blindness, and the financial burdens of her remaining family, all of which she handles with a cheerful attitude and calm sagacity far beyond her sixteen years. She navigates a dangerous attraction to the Illuminatus, or magus figure, Ormond, and an equally compelling friendship with Ormond's sister, Martinette. The novel breaks off quite suddenly after Constantia murders Ormond, who has been threatening to rape her, and yet Brown loads these final scenes with so much ambiguity and suggestive imagery that the "murder" may be read as Constantia's occult initiation. Edgar Allan Poe's novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, is also the tale of an unlikely hero and his strange and consternating end. Young Pym embarks as a stowaway on a sea adventure, only to have his callow, nautical fantasy razed by confrontations with mutiny, shipwreck, starvation, and cannibalism. *Pym's* final scenes, like the final scenes in *Ormond*, grow exceedingly bizarre as Pym encounters a fantastic and savage race at the ends of earth, and

then appears to come face to face with God. Pym's narrative breaks off immediately following this vision, and the text is reminiscent of *Ormond* in that its author declines any comment upon or clarification of the mystery he has created.

George Lippard's novel *Paul Ardenheim* is more explicitly about initiation than either *Pym* or *Ormond*, in that it depicts the initiation and progress of the noble Paul Ardenheim through the ranks of the Rosicrucian Order. Yet, similar to Brown and Poe, Lippard exhibits a resistance to wrapping up the plot of his novel and discoursing upon the meaning and implications of Paul's initiation. "Resistance" does not express his attitude strongly enough, however; Lippard aggressively defends his choice to flout the reader's expectation of linear plotting and narrative closure. At the close of *Paul Ardenheim*, Paul may or may not be dead, the multiple identities of the villainous characters remain ambiguous, and the denouements of certain plots have been disputed by the author himself! Lippard invokes occult realities in lieu of explanation for the fantastical excesses of his tangled text: "It is not for me, now, to attempt to explain the mysteries of the present work; many things in its pages, which appear dark and obscure, might easily be made plain as sunlight, by a simple reference to that great science of the Soul, which in our day is called Magnetism. But for the present, I will not attempt any explanation of these mysteries [sic]."¹³ Lippard's stated denial of an expository discussion of "that great science of the Soul," or mysteries which may not be conveyed to the uninitiated, is rendered by Poe and Brown in their works as silence and absence, a refusal to speak of unspeakable mysteries. While *Paul Ardenheim* was written at the height of Lippard's personal involvement with the occult, the Lippard chapter also examines the writer's earlier novel, *The Quaker City*, in which his occult sympathies are less overt, and communicated by telling silences, absences, and other rhetorical gestures.

¹³ George Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim, The Monk of Wissahikon* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1848) 533.

A project which investigates fictional initiation must also include some analysis of the agent of initiation, the magus, as literary archetype. On this issue in particular, my study has close parallels with Marie Roberts's *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*. Roberts's book traces the evolution of the Rosicrucian magus through five British novels of the nineteenth century:

There was a species of immortal who evoked the redemptive powers of myth by using the gift of eternal life for the purposes of benevolence. This was the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, for whom immortality was a blessing and not a curse. But unlike the vampire, Wandering Jew, or werewolf, the Rosicrucian has proved to be an elusive prey for the historian, since his distinguishing feature is his power of invisibility.¹⁴

Originally, I had conceived of this project as a sort of Americanist companion to Roberts's study, because Brown's *Ormond* and Lippard's *The Quaker City* intersect thematically with the texts that comprise Roberts's study: novels by William Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Charles Maturin, and Edward Bulwer Lytton. Yet it soon became clear that Roberts's focus, and the preoccupations of her selection of texts, are the moral, psychological, and philosophical implications of life extension, considered against the backdrop of the nineteenth century rise of science. Brown and Lippard, conversely, are less invested in the Faustian drama of the magician's control over nature, and more interested in the magician's capacity to stand in metonymically for the secret tradition of Western occultism and its subtle communication systems. I also rejected "Rosicrucian" as too limiting a term for containing my own selection of texts, for reasons I will explain shortly in a section which clarifies my choices regarding the terminology of the occult. While both *Ormond* and *Carwin* feature enigmatic Illuminati, and Lippard's wizard Ravoni of *The Quaker City* is a clear emulation of Lytton's martyred Rosicrucian, Zanoni, the Poe chapter notably does not rely on a magician figure for its argument.

¹⁴ Marie Roberts, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (London: Routledge, 1990) 1.

While generic elements (e.g. the gothic) and occult themes like initiation certainly contributed to my choice of primary texts, narrative style and other formal, linguistic properties were also important criteria for inclusion in this project. I rejected novels which are merely *about* occultism as subject matter, and selected those which function as vehicles to personal, occult knowledge by replicating occult beliefs and transmission systems in their very form. Certainly, form alone is not a determining factor in whether any individual reader walks away from a particular novel with a personal initiation into occult belief, and yet occultists favor certain linguistic strategies for communicating truths which, by their own admission, are incommunicable in language. Pioneering theorist Joshua Gunn identifies the rhetorical strategies of the most influential occultists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his book, *Modern Occult Rhetoric*. While Gunn's focus is works of occult philosophy, not fiction, his conclusions are tremendously useful in outlining the formal elements which distinguish my selection of texts.

Gunn begins with the premise that religious rhetoric in general “embod[ies] a conflict between representation and ineffability.”¹⁵ Though spiritual truth is experiential and hence translinguistic, literary texts as carriers of the Western occult tradition attempt to overcome this difficulty by devoting copious attention to occult realities via the limited and limiting medium of language. Or, as Gunn puts it, occultists are guilty of an antinomy which, “on the one hand, regards spiritual truths as ineffable but, on the other, assumes there is much to say about ineffability.”¹⁶ Most occultists are keenly aware of this paradox, and so have developed a host of strategies for acknowledging the inaccessibility of the subject matter they yet seek to transmit. One of these techniques is admonitions to the reader to seek answers in silence and practice (e.g. meditation) in lieu of explicit descriptions, yet silence as a textual absence “leaves the critic little to

¹⁵ Gunn xxi.

¹⁶ Gunn 37.

analyze.”¹⁷ By contrast, some of the more concrete forms employed by occultists for representing ineffability are the neologism and the introduction of foreign vocabularies, both of which serve to induct the reader into untried modes of consciousness by creating wholly new, linguistic referents for revelation. Exotic vocabularies work in tandem with syntactical distortions to disorient the reader and hence open a space where ineffability or translinguistic understanding looms larger than literal and logical sense. Gunn’s primary example of this technique is the writings of best-selling, nineteenth century occultist, Helena Blavatsky, whose abuses of the English language are legend. Gunn argues convincingly that it was Blavatsky’s very mistreatment of language, her flouting of the rules of grammar and disregard for literal precision, which generated her popularity, because this enigmatic style approximated the mood, or mode, one must enter to receive a translinguistic truth. Gunn concludes, “esoteric language has an epistemological function for the true believer.”¹⁸

While the writers under discussion in this project do not invoke strange vocabularies to effect an occult mood (Poe may qualify as the exception), all three of these nineteenth century American authors implement a turgid, often impenetrable style in their respective works, one which functions as the literary equivalent of occult silence, particularly when it obscures the plot. Charles Brockden Brown is famous for his cumbersome prose, packed with various types of parallelism, extended clauses, and double negatives, but *Ormond* represents an extreme of his style. One critic remarked of *Ormond*, “Nowhere in his fiction do Brown’s syntax and nominalizations seem so intentionally impenetrable; the text’s wall of grammar and rhetoric, its latinate diction,

¹⁷ Gunn 38.

¹⁸ Gunn 77.

and convoluted passives benumb the reader.”¹⁹ At *Ormond’s* climax, the titular villain is murdered, and yet Brown also tells us that, “the wound by which he fell was secret, and was scarcely betrayed by the effusion of a drop of blood.”²⁰ Even more bizarrely, a strange smile lingers on Ormond’s face after he was supposedly stabbed in the heart. Ormond’s knowing smile and bloodless wound force the reader to question the conflicting report of his murder. Brown, who trained for the law and was a lawyer’s assistant for several years, knew how to be linguistically precise, and yet he chooses to employ ambiguity at a point in the novel when the reader most desires closure. Ormond’s indeterminate status at the novel’s end, combined with his enigmatic personality, suggest that he is a type of the “Rosicrucian immortal” tracked in Roberts’s study. Brown’s deliberate masking of this possibility with what Gunn calls a “rhetorical blind,” or conventional interpretation of events, shows that the occult interpretation must only be hinted at or implied because of its controversial nature.

While “over-reading” is a quagmire into which any critic may fall, works of occultism are actually structured to invite such close scrutiny, and often may only be understood with excessive exegesis, as with a cipher and its key. “Deliberate obfuscations and misdirections”²¹ are a regular feature of occult texts, both to encourage careful thought and reflection in the reader, as well as to shroud more disquieting truths from the uninitiated. Gunn tells us that the single most common rhetorical blind in occult literature is “prefatory piety,” or a show of sham Christianity intended to divert the superficial reader from the inflammatory occultisms to follow.²² In George

¹⁹ Steven Hamelman, “Secret to the Last: Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond*,” *Literature-Interpretation Theory* 11 (2000): 321.

²⁰ Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness* (1799; Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1999) 273.

²¹ Gunn 42.

²² Gunn 22.

Lippard's potboiler, *The Quaker City*, the author's preface informs us that his express purpose in writing the novel is "to show how miserable and corrupt is that Pseudo-Christianity which tramples on every principle ever preached or practised by the Saviour Jesus [sic]."²³ This Christian pose is belied by a vicious satire of a corrupt, Protestant preacher, followed by the introduction of a markedly attractive and sympathetic Rosicrucian. Though Lippard kills off his godless wizard, who founds an occult brotherhood with some salacious rites, the scene of Ravoni's death rather uncannily recalls Ormond's ambiguous end. Like Ormond, Ravoni is also stabbed in the heart, and Lippard provides some textual evidence that Ravoni survives this blow by exercising the Rosicrucian feat of metempsychosis with one of his disciples: "When I am dying, gaze in my face and inhale my last breath. My Soul shall pass into thine!"²⁴ Most readers will simply assume that Ravoni dies, and that his pretense of immortality is self-delusion. Yet Lippard's silence touching Ravoni's ultimate fate is the tell here; when it comes to his pet political passions and moral didacticism in *The Quaker City*, Lippard's loquaciousness knows no bounds. Concerning the occult plot of Ravoni, however, Lippard appends a note to the text proclaiming that he owes the reader neither apology nor explanation.²⁵

As a celebrated artist of the spooky, Edgar Allan Poe's occult style might need the least contextualizing of the three authors, and yet his *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* represents something of a peak in narrative occultism. Pym's journal begins with methodical reportage and ends with imagistic adventures too fantastic to be true, suggesting that an altered state of consciousness has occurred. Since Pym is ostensibly compiling his journal entries following his re-

²³ George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, ed. David S. Reynolds (1845; Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1995) 4.

²⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 537.

²⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 422.

turn from an Antarctic odyssey, he might be expected to comment on his journey's conclusion, and the nature of his confrontation with a godlike figure "of the perfect whiteness of the snow."²⁶ Yet Poe withholds any interpretation of the novel's climax, claiming that Pym died before he could complete his narrative. Poe then rather perversely encourages an occult reading of his consternating novel, by giving the last words of the text to an "editor," whose proffered clues suggest much while ultimately revealing nothing. This is the occult narrative strategy of meaning silences, rhetorical blinds, irony, deliberate obfuscation, and misdirection at its height. Though clearly Pym's revelation, whatever it may be, is translanguistic and therefore opaque to the reader, Poe sends the novice reader down a series of dead-ends of interpretation. In his penchant for (and skill at) playing narrative tricks, Poe's style is reminiscent of that of the most important occultist of the twentieth century, Aleister Crowley, whose "work provides a number of excellent examples of a conspicuously ironic brand of occultism designed to mislead an inexpert public."²⁷ Poe, a good Platonist, distinguishes between narrative and what it may only imprecisely convey: the ideal world of forms or ultimate, occult realities. In this he is aligned with Crowley, who found in language a vehicle to more immediate modes of knowledge.

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe details his own mastery at creating mood and atmosphere in his haunting poem, "The Raven." To achieve this effect, a literary work must contain "some amount of suggestiveness – some under current, however indefinite of meaning [sic]." Too much description can ruin the mood of the uncanny, as in the "hardness or nakedness" of exposition "which turns into prose ... the so called poetry of the so called tran-

²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, intr. Sidney Kaplan (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960) 195.

²⁷ Gunn 145.

scendentalists.”²⁸ Poe’s narrative philosophy, which advocates communicating a mood instead of outlining hard facts, neatly encapsulates this project’s argument about occult form: vague hints and ambiguity connote the occult stylistically, by suggesting that ultimate truth is remote. The novels I examine in this study not only invoke the Western occult tradition in their content, they also convey this legacy through recognizably occult linguistic strategies. Poe, in the same essay, also delivers a warning about the assumption on which his narrative style depends. “Suggestiveness” and the atmospheric “*richness*” provided by linguistic ambiguity, must not be “confound[ed] with *the ideal* [sic]” itself.²⁹ Poe’s meaning is that nothing can represent the Platonic world of ideal forms other than the forms themselves; language may appeal to these forms metaphorically, but it can never stand in for them. Once again, Gunn’s work is helpful for elucidating this concept: “In Plato’s dialogues, as well as traditional religious texts, language is ... an imperfect copy of something translinguistic.”³⁰ Gunn then compares the Platonic idea of language, as the failed descriptor of some larger and inaccessible truth, to the theory of language which holds sway in the modern academy: language as constitutive of both self and reality.

Part of the difficulty of tackling occultism in the academy is arguing for the existence of a community of readers and writers who believe that language can only represent a fraction of an ultimate reality, that this same ultimate reality has dominion over the physical world, and that ultimate reality, furthermore, is both wholly invisible and impossible to describe. To the typical academic, for whom language *is* reality, and imbued with all the power to name, negotiate, and shape the world, such occult assumptions seem hopelessly antiquated and perhaps insane. Yet

²⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (New York: Penguin, 2006) 553-554.

²⁹ Poe, *Portable Poe* 553-554.

³⁰ Gunn 45.

though these assumptions are, in truth, both ancient and uncommon, they nevertheless define occult readerships, serving to separate the sheep from the goats (this being a parable borrowed from Christianity, however, it's not clear which animal represents the occultists). Occult reading practices run the gamut from the same excesses of exegesis practiced by literary critics, to truly off-base, extra-literary conclusions fueled by half-baked ideas of correspondence and the conviction that nothing is what it seems. The distinction is not so easy to draw (for both occultists and literary critics), yet one does not need to be an occultist in order to understand that the uses and goals of language in occult texts are quite different from how language is conceived under our current secular, materialist paradigm. Aleister Crowley represents an extreme of the position that language cannot impart any actual truth, but may be useful in distracting and disorienting the rational mind so that immediate revelation can take place. Crowley's cryptic work, *The Book of the Law*, for example, "is intended as an opiate, as a transportive device for magicians on their ascent to higher planes of reality."³¹ Literary scholars in general are unaccustomed to thinking of the potential of texts to operate as translinguistic mediums to ultimate knowledge, and yet, as this is an interdisciplinary project tracing fiction's interplay with the occult tradition, I must necessarily address this possibility.

Collectively, the several arguments I have outlined in this opening section allow for the understanding of a fictional text as a gateway to occult belief, and this is why my study also includes evidence of novels being misunderstood and cited as revelatory disclosures of secret facts. Not only do occult novels communicate their participation in the Western occult tradition through reference to esoteric movements and by conspicuous narrative strategies, they also embody ritual elements in their very form. Occult rituals are designed to amaze their participants with the purple prose of ceremony and the visual impact of stylized ritual and its effects (such as

³¹ Gunn 93.

strange tools and suggestive backdrops), creating a general atmosphere of narrative impenetrability which works to surprise and disorient the initiate. By staging dramatic events which engage the emotions of the participants, such as the death of the initiate and other tests of courage and character, ritual functions to transform the individual by calling on his/her ability to penetrate the meaning of the ceremony. Whether or not the ritual participant achieves a revelation is of course a highly individual affair, and here ritual's parallels with reading become obvious.

Novels may also engage and amaze the reader with purple prose and fantastic landscapes, and by inviting identification with a hero and his perilous adventures. Occult novels, by denying authorial interpretation of events, displace the connective work of meaning-making onto the reader, who is then left to his/her own individual devices for deciphering the novel's code.

While reading is not reducible to ritual and vice versa, the reading of novels for their affective and religious properties is a phenomenon too often elided by the legacy of New Criticism, which excised both reader and author from the interpretation of text. This study violates both New Critical tenets, by arguing that authors of occult fiction intend to impart an occult ontology with their texts, to which a certain class of occult readers is receptive. While I ground my analysis of text in the New Critical practice of close reading, it is the nature of my primary object of study, occultism, to violate strict fidelity to "words on the page" by invoking translinguistic realities. Surprisingly little has been written on a text's capacity to generate a religious transmission, but here Jeffrey Kripal gives a concise explanation of how Esalen founder, Michael Murphy, was impacted by the reading of an Indian guru's autobiography:

We need to recognize that the act of reading, far from being a mechanical, disembodied exercise of vocabulary and grammar, is in fact an immeasurably complex psychophysical event in which two horizons of meaning and being (the reader and the read) are "fused" and transfigured in a mysterious process that we do not, and perhaps cannot ever, fully understand . . . In effect, a kind of initiatory transmission sometimes occurs between the subject and object of study to the point where

terms like “subject” and “object” or “reader” and “read” cease to have much meaning. And this, of course, is a classically mystical structure – a twoness becoming one, or, perhaps better, a not-two. Reading has become an altered state of consciousness.³²

Rather than criticize such affective reading as somehow in violation of the proper, academic, and wholly intellectual approach to a text, the present study acknowledges both the practice and phenomenon of revelatory reading, and names it as a distinct feature of popular culture.

The argument I make in this dissertation is unique in claiming that imaginative literature may both embody and convey the occult tradition more powerfully than discursive texts. In *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal looks at several occultists and their “impossible” claims, and concludes, “Writing and reading . . . can replicate and realize paranormal processes, just as paranormal processes can replicate and realize textual processes.”³³ While Kripal explores this idea in the intersections of the lives of occultists and their texts, my study applies this argument to a set of fictional texts by authors known primarily as fiction-writers, and reaches remarkably similar conclusions. The implications of three prominent American writers penning discernibly occult novels in the nineteenth century are threefold. First, Brown, Poe, and Lippard as individuals had more extensive knowledge of occult philosophy and practice than has heretofore been understood, and each writer’s biography and body of work bears this out. Second, the cultural power of the novel in the nineteenth century allowed for its deployment as a transmission site for occult mysteries. Third, there may be something fundamentally *occult* about fiction writing in general and its accompanying processes, of which my sample of primary texts presents only particularly strong examples. Obviously, the grand scope of the third inference is beyond the capacity of a single study to demonstrate, and yet this theory provides appropriate food for

³² Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2008) 61.

³³ Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* 26.

thought in an interdisciplinary project dedicated to the meeting point of fiction and occultism. What follows in this introduction are an explanation of my selection of terms, a review of occult history and occultism in America, and an overview of relevant European occult fiction of the nineteenth century.

The term Occult

In this section, I outline my reasons for selecting the controversial term *occult* over competing and less negatively charged terms like *esoteric*, *metaphysical*, and *gnostic*. In this study, *occult* refers to a religious tradition whose primary wellsprings are the Hermeticism and Neoplatonism of late antiquity. This religion is often referred to as the Western esoteric tradition, the Western Hermetic tradition, and, among occultists themselves, simply the Western tradition. *Occult* is, first and foremost, an umbrella term, serving to cover such variant expressions of the Western Hermetic tradition as the philosophical writings of Plotinus, medieval alchemy as a mystical pursuit, the eighteenth century vogue for esoteric societies, and the ceremonial magic of Aleister Crowley. If *occult* is the genus, then Neoplatonism, speculative alchemy, Freemasonry, and Thelema (to again employ the examples listed above) represent species or subspecies of occultism. Shortly, I will provide a history of Western occultism and an argument for containing these variant expressions under the umbrella of a coherent tradition, but here my focus is definitions.

Scholars of the Western Hermetic tradition seem about equally divided when it comes to the terms *esoteric* and *occult*. Jon Butler and Christopher Leirich invoke the term *occult* without much fanfare or self-analysis.³⁴ The editors of *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*

³⁴ Christopher I. Leirich, *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007).

tives, eschew a precise definition of *occult*, but note its “historical ubiquity” on the American scene.³⁵ But some of the most important scholars in this small field favor the term *esotericism*.

Wouter Hanegraaff heads the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, and edited the landmark reference work, *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*.³⁶ Jeffrey Kripal helped develop an academic program within Rice University’s Religious Studies graduate track for Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism. “Esotericism” appears frequently in the titles of Arthur Versluis’s many publications, and he was the founding president of the Association for the Study of Esotericism in America. Versluis’s definition of *esotericism* makes it clear, however, that his use of the term does not diverge from how other scholars employ *occult*:

I use the word *esoteric* in a religious context to refer to individuals or groups whose works are self-understood as bearing hidden inner religious, cosmological, or metaphysical truths for a select audience. Such a definition can include alchemical, magical, Masonic, or gnostic groups or individuals, but in any case there is a separation between esoteric (from the Greek *eso-*, meaning “within” or “inner”) knowledge for a select audience and exoteric knowledge for the general populace. This definition includes the social-anthropologic sense of initiation as admission into a secret society, but extends it to include the full range of cultural works like those of literature and art, which may very well convey secrets hidden from the casual observer. It also includes the range of New Age or syncretic movements that emerged in the late twentieth century and that also claim access to hidden secrets of the cosmos. At the same time, this definition excludes the loose sense of *esoteric* as referring to the arcana of, say, computer functions or plumbing; it refers explicitly to knowledge of religious or cosmological mysteries.³⁷

Though Versluis carefully excludes *occult* from his definition, the “secret tradition” he describes is one and the same with the occult tradition explicated by Christopher Leirich, for example.

Interestingly, the etymology of *occult*, from the Latin for “hidden” or “concealed,” does not dif-

³⁵ Kerr and Crow 2.

³⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Boston: Brill, 2005).

³⁷ Versluis 8.

fer qualitatively from the gloss of *esoteric* given by Versluis, who interprets the “inwardness” denoted by the term to mean “hidden” from general knowledge.

This discussion of terms serves to illustrate that historians of occultism and historians of esotericism refer to the same tradition, and also clarifies why I often use *esotericism* as a synonym for *occultism*. Confusingly, some of the scholars on whom I lean most heavily do not employ either of these terms, preferring to invoke novel ones which are less loaded with preconceived ideas and negative associations. Catherine Albanese traces the lineage of the Hermetic tradition in America, but employs the term *metaphysical* to denote the particular development of occultism in this country. While acknowledging that this term and its historical meanings are not appropriate to describe the whole of Western esotericism, Albanese grounds her choice in the literal meaning of the word, and its suggestion of religious expressions preoccupied with what lies “beyond the physical.” But *metaphysical* does not seem to carve out any distinct territory once Albanese has linked it to the express province of the occult: “Metaphysical practice is about what may be called magic, and magic ... lies at the heart of American metaphysics.”³⁸ Albanese rejects the term *esotericism* for her study because of its connotations with a purely intellectual occultism and “elite speculation,” and here I am in sympathy with her argument. But her jettisoning of *occult* as a useful term seems to have solely to do with its association with “negative witchcraft practice.”³⁹ Where Albanese sees a potential deterrent for understanding the fecund and redemptive properties of the Hermetic tradition in the word *occult* and its taboo associations, I see a linguistic signifier whose susceptibility to polysemic distortion cries out for reclamation and redefinition.

³⁸ Albanese 6-7.

³⁹ Albanese 12-13.

Joshua Gunn's analysis of the word *occult* in *Modern Occult Rhetoric* includes its twentieth century usage as a descriptor of horror movie fodder and the pop culture depictions of devils and vampires.⁴⁰ Clearly these usages, most often deployed pejoratively by Christian pundits, do not reference a discrete, magical tradition, and yet their capacity for generating outrage and alarm reveal a strong cultural association with the *occult* which related terms like *metaphysical* and *esoteric* cannot marshal. It strikes me that a culturally loaded term like the *occult* should be unpacked, and that the negative associations it has gathered be incorporated into a critical understanding of the *occult's* function as sign. While Satanic cults and other practitioners of black magic exist, and cannot in good scholarly conscience be excised from a genus of occultism or esotericism, these darker manifestations of the magical tradition represent only a very small portion of a lofty lineage which includes such luminaries as Marsilio Ficino and Jacob Boehme. Let it be stated that occultism is not specially structured to invite illegal acts like rape, torture, and murder under its auspices, and yet it has come to be associated with such abuses of power more than any other Western religion. I would like to argue here that it is the occult's bid for power outside the Judeo-Christian mainstream which has created its undesirable connotations of anti-social activity and Faustian madness. Less loaded terms like *esoteric* and *metaphysical* connote quiet, private, and non-threatening acts like meditation and reflection, while *occult* carries the charge of active, organized religious practice whose goals have met with some measure of success. It is this connotation with structured, metaphysically transgressive, and potentially successful acts of power which I would like to salvage from the runaway polysemy of the *occult* as sign.

The *occult* signifies personal power. Some of this power is a function of the fact that the occultist must be brave enough to operate outside of cultural norms of behavior and belief, but

⁴⁰ See the chapter, "Prime-Time Satanism: Stock Footage and the Death of Modern Occultism," in Gunn 172-203.

power and its accompanying dangers are, in large part, native to the tradition of occultism. Magic is an attempt to manipulate the physical world and produce a desired outcome with religious ceremony and invocation; therefore, anyone who practices magic implicitly places himself on par with God by acting to influence events and direct reality. Yet in many schools of occultism, the magician's desire to become as God is an *explicit* goal of occult practice as well. The Oneness of Neoplatonism, for example, describes the goal of merging with godhead to the end of attaining divine wisdom and personal transformation. In the related school of practical Hermeticism, adherents consciously emulate God to effect a return to the state of "primal Adam," a godman endowed with magical powers. John L. Brooke's important text, *The Refiner's Fire*, traces the prehistory of Mormonism in early America and, in so doing, offers a compelling look at Hermetic practice in the colonies. For Brooke, Hermeticism is inherently "optimistic ... celebrating the potential divinity and power of humanity."⁴¹ Here Brooke compares Hermeticism's attractions to the negative view of mankind under Calvinism:

Reformation Calvinists would stand before their omnipotent God of wonders and sovereign will as sinful and totally powerless inheritors of Adam's original sin at the Fall. They might be made aware of the power of God through the divine providences that he sent down on their world, but they must wait in doubt or faith for redemption through an arbitrary distribution of divine grace. In stark contrast, hermeticism promised divine power to mortal man as *magus*, restored to the freedom of will and the powers of Adam in Paradise before the Fall.⁴²

Occult contains this sense of aspiration to godhead, still so transgressive and alarming in our culture with its Judeo-Christian legacy of an omnipotent, authoritarian God. While Brooke is correct in naming Hermeticism a personally empowering alternative to conventional Christianity,

⁴¹ John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 12.

⁴² Brooke 12-13.

the fact remains that, for most people, the idea of emulating God is so taboo that it is tantamount to a criterion of insanity.

The *occult* as a signifier carries a negative charge because of its (mostly erroneous) association with sadistic rites, its positioning outside conventional religion, its pretensions to godlike power, and, let us not forget, the fact that its *signified* includes spooky phenomena which have yet to be explained by modern science. Much of Jeffrey Kripal's book *Authors of the Impossible* is concerned with these unclassifiable phenomena, which scientists and religion scholars alike dismiss as exceptional or "anecdotal." Taking a cue from this term, Kripal explores the idea that paranormal phenomena as "anecdote" must be intimately related to narrative and vice versa. While this project, as a literary study, is not concerned with evaluating occult phenomena, Kripal's book is relevant for its foregrounding of data which most academics refuse to discuss, because these unclassifiable facts violate agreed-upon constructs of reality. To employ one of Kripal's humorous colloquialisms, there is a component to paranormal phenomena which is just "fucking scary,"⁴³ hence the reason that it is shunned by both academics and the population at large. My point here is that the fear and discomfort that the *occult* often generates (to say nothing of the titillation created by its taboo) is an integral and even valuable piece of its function as sign, in that it reflects both the occult's history as a marginalized and demonized religious practice, as well as the fact that the beliefs it encompasses remain controversial to this day. Renaming the *occult* to highlight its redemptive properties and illustrious history does not alter the fact that its principles of personal power register as inflammatory doctrine to all but a small segment of the population.

⁴³ Kripal's gloss of the *tremendum* of Rudolf Otto's Latin coinage, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* 9.

Kripal himself favors the term *paranormal* over *occult* in his most theoretically rigorous text, *Authors of the Impossible*. “In the paranormal,” Kripal explains, “both the faith of religion and the reason of science drop away, and a kind of super-imagination appears on the horizon of thought. As a consequence, the paranormal becomes a living story or, better, a mythology.”⁴⁴ Though the twentieth century coinage of *paranormal* makes it an inappropriate choice for my study, Kripal’s definition of the paranormal as an ontology coincides with my use of *occult* as a means of knowing and experiencing reality. As with the paranormal, the occult does not rely on an episteme of rationality or revelation exclusively, but rather seeks to integrate multiple roads to knowledge into an inclusive whole of consciousness. Synthesis, wholeness, and Oneness are important terms for the Hermetic tradition, as we shall soon see.

Kripal’s emphasis on the *super* is also a unique facet of his theories which overlaps with my study. In essence, Kripal’s body of work is concentrated around religious attempts to transform the human body into a supernormal or superhuman version of itself through revolutionary changes in consciousness. This focus is most pronounced in *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, in which Kripal argues that the superheroes of the twentieth century are the cultural relics of the occult traditions of days gone by.⁴⁵ While the works that comprise my study more properly belong to the gothic genre than to science fiction, they are also poised on the verge of the latter genre’s genesis. Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, for example, is considered a piece of proto-science fiction, one which left an indelible mark on the imagination of science fiction’s most recognized originator, Jules Verne. The Rosicrucian adepts of *Ormond* and *The Quaker City*, who have mastered the supernormal feats of immortal-

⁴⁴ Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* 9.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2011).

ity, mesmerism, invisibility, and metempsychosis, are of a piece with this paranormal tradition which unites Enlightenment science and Hermetic humanism. Lippard's character Paul Ardenheim is something of a superhero, charged with a sacred trust to make the world safe for democracy, a task he accomplishes with his supernormal abilities and other methods which defy rational comprehension. The relevant point here is that what Kripal terms the *paranormal* has a long tradition in the magical adepts of Hermetic lore, practitioners who exploited both natural science and non-rational means to achieve superhuman feats.⁴⁶ My use of the term *occult* includes and highlights this connotation of the *superhuman*; acts of magic and the Hermetic goal of attaining the powers of a god culminate practically in abilities which we may term superhuman, because they violate accepted notions of what a human is and what he/she may become.

The last facet of *occult* that I would like to draw out is a signification it already enjoys: *occult* is the marker of a discrete tradition of ceremonial magic. At one point I seriously considered characterizing my study as the fiction of theurgic Neoplatonism; *theurgy* emphasizes the practical, ritual arm of the occult, while *Neoplatonism* identifies its primary religio-philosophical basis. Yet aside from the fact that this term is altogether too awkward for regular use, it is also too narrow for the purposes of this study, in that it defines the Western tradition as a *practice* more so than as an ontology or system of belief. One may believe in occultism's tenets without being a practicing ritualist, or experience occult ontology without consciously believing in the

⁴⁶ Kripal's focus in both *Esalen* and *Mutants and Mystics* is Eastern mystical traditions which teach that the physical body may be transformed by spiritual practice. Kripal uses the umbrella term, *Tantra*, to refer to spiritual practices aimed at developing supernormal abilities. This emphasis on an Eastern tradition of magic is appropriate for Kripal's twentieth century subjects, in that the West experienced an influx of Hindu religious thought beginning in the late nineteenth century with the popularity of Theosophy. This phenomenon continued through the twentieth century and peaked in the 1960s, the era of the Indian guru. Yet for the early American writers which comprise my study, the most immediate context for both a magical tradition and the attainment of godlike powers is the school of Western Hermeticism and its icon, the magus, not Tantra and the Indian yogi. Though this is something of an egregious oversimplification, Hermeticism is to the West what Tantra is to the East. Both are schools of thought and accompanying spiritual practices which emphasize the divine potential of the human being. Kripal does not link the origins of the paranormal to a Western tradition of Hermeticism, and yet this is the primary source for magical and occult ideas in Europe and America through the nineteenth century.

occult's claims. Therefore, my use of the term *occult* includes its association with theurgic Neoplatonism, or ritual acts aimed at engendering union with the divine, but is not limited to a definition of occultism as the practice of ceremonial magic. This study employs the historically appropriate term *occult* to denote the practice, tradition, and ontology of a religion which was forged out of the related doctrines of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism. The specifics of these schools of thought are detailed below in a section which provides an overview of the tradition of occultism.

A Genealogy of Occultism

With its emphasis on secrecy and initiation, the occult is a challenging phenomenon to historicize. The social marginalization of the occult and its adverse relationship to the academy have meant that its historians are most often occultists themselves, with an investment in mythologizing or aggrandizing origins and a susceptibility to blurring the distinction between revelatory and factual information. For the purposes of this project, I locate the origins of occultism in the Mediterranean basin in the era of late antiquity. The third and fourth centuries stand out as particularly notable epochs for occultism for several reasons. First, Neoplatonism originated with Plotinus, the Greco-Egyptian philosopher who lived and died in the third century CE. Second, the writings which make up the *Corpus Hermeticum*, though probably somewhat older in origin, have been dated to the third century by modern scholars. Finally, the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century helped to create the taboo around the practice of magic which persists to this day. As Joshua Gunn points out, “magic did not become occult, at least in the Western world, until the Romans adopted Christianity as the official religion and began persecuting those who held alternative beliefs – including those who

studied magic.”⁴⁷ Gunn’s thesis depends on the assumption that the secrecy of occultists was purely a function of legal censure. Yet occultists typically place the origins of their tradition with ancient Greek and Egyptian mystery schools, religious rites which incorporated initiation and secrecy in their enactment, in spite of the fact that they were then more culturally acceptable forms of devotion. The lack of historical information about these ancient, initiatory lineages, however, prompts me to consider them more properly as prehistory to the occult ideas and practices which cohered around the third century.

What follows here is an explication of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, and an overview of the movements and personages which developed these ideas and practices from antiquity through the nineteenth century. The value of subsuming thinkers as diverse as Jacob Boehme and Cornelius Agrippa under the same tradition is that it allows the occult to emerge as a coherent set of values and beliefs across a wide range of cultures and historical epochs. Failing to do this theoretical work contributes to a sense of the occult as the sum total of strange, disconnected religious outcroppings, whose primary point of commonality is the very anomalousness which such an exclusionary method prescribes. In fact, speculative alchemy, Freemasonry, and the ceremonial magic of the late nineteenth century all have a common source in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Neoplatonism revived by Marsilio Ficino influenced both Agrippa and Boehme, and one or both of the latter writers have contributed heavily to practically every subsequent occult movement in the West. The connections, in other words, are both direct and myriad, not forged in the imaginations of latter-day occultists. While the transmission of occult ideas is unconventional, in that centuries might pass between the writing of a text and its reception by a new practitioner, there is a consistency of thought, belief, and practice in the occult’s manifestations through seventeen hundred years of history. Though some scholars have objected to con-

⁴⁷ Gunn 10.

structuring a historical narrative of occultism, citing the problems of non-continuous practice and morphological multiplicity, these same strictures are not placed on the categorical terminology of established religions. For example, a tremendous disparity in belief and practice separates a fourteenth century adherent of Eastern Orthodoxy, a seventeenth century Quaker, and a modern-day Southern Baptist, and yet all can agree that each is engaged in the worship of Christianity. A common belief system ties these diverse sects and historical expressions together, just as occultism unites the varied manifestations of the Western Hermetic tradition.

As this is an interdisciplinary study centered on the occult implications of fiction writing, my overview of occult history is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, I review below the major figures and movements of occult history which have some application to this project. For example, Pietism with its blend of Hermetic and Christian mystical thought was a far more pervasive influence on early American religious life than aggrandizing and Eurocentric legends about the Knights Templar. Another notable absence in my review is the history of Gnosticism. Though Gnosticism comprises a distinct set of beliefs and practices, its genesis in the ancient world of the Near East, Southern Mediterranean, and North Africa, alongside Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and early Christianity, means that its tenets are so often fused and confused with these other traditions that isolating it as a separate philosophy pays small scholarly dividends. Precise distinctions between Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Neoplatonism are all highly arguable, as each of these schools encompasses a measure of contradictory beliefs within their own systems. While I do not dispute that Gnosticism has contributed to occult thought, one of its tenets is a dualism which counterpoises the physical and spiritual worlds. This study is focused, conversely, on a religious tradition which emphasizes monism or the unity underlying all manifestation, of which Hermeticism and Neoplatonism provide such striking articulations. Another ma-

major contributor to Western occultism which my study does not engage is the Judaic mystical tradition of Kabala. This lacuna is largely due to the fact that the Kabala provided Western esotericism with a symbology and technology of magical practice more specialized than a study of this kind permits for discussion. Ultimately, Western occultism is a syncretic entity, absorbing rites, beliefs, and practices across myriad cultures and a lengthy historical timeline, of which the following overview provides only a cross section.

Hermeticism. Hermeticism takes its name from the Greek god Hermes, who was identified with the Egyptian god of writing and interpretation, Thoth, in Hellenized Egypt. From this fecund syncretism of antiquity, the iconic Hermes Trismegistus was born, the “thrice great” sage who was credited with authoring untold numbers of wisdom books in the first few centuries of the Christian era. Of the books that survived, fourteen were translated by Marsilio Ficino into Latin in the fifteenth century, and this collection is generally known as the *Pymander*. Later other short “books” joined the collection, bringing the total to eighteen, and a Latin text called the *Asclepius* (of a somewhat different character) was united with these to form a body of ancient writings now contained under the heading, the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁴⁸ Though there is evidence that the books which make up the *Pymander* were first bound together in the early Middle Ages, each book originally had an independent composition, and the “criterion that determined their selection into one collection is not known.”⁴⁹ The current archive of Hellenistic-Egyptian antiquity contains other wisdom books which might justifiably be included in “one great hermetic Corpus, for they all have the same literary structure . . . and the same kind of teaching,”⁵⁰ but my

⁴⁸ Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. and trans., introduction, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) xiii-lxi.

⁴⁹ Roelof Van den Broek, “Hermetic Literature I: Antiquity,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 489.

⁵⁰ Van den Broek 489.

study is focused more narrowly on the *Pymander* and *Asclepius*, because these are traditionally the books signified by the title, *Corpus Hermeticum*. They are also the only Hermetica which would have been generally available to nineteenth century readers, via John Everard's English translations of Ficino in the 1650s.

Scholars have assumed until relatively recently that the diminished availability of the texts in the Middle Ages resulted in Hermeticism's dormancy leading up to the Renaissance, but this was not the case. Many church fathers perpetuated an interest in Hermeticism, and Hermes was a guiding figure and symbol for medieval alchemists.⁵¹ The surprising information that Hermetic ideas were carried forward without the benefit of the *Corpus Hermeticum* strongly suggests that Hermeticism has cohered as a discrete religious tradition from at least the third century, and continues to the present day. A fascination with specifically Egyptian mysteries and the exoticization of the past has been a feature of the Western tradition since ancient times, and thus the *Corpus Hermeticum* was considered a distillation of ancient Egyptian wisdom from the time of the production of the texts (the first to third centuries CE).⁵² Until the seventeenth century, when Isaac Casaubon accurately dated the texts, the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus was believed to precede the time of Christ, and many religious scholars like Ficino assumed that the Egyptian sage had been a contemporary of Moses. While it's possible that the material reflected in the *Corpus Hermeticum* stretches back to Pharaonic Egypt, Hellenism was introduced following Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC, and the Roman conquest three hundred years later further distanced Egypt from these roots. Scholars debate the relative proportions of Greek and Egyptian thought in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but most agree that the texts are a syn-

⁵¹ See the chapter, "The Middle Ages: Christian Theology and 'Antediluvian' Magic" in Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism From Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007) 37-58.

⁵² Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 1.

cretic fusion of Greek and Egyptian magical ideas, and betray some influence by the burgeoning contemporary traditions of Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism.

With such eclectic origins, one might assume that the *Corpus Hermeticum* contains much material that is irreducible to modern categories and rife with internal contradictions, and indeed this is an accurate characterization of the whole. Scholars distinguish between philosophical and practical *Hermetica*, the former primarily concerned with enlightenment and the regeneration of the soul, and the latter providing instruction in works of magic. Brian Copenhaver points out that the distinction between high and low, religion and magic, is a modern Western preoccupation and applies an “unhistorical dichotomy” to diversity within the Hermetic books.⁵³ Both the lofty pursuit of the knowledge of God and the divine potential within the self, and occult technologies like demon possession and the ensoulment of statues, constitute the Hermetic wisdom. Portions of the *Corpus Hermeticum* adopt a pessimistic, dualist worldview which privileges spiritual life over the pleasures of a fallen world, yet Hermeticism as a tradition has cohered around the cosmological and monist substance of the texts, in which God, nature, and the individual are one. Jan Assmann, in the foreword to *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus*, isolates the monist viewpoint as the common denominator in far-flung expressions of the Hermetic tradition:

From antiquity on, all Hermetic traditions have insisted on the revelatory character of nature, on the divinity of the world as a work of God, and on the ever graded levels of presence or “immanence” of God in all things; at the same time, however, in Hermetic thought of all periods, it is clear that the essence and truth of God are not bound up in the things of this world, that they cannot be comprehended by human reason or described with human speech.⁵⁴

⁵³ Copenhaver xxxvii.

⁵⁴ Jan Assmann, foreword, in Ebeling x.

What Assmann terms the “hypercosmic” perspective, or the idea that the world and the individual soul are reflections of each other and ultimately dissolvable into the same central unity, underlies the major tenets of the Hermetic tradition.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Hermeticism, one outlined clearly in the *Pyramander*, is that man may become as God by cultivating the divine within himself. It follows that if God is immanent in all things, then the individual can obtain divine powers through emulation of the perspective of God. While the philosophical *Hermetica* emphasize the salvific potential of this tenet, explaining how the individual soul may be regenerated and transformed by direct contact with divine mind, the practical *Hermetica* extend this principle to God’s dominion over the physical world, and here the more exotic, occult aspects of the Hermetic tradition have their origin. By performing rituals and other practical works of magic, the Hermeticist may manipulate physical reality via application to the divine principle lying hidden within all manifestation. Thus, though the stars and planets determine physical reality under the ancient, astrological cosmology, the Hermetic practitioner might mitigate such influences through intercession with the demons, or souls, of these celestial governors. Inanimate matter may take on divine qualities, as in the transference of divine personality to idols and statues, and in the blessings of talismans. The alchemical idea that gross matter contains the seed of gold, or the potential to be transformed into something exalted, ultimately stems from this animistic application of Hermetic doctrine. The individual’s power over nature and physical laws proceeds in accordance with his ability to identify himself with the godhead and merge with divine mind.

A concise description of the Hermetic tradition is given by Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who reduces it to three tropes: revelation, secrecy, and initiation. Revelation describes both the non-rational states which the Hermeticist must enter to receive divine wisdom, and the non-

human entities to whom he appeals. “Hermetic discourse is revelatory discourse. It proceeds from above to below, from a higher standpoint inaccessible to that of ordinary reason.”⁵⁵ Revelation’s untranslatable character, passing as it does from unlimited, divine beings to the more restricted perspective of the human, underlies the Hermetic discomfort with the Word as the locus of revealed truth. Secrecy is the primary feature of the Hermetic tradition which distinguishes it from Christianity. While Christianity also depends on revealed truth, these truths are proclaimed freely to all in the hopes of gathering the widest possible audience. Hermeticism, conversely, embeds its truths in signs which both shield them from a general audience and also allow for a multiplicity of interpretations. Egyptian hieroglyphs offer the stand-out example of Hermeticism’s elevation of nondiscursive symbols over the Word, and yet the use of metaphor, misdirection, and obfuscation in Hermetic texts, discussed earlier, also participates in this legacy of secrecy. Initiation, a ritual separating those who know Hermetic secrets from those who cannot or do not read the signs, demonstrates Hermeticism’s investment in maintaining the status of an exclusive cabal. “The reason for the arcanizing of Hermetic knowledge was concern that it might fall into unworthy hands,” Assmann explains. Therefore, “initiation was ... above all, a test of worthiness,” as “knowledge was to be communicated only to the worthy.”⁵⁶ Revelation, secrecy, and initiation recur over the centuries as the dominant practical manifestations of Hermeticism’s hypercosmic perspective.

The term *Hermetic* has only been widely used as a signifier for the Western esoteric tradition since the late nineteenth century, a deployment it owes both to the rise of religion as a scholarly discipline, and to its adoption by Madame Blavatsky in the seminal Theosophical text,

⁵⁵ Jan Assmann, foreword, in Ebeling ix.

⁵⁶ Jan Assmann, foreword, in Ebeling xii.

Isis Unveiled (1877).⁵⁷ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explains that the connotation of *Hermetic* as referring to a larger religious tradition, one not confined to ancient Egypt, first entered the consciousness of Europe via Ficino's theory of the *prisca theologia*. Ficino's idea that an ancient and perennial wisdom had begun with Hermes Trismegistus and descended to Plato established Egypt as the ultimate origin of an enduring mystical tradition, one which was self-consciously taken up by both Freemasons and Pietists during the Age of Enlightenment. A German polemic against *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690) provides an early example of the term's deployment in a Pietist context, and Goodrick-Clarke cites other examples of *Hermetic* being used to describe speculative Masonic societies in eighteenth century Europe.⁵⁸ However, *Rosicrucian* was the preferred term for denoting a secret and ongoing mystery tradition through the nineteenth century, because it had more successfully synthesized occult lore with Christianity; in the discourse of Hermeticism, conversely, Christianity had been reduced to "a single strand in a universal pansophy sometimes aligned with neo-pagan, anti-clerical Enlightenment interests. Hermeticism still pointed to an Orient represented by ancient Egypt, polytheism, and mystery-religions."⁵⁹ Blavatsky favored the term *Hermetic* over *Rosicrucian* to describe the Western esoteric tradition in *Isis Unveiled*, precisely because of its stronger association with the occult.

My use of the term *Hermetic* refers to the philosophical and theological tenets described in detail above, as well as their continuing appearance over the centuries in the myriad manifestations of the Hermetic tradition. Some scholars invoke the related term, *Hermetism*, to specify

⁵⁷ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "Hermeticism and Hermetic Societies," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 550-558.

⁵⁸ Goodrick Clarke 551.

⁵⁹ Goodrick-Clarke 551.

Hermetic belief in the ancient world.⁶⁰ Though there is some rationale for deploying *Hermetic* and *occult* as synonyms for the Western esoteric tradition, I have settled on *occult* because of its broader application; Hermetic beliefs lost much of their express association with ancient Egypt following Isaac Casaubon's accurate dating of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the seventeenth century, and thus *Hermetic* can give the appearance of being an inexact choice to describe practices more readily understood as *occult*.⁶¹ I have also followed the conventional (though misleading) usage of *Hermetic* to denote a strictly philosophical tradition, and have applied to the *occult* the wider connotation of the tradition, practice, and philosophy of magic.

Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism shares many tenets with Hermeticism. The term *Neoplatonism* was not coined until the nineteenth century, by scholars who sought to distinguish the mystical interpretation of Plato's thought from Plato's philosophical writings. By all accounts, the third century Egyptian philosopher, Plotinus, was the first Neoplatonist. Plotinus believed he was carrying on the project of his Greek forerunner, though he focused selectively on Plato's discussion of the soul, particularly the doctrine of transmigration or reincarnation which appears in the *Republic's* "Myth of Er."⁶² Plotinus's most influential idea was his theory of the One, from which all being and material forms emanate, and toward which human beings may reach via exemplary behavior and ascetic practice. This emphasis on being and form as gradations from an original source, usefully envisioned as concentric circles emanating from a central point, is what distinguishes Neoplatonism from the dualism of Gnosticism; also in contrast to Gnosti-

⁶⁰ Roelof Van den Broek, "Hermetism," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 559.

⁶¹ Ebeling 130.

⁶² John Dillon, introduction, *The Enneads*, by Plotinus, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Penguin, 1991) xcvi-xcix.

cism, the Neoplatonists generally gave “a positive account of the material world.”⁶³ Here Anne Sheppard details the mystical applications of Plotinus’s philosophy:

What for Plato is perhaps only a theory, expressed through myth and analogy, becomes in Neoplatonism an essential doctrine. For the Neoplatonists, the belief that the soul can ascend to higher levels of reality and thus return to its own ultimate origins is fundamental. In Neoplatonic terms, however, an ascent to the world of Forms is an ascent only as far as Mind. The Neoplatonists did believe that it was possible to go further and reach the level of the One. Since the transcendent One is strictly unknowable, any contact with it must be by means of mystical experience. Plotinus, indeed, describes himself as having often had such an experience; he achieved it four times during the six years Porphyry spent with him, while Porphyry himself attained it only once. But Plotinus was a philosophical mystic and in the *Enneads* mystical experience is always regarded as something which comes only after the rigorous intellectual effort required to reach the level of Mind.⁶⁴

While Plotinus’s philosophy may be accurately characterized as an idealistic monism, his system also includes the potential for mystical union with original Oneness. This same trajectory toward non-rational, transcendent unity with the mind of God is what unites the schools of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism.

Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry followed the writings of Plato, but the fourth century philosopher Iamblichus added a religious overlay to Neoplatonism by defending and unfolding the practice of theurgy. Iamblichus also enlarged the Neoplatonic pantheon by theorizing innumerable entities separating human consciousness from the One, such as angels, demons, and other celestial intermediaries. Iamblichus broke with Porphyry on the question of theurgy; Porphyry believed philosophical contemplation alone allowed one to attain divine Oneness, while Iamblichus advocated the practice of ritual magic.⁶⁵ Descended from a long line of Syrian priest-

⁶³ Gregory Shaw, “Neoplatonism in Antiquity,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 835.

⁶⁴ Anne Sheppard, “Plato and the Neoplatonists,” *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 11.

kings, Iamblichus believed he was redeeming Platonism from the rational excesses of Hellenism by elevating theurgy (“god-work”) over theology (“god-talk”).⁶⁶ For this reason he answered Porphyry in the guise of an Egyptian priest in his influential treatise, “The Reply of the Master Abammon to the ‘Letter of Porphyry to Anebo,’ and the solutions to the difficulties that it contains.” Ficino changed this cumbersome title to *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum* in his translation, emphasizing Iamblichus’s valorization of the “old ways” of the Egyptians, who stood in closer relationship to the *prisca theologia*.⁶⁷ Iamblichus’s appeal to the same secret initiatory schools which authorized the doctrines found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* reveals just one of the many points of crossover between the two traditions, a trend which the translators of the Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts encouraged.

The fifteenth century Italian philosopher and theologian, Marsilio Ficino, was the first to translate the works of Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and the first fourteen books of the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin, and this reviving of the Neoplatonic tradition fostered the humanism which came to define the Italian Renaissance. Ficino accepted Plotinus as Plato’s exegete, and so presented a spiritualized Plato to the world in his popular commentaries. Furthermore, Ficino located Hermes Trismegistus and Plato as prophets in the same *prisca theologia*, or original theology, leading up to the revelations of Christ, thus emphasizing the intersections between Hermeticism and the Neoplatonic version of Plato.⁶⁸ Neoplatonism’s emissary to the English-

⁶⁵ Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, eds., introduction, *De Mysteriis*, by Iamblichus (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) xxii.

⁶⁶ Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) 4.

⁶⁷ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 6-7.

⁶⁸ Michael J.B. Allen, introduction, *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Boston: Brill, 2002) xiii-xv.

speaking world, Thomas Taylor, saturated his translations of Plato, Plotinus, and Iamblichus with his own anachronistic, mystical philosophy, one which shaped the progress of Romanticism in both England and America. British Romantic poets took Taylor as their source on Hellenism, and the Transcendentalists Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson lionized the man in spite of his eccentricities.⁶⁹ Though Taylor's guiding obsession was ancient Greece, not Egypt, his enthusiastic portrayal of ancient Greek mystery cults combined with his vociferous attacks on Christianity link him to a tradition which includes both Neoplatonism and its ceremonial arm, theurgy. *Neoplatonism* maintained an occult connotation through the nineteenth century, encompassing "much that would nowadays be associated with hermetic philosophy, the occult sciences, and Western esotericism in general."⁷⁰ The Neoplatonic tenet of finding the divine within and without, through cultivation of what is noblest in self and by viewing the physical world as an extension of this same mystical unity, clearly impacted the Romantic movement in literature, though this legacy is exceedingly difficult to distinguish from the related tradition of Hermeticism.

In contemporary genealogies of occultism, Neoplatonic and Hermetic origins are together traced through medieval alchemy, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment Freemasonry, and nineteenth century Theosophy, the syncretic system which in turn gave rise to the twentieth century New Age movement. Perhaps because imaginative contact with ancient Egypt has been such a marked feature of the Western tradition, Hermeticism in general receives more discussion than Neoplatonism. For example, Erik Hornung's *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the*

⁶⁹ See Frank B. Evans III, "Thomas Taylor, Platonist of the Romantic Period," *PMLA* 55.4 (Dec. 1940): 1060-1079, for Taylor's life and legacy in England. See George Mills Harper, "Toward the Holy Land: Platonism in the Middle West," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 32.2 (Mar. 1967): 1-6, for Taylor's reception in America.

⁷⁰ Cees Leijenhorst, "Neoplatonism Since the Renaissance," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 845-846.

West and Jan Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*

both track the progress of Hermeticism from ancient Egypt through the modern era. No comparable level of critical attention has been paid to the specific legacy of Neoplatonism, yet it is known that Cornelius Agrippa, the foremost magician of Western occultism, "constantly reference[s]" Iamblichus throughout his most important work, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.⁷¹

In an article entitled, "The American Theosophical Synthesis," Robert S. Ellwood distinguishes a tradition of theurgic Neoplatonism as the central influence behind Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy, and performs a genealogy which has become conventional in occult histories. I quote him at length, not only for his emphasis on Neoplatonism, but also because his recitation of an occult genealogy serves as good introduction to my own:

The weightiest influence [on Theosophy] was clearly later Neoplatonism. The more occultist theurgic wing of Neoplatonism, which overwhelmed it in the end, stems not so much from Plato and Plotinus themselves as from later savants like Proclus and Iamblichus. They were swayed by the practice as well as, like Plato, the vision of Greek, Egyptian, and Chaldean mysteries and magic, and no doubt ultimately by shamanism. Theurgic Neoplatonism has ever run like an underground river beneath the terrain of Western civilization, perennially sending up fresh wellsprings of esotericism and "alternative" spirituality.

The lore of theurgic Neoplatonism can be seen behind the systems of the medieval Cabalist, magician, alchemist, and Manichee. In the Renaissance, Neoplatonism was virtually reborn to a brief but potent career as a major spiritual force aligned with the Age of Discovery's new awareness of the distant, the past, and the inward. But the passions of the Reformation and the cooler eye of the new science again sank the Chaldean river beneath the surface. Its early modern legacy remains in the voluminous tomes of the Florentine symposium, of Paracelsus and what Frances Yates has called the Rosicrucian Enlightenment. That legacy is part science, part alchemy and astrology, and part mysticism; of it the best that can be said (and this is not to be despised) is that its visionaries far more closely united the spiritual quest to the scientific quest for the knowledge which is power than has seemed possible since.

⁷¹ Christopher A. Plaisance, "From Conjuror to Philosopher: A Comparative Analysis of Medieval and Renaissance Angel Magic," *Occult Traditions*, ed. Damon Zacharias Lycourinos (Victoria, Australia: Numen Books, 2012) 148.

But though Neoplatonic occultism may have sunk underground, it did not go out of existence. The Age of Reason produced a spiritual counterculture represented by the likes of Cagliostro, Saint-Germain, the Illuminati, and the more esoteric aspects of Freemasonry.⁷²

Ellwood goes on to place Emmanuel Swedenborg, Anton Mesmer, and Spiritualism in this Neoplatonic tradition, whose common denominator seems to be the turn to ideal or spiritual worlds for the purposes of healing and redemption.

Alchemy. The roots of modern chemistry can be found in the speculative art of alchemy. In a genealogy of occultism, alchemy provides the missing link between the third century coalescence of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism and the fifteenth century Renaissance when these ideas were again in the ascendant. Though many practitioners and early chemists were indeed attempting to transform base metals into gold, alchemy as a practice carried with it a spiritual discipline which is difficult to disentangle from its scientific goals. Thus the alchemist's dupes in Ben Jonson's early seventeenth century play are frequently told that the chemical work is not progressing because the seekers have not purified themselves spiritually.⁷³ In the 1860s, American occultist Ethan Allen Hitchcock argued that alchemy was an essentially psychological pursuit, one which dramatizes the alchemist's internal changes by projecting them onto chemical experiments in the transformation of matter.⁷⁴ Carl Jung famously elaborated on these claims in the twentieth century, with his psychological interpretation of medieval, alchemical tracts.⁷⁵

⁷² Robert Ellwood, "The American Theosophical Synthesis," *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1983) 121.

⁷³ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Brian Woolland (1612/1631; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

⁷⁴ Hornung 41.

⁷⁵ See, for example, C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (1944; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

Erik Hornung provides copious evidence that alchemy began in ancient Egypt, and Antoine Faivre notes that the first alchemists in the West performed their art under the auspices of Hermes.⁷⁶ Thus the Hermetic quality of alchemy is evident, but how does this manifest in practice? In *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, Stanton J. Linden outlines the belief systems which were expressed and affirmed through the attempted transformation of metals. Linden describes a magical or animistic universe in which “metals possess sex, soul, and feeling,” and matter is infinitely convertible: “If all sublunary substances are in a state of flux as the result of the imposition of different forms upon prime matter, it follows that metals, too, could be changed through recombining or altering the proportion of the elements that comprise them.”⁷⁷ Linden locates this faith in matter’s volatility in the Hermetic dictum, “as above, so below,” which comprises the belief that the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm, or that things of earth mirror things of heaven. In this schema, the alchemist as mortal god may claim the divine power of converting matter to its original, heavenly perfection. Implicit in this task is the alchemist’s attainment of the spiritual purity of a deity in order to perfect his work. John L. Brooke explains that the “mystical transmutation encompassing living metals and living mortals” which alchemy promised was achieved by the reduction of warring opposites into a synthesized, Hermetic whole.⁷⁸

Alchemical texts as a body are heavily symbolic and imagistic, vague and difficult to decipher. Alchemy’s critics cited the obscurity of the texts as evidence that the quest for the philosopher’s stone was a sort of tilting at windmills fueled by colorful language which did not yield

⁷⁶ See the chapter, “Alchemy,” in Hornung 34-42, and Faivre quoted in Albanese 36.

⁷⁷ Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1996) 23,19.

⁷⁸ Brooke 8.

any actual, scientific instruction. For latter-day Jungians, the dream-like symbolism of the language of alchemy suggested fructive contact with the psyche and the imaginative realm: “The mind in the Renaissance, and before, was characterized by an immersion in images [and] a lack of critical reflection on fantasy.”⁷⁹ The violent reaction between sulfur and mercury, for example, might be represented as the eternal distance between Sol and Luna, and their happy reconciliation as the *conjunctio* of a King and Queen in coitus. While it is easy to see how harmonizing the natural antipathy of opposed elements in the laboratory might crystallize processes at work in the alchemist’s own psyche, modern scholarship has revealed complex and consistent codes in alchemical texts which belie their fanciful appearance. In other words, the obscurity and rendering in images and allegory was intentional and served a range of purposes. The practical work of experimentation and repeated failure, to which the indecipherability of the texts inevitably led, insured that only the most worthy and dedicated seeker would attain the weighty gifts of personal immortality and endless wealth. The symbolic language also obscured the decidedly unchristian goal of magical powers over and above the common lot of men. Finally, the esoteric language of the alchemical texts required the intercession of divine guidance to open meanings to the practitioner, and here alchemy serves as a connecting link between the mystery schools of the ancient world and the emphasis on symbolism we see in later systems like Freemasonry. In each practice, language is not employed discursively but rather functions to awaken the practitioner’s intuition and receptivity to higher guidance.

Renaissance thinkers. While many sophisticated occultists contributed to the Hermetic tradition during the Renaissance, refining it and writing advanced magical treatises which would shape the future of modern occultism, three voices stand out as particularly relevant: the Floren-

⁷⁹ Nathan Schwartz-Salant, ed., comp., introduction, *Jung on Alchemy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 4.

tine theologian's, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499); the German magician's, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), and the German mystic's, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624).

As already discussed, Marsilio Ficino gave the Renaissance its humanist character by introducing translations of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* to a European audience. The immensely wealthy Cosimo de' Medici funded Ficino's work, appointing him head of his Platonic Academy for philosophical enlightenment. Such high-level patronage certainly enabled Ficino's fruitful and extended career, and he was also one of the first early modern scholars to enjoy the benefits of the recently invented printing press, affording him wide exposure.⁸⁰ While the occultist may trace the dissemination of Hermetic and Platonic ideas in the West directly to Ficino, it was not simply Ficino's translations, but his remarkable synthesis of the Platonic and the Christian which gave his ideas such buoyancy and popular appeal. Ficino's supposition that the wisdom of Plato had in fact predicted and prepared the world for Christ allowed him to "argue with conviction that the time was ripe for a Platonic revival that would unite wisdom and faith, philosophy and revelation, as they had first been united in the golden age."⁸¹ Ficino's successful melding of Christian and Plotinian metaphysics legitimized the philosophical underpinnings of occultism for subsequent generations of practicing occultists.

For Catherine Albanese, Cornelius Agrippa is the "Hermes of the North," a Renaissance theologian of great importance who, like Ficino, her "Hermes of the South," demonstrated that Christianity and Hermeticism were not incompatible.⁸² While this might be technically true, Agrippa is rarely remembered for his Christian sympathies; rather, his name has become a watchword for the sort of practical occult methods which most alarm Christian pundits. Taking

⁸⁰ Allen xv.

⁸¹ Allen xx.

⁸² Albanese 34.

his cue from the Neoplatonism of Ficino, Agrippa pursued occult studies from an early age, and in 1510 completed his masterwork *De occulta philosophia*, commonly known as *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The text was not published until 1533, shortly before Agrippa's death.

While Agrippa was both heavily indebted to the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus and the Hermetic notion of the interrelatedness of all manifestation (*omnes in omnibus*), the "philosophy" alluded to in the title is overshadowed by the magical content of the text, which reads as a compendium of occult arts. A summation of Agrippa's themes by chapter, compiled by Christopher Lehrich, readily illustrates this point: the elements and their occult properties, astrological properties of elements, seals (sigils) and characters, magical techniques for attracting elements, divination, magical language and magical writing, magic numbers, magic squares and their association with demonic beings, planetary seals, names of God (i.e. the hierarchy of spirits, demons, and angels), the language of angels and the names of demons, exercises for summoning and exorcising demons, necromancy, and ritual purity.⁸³ Though Agrippa might have shared Ficino's optimism that Christianity could be reconciled with the magic of the ancient world, his legacy to later generations was a detailed handbook of practical occultism, not a philosophy, and it was this Northern European voice that would have the greater impact on the immigrants to the first American colonies.

Greater than either Ficino or Agrippa, however, in terms of influence on the shape that American metaphysics would ultimately take, was the visionary work of German Lutheran, Jacob Boehme. A humble shoemaker of modest education, Boehme sought divine light through the heart, and found it in a series of visionary experiences which revealed to him the structure of the cosmos and the true nature of God. The first of these visions was given full scope in *Aurora*

⁸³ Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Boston: Brill, 2003) 37-39.

(1612), a privately circulated text which nevertheless caused Boehme to be persecuted by Lutheran authorities, at the same time that it won him a devoted following. Boehme's first published book, *The Way to Christ*, did not appear until shortly before his death in 1624. Though nominally Christian, Boehme's cosmology incorporated many ideas culled from Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, even some of the elemental magic compiled by Agrippa, though mediated through Agrippa's successor, Paracelsus. In fact, the German-Swiss astrologer, healer, and alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541), was a primary source for Boehme's alchemical-Hermetic revision of Christian theology.⁸⁴ According to Arthur Versluis, Boehme's fusion of the occult with an anticlerical Christianity was so unique that it may justly be named the origin of Christian theosophy, a religious alternative within Christianity which emphasizes inner light over Bible literacy.⁸⁵

The waves of religious radicals, dissenters, and nonconformists who emigrated to the North American colonies in the seventeenth century had some obvious sympathies with Boehme's anticlericalism, and yet it seems that Boehme's apocryphal accounts of the Hermetic Adam and sophianic wisdom were controversial even among radical Protestants. The American astrologer, Daniel Leeds, was disowned by the Quaker Meeting in 1688 for publishing Boehme's visionary works.⁸⁶ As my history of occultism encroaches upon the transmission of the occult tradition to American soil, Boehme emerges as a particularly important figure, for it was through Boehme and his spiritual progeny that Hermetic ideas achieved their widest deployment in early America. A small cult centered around the Pietist mystic, Johannes Kelpius, was established in

⁸⁴ Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany: New York State UP, 1991) 49-50.

⁸⁵ Arthur Versluis, *Theosophia: Hidden Dimensions of Christianity* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1994) 58-60.

⁸⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* 82.

the Philadelphia area in 1694, and for fourteen years practiced a Boehme-inspired theosophy replete with elements of astrology, alchemy, and Christian mysticism. The mantle of this group was then taken up by a latecomer to the Kelpius society, Conrad Beissel, who established a community at Ephrata in Lancaster County, which furthered the sexual-chemical components of Boehme's vision. Beissel's fusion of alchemy, magic, Hermeticism, and Boehme's Adamic superman offers the perfect illustration of how the occult tradition survived by merging its claims with radical Protestantism:

At the core of Beissel's Ephrata lay the gnostic "wooing" of the Virgin Sophia, elaborated by Jacob Boehme a century before. Like the alchemical search for the philosopher's stone, the worship of the Virgin Sophia would lead to a gnostic union with God. With antecedents running through Boehme to the "Pimander," Beissel's theology revolved around an alchemical construction of a sexually androgynous God, composed of tinctures of male fire and female wisdom. Divided with the Fall of Adam into male and female, humanity could be restored to its original whole, as in alchemical marriage, or *conjunctio*.⁸⁷

Beissel died in 1768, though the Ephrata community he founded was still active when Charles Brockden Brown, the earliest writer in my study, was born in 1771.

In spite of Boehme's appeal for occultists, it was his Christian affiliation and heart-centered mysticism that allowed for his popularity in early America. Catherine Albanese argues that Boehme's location of spiritual authority in direct revelation from Christ authorized a practical theosophy in tune with both American anticlericalism and individualism: "The emanation cosmology of Boehme's writings came bearing echoes of earlier Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and Kabalistic schemas ... However ... the Boehmian synthesis, for all its intellectual elements, existed to advance a deeply practical program of spirituality ... what for many became a vernacular

⁸⁷ Brooke 42.

and nonelite ‘path of the heart.’”⁸⁸ In Boehme, early Americans found both a model for direct knowledge of God and a theorist of the Hermetic tradition.

Secret societies. In the Enlightenment era, the trend toward rational, empirical inquiry in philosophy and science led to the formation of learned societies for pursuing and promoting general knowledge. The most famous of these, London’s Royal Society, originated in the seventeenth century and was headed in the eighteenth by that paragon of Enlightenment accomplishment, Sir Isaac Newton. Yet Newton’s devotional relationship to speculative alchemy, a lifelong preoccupation which his contemporaries suppressed in order to prop up his legacy as a man of pure science, gives us some indication that Enlightenment was often a complicated *mélange* of the new rationalism and ancient, occult ideas about the nature of God, matter, and perception.⁸⁹ The Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge outside a strictly Christian framework opened the door to previously taboo occultisms, and Freemasonry successfully synthesized the “revelation, secrecy, and initiation” of the Hermetic tradition with the new emphasis on rational and disinterested inquiry. The development of secret societies in the Age of Enlightenment allowed for the survival of ancient, mystical ideas in private, while publicly, religion’s hold on scientific inquiry was increasingly questioned and exposed to rational scrutiny.

Freemasonry’s imaginative origins are often linked to the Rosicrucian hoax of the early seventeenth century. Another Lutheran theologian, contemporaneous with Boehme, is the most likely author of the three inflammatory tracts which told of a secret society of pious men who combined scientific learning, magical arts, and Protestant fervor in their elite program. Johann

⁸⁸ Albanese 42.

⁸⁹ Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1996) 14. For Newton’s alchemical pursuits, see Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s Alchemy; or, “The Hunting of the Greene Lyon”* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1975).

Valentin Andreae (1586-1654) confessed to writing the *Chemical Wedding* as a sort of youthful prank, and yet his fictional Rosicrucians inspired a craze for secret societies which inevitably led to the formation of real groups modeled on the mythical secret order.⁹⁰ Just as Boehme melded the Hermetic-chemical tradition with a visionary Protestant theology, so the Rosicrucian tracts drew on an occult mystique in promoting a learned society which could enable the Protestant reformation of the “whole, wide world.” Freemasonry was not formally established in England until the eighteenth century (1717), though its precursors had appeared in the imaginative wake of the “Rosicrucian Enlightenment.” The career of the British alchemist, Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), is instructive here. Ashmole wrote a formal, printed appeal to the invisible Rosicrucian order, outlining his worthiness to be admitted to the learned society. Yet his quest was destined to be met with disappointment, and he later joined an incipient Freemasonic lodge in 1646.⁹¹ He was also one of the founding members of the Royal Society in 1660. Ashmole’s zeal for the antiquated occult arts of alchemy and astrology meshes somewhat awkwardly with our historical sense of Enlightenment as the rooting out of medieval mysticisms, and yet Ashmole’s career as both public intellectual and secret society enthusiast offers the perfect illustration of how ancient occultisms were synthesized with the new empiricism.

While this dissertation is not exclusively concerned with the legacy of secret societies to American fiction, Freemasonry and related societies were so important to the occult’s survival and transmission in the eighteenth century that I pay more detailed attention to the popularity of ritual brotherhoods in individual chapters. Freemasonry was established in America soon after its formal inception in England, and a plethora of secret societies also appeared in Europe at this

⁹⁰ Adam McLean, “Introduction,” *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin (Boston: Phanes Press, 1991), and Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: New York State UP, 1994) 65.

⁹¹ Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972; London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 249.

time; hence, my analysis of Charles Brockden Brown's "occult moment" draws heavily on this eighteenth century fascination with fraternity. The "Illuminati scare" of the 1790s piqued Brown's imagination surrounding the epistemological questions which the mystical programs of secret societies raised, and Brown participated in an Enlightenment *Zeitgeist* which also encompassed expressly occult orders like Martinism and Cagliostro's Egyptian Rite. My third chapter, subtitled "George Lippard's Fraternal Dialectic," examines the nineteenth century popularity of Freemasonry, the damning legacy of Anti-Masonry, and Lippard's revivification of Rosicrucian myths in a democratic and nationalist vein. Though Freemasonry might have originated under the auspices of the eighteenth century quest for a rational Enlightenment, by the nineteenth century ritual fraternities met essentially religious needs by emphasizing a revelation of the heart, and by serving up ever more exotic lineages and dramatic rites.⁹² Freemasonry's official identification as a secular order promoting a non-denominational program of self-improvement and social responsibility successfully masked its status as a major carrier of the occult tradition from Enlightenment through the Romantic era.

Theosophy and the New Age. By all accounts, the late nineteenth century witnessed the resurgence of occultism. The New Thought movement flourished in magazine culture, and reformers touting causes as diverse as free love and vegetarianism pressed their various political agendas. Formal societies dedicated to psychical research were founded in both England and America. Even Spiritualism made a comeback. In the United Kingdom, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn self-consciously invoked ancient, magical rites in imitation of both the Egyptian mysteries and Freemasonry. But it was an American innovation, Theosophy, which is credited with both leading off this new spiritual dispensation and giving it a doctrine.

⁹² This is the overall thesis of Mark C. Carnes's book, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), which receives more treatment in my Lippard chapter.

Theosophy was born out of dissatisfaction with the salvific benefits of Spiritualism. American military officer and journalist, Henry Steel Olcott (1832-907), met the Russian adventuress Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), at an investigation of spiritualistic phenomena in Vermont in 1874.⁹³ The Spiritualist movement initiated in 1848 had leveled an informal religious challenge to the stern-minded Congregationalism of previous generations, and largely lacked a dogma. Loosely organized and boasting a majority of female adherents and practitioners, Spiritualism denied infant damnation and the existence of hell, and promised the continuation of earthly delights after death by painting a materialist heaven where one's body, clothing, possessions, and family relationships also survived. Though Spiritualism could lay claim to some high cultural predecessors like Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the Swedish theologian who had extensively theorized the spirit world, in practice Spiritualism consisted of spirit mediums going into trance and relaying messages from both departed loved ones and benevolent icons of the past. Its more immediate antecedent was the work of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), who laid the groundwork for Spiritualism by promoting the healing powers of animal magnetism. The American mystic, Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910), was a proponent of both Mesmer's magnetic healing and the Swedenborgian spirit world, and served as Spiritualism's unofficial high priest. But Spiritualism foundered on the very pillars which had allowed for its dramatic appearance into American religion: its anticlericalism and lack of a central governing body. Spiritualism's inability to prove its pseudo-scientific claims empirically made it the subject of scorn, and the legions of frauds who entered Spiritualism's ranks did much to discredit it.⁹⁴

⁹³ Albanese 272.

⁹⁴ For women's dominance in Spiritualism, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon, 1989). For a good general introduction, see "The Epoch of

Theosophy's great innovation was to capitalize on the homespun enthusiasm for Spiritualistic phenomena (in the form of ghostly sounds and apparitions) and to yoke it to the high cultural discourse of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism which had long sustained the Western esoteric tradition. Theosophy articulated the transition from the passive mediumship of Spiritualism with the souls of the dead to a type of active mediumship with "ascended masters" or godlike beings who provided wise counsel and guidance. As Catherine Albanese points out, there was nothing really new about this first Theosophical mission statement, other than the fact that the intercession of angels and demons in human life had not been seriously entertained since before the Enlightenment. The archetype of the ascended master or incorporeal divine guide can be traced from the *Corpus Hermeticum* through to Iamblichus and, later, to the Rosicrucian tracts and the demonology of John Dee, personal wizard to Elizabeth I.⁹⁵ Officially founded in 1875, Theosophy remained an elite coterie of seekers until Blavatsky's publication of the monumental tome, *Isis Unveiled*, in 1877, an immediate bestseller which went through several reprints. That Blavatsky was a bit of a charlatan, a vague and imprecise writer, and an egregious plagiarizer do not seem to have impacted her popularity. Today, Theosophy is characterized as a system which harmonized the metaphysical systems of East and West, a description owing to the movement's later development in India (Blavatsky and Olcott removed to Bombay the year following *Isis Unveiled*). But its original platform had been to recover the sophistication of the Western Hermetic tradition, and to revive the magic and mystery which were languishing under the tyranny of nineteenth century materialism.

the Rapping Spirits" in Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1972) 3-21.

⁹⁵ Albanese 278.

The present project is in part a study of the prehistory of Theosophy and the latter nineteenth century occult resurgence, which does not seem to have abated since. Grand narratives of occultism claim that the occult declined in the seventeenth century with the onset of the scientific revolution and died a long, lingering death in the eighteenth, only to return with a vengeance with Blavatsky in 1875. The fact that only a century of dormancy separated medieval mysticism from modern occultism has always seemed suspicious to me, and indeed, Robert Galbreath concurs that, “The argument that the occult declined either rapidly or completely is far from self-evident.”⁹⁶ Though much has been made of the popularity of Spiritualism in antebellum America, Spiritualism was not consciously connected by doctrine or practice to the venerable tradition of high, Western occultism dating back almost two thousand years. Spiritualism’s resistance to establishing a firm line between esoteric and exoteric knowledge also puts it out of the occult mode of revelation, secrecy, and initiation, and it was in fact another gendered religious alternative which quietly carried the occult tradition through to its nineteenth century resurgence. The importance of Freemasonry and related occult brotherhoods in America has been seriously neglected by scholars in both religion and cultural history, and my study serves to rectify, in part, this gap in our scholarship. My study also highlights another heretofore unknown locus of occult survival linking ancient magic to modern Theosophy: the rise of the novel. Not enough has been made of the fact that fictional texts figured among Blavatsky’s esoteric sources, or that the novel was an ideal vehicle for transmitting controversial occult truths. Just like the alchemical texts of old, occult novels could obscure their esoteric agenda with figurative language and encoded allegories which only the initiated could unfold.

⁹⁶ Robert Galbreath, “Explaining Modern Occultism,” *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1983) 23.

Occultism in America

Until relatively recently, the history of the occult in America remained “almost wholly unwritten.”⁹⁷ While histories of individual movements like Spiritualism could be found, as well as the biographies of notable occultists like John Humphrey Noyes, a comprehensive, scholarly account of American esotericism and its multifarious manifestations simply did not exist until the end of the twentieth century. The first study devoted exclusively to the survival of occultisms in America, Herbert Leventhal’s 1976 book, *In the Shadow of Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth Century America*, tracks the tenacity of the medieval worldview in the astrologers and alchemists of early America, and in the difficulty with which scholars relinquished the Ptolemaic universe to the Copernican system.⁹⁸ Yet Leventhal’s primary focus is the occult’s infringement on the progress of science, not religion. The first salvo fired into the void of America’s occult history was a 1979 article by Jon Butler entitled, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760.” In the first few pages, Butler delivers the startling information that after 1650 only one-third of the colonists belonged to a church, and that in the Revolutionary era this number dropped to fifteen percent! Such evidence obviously upsets the popular perception of early America as a hyper-religious outpost with a populace that was defined by church worship. But Butler does not interpret this compelling evidence to mean that Americans disregarded religion as a body, but rather that we must broaden the historical narrative to include religious alternatives to the assumed dominance of Christianity:

The discrepancy between popular colonial indifference to formal religious institutions and the early American reputation for deep religiosity reveals a contradiction in traditional American religious history. Unless the early American populace is viewed as irreligious, as some observers in fact thought it was, the numbers

⁹⁷ Butler, “Early American Religious Heritage” 345.

⁹⁸ Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: New York UP, 1976).

of settlers who were ambivalent toward institutional Christianity or ignored it altogether means that descriptions of common colonial religious practice simply cannot rest on histories of churches and church-related events. To understand what many colonists meant by religion, historians need to move beyond the study of ecclesiology, theology, and the ministry to recover noninstitutional religious practices. This task is difficult. Evidence about religion that is not linked to churches is extraordinarily difficult to find. In contrast, whole libraries are devoted to the histories of Christian groups.⁹⁹

Butler's article authorizes a scholarly re-imagining of early America in which occult religious practices are redeemed from the status of the aberrant and marginal and included within a holistic narrative of American religious life.

Butler followed up on many of his earlier claims in a book-length work of 1990, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. But as the title intimates, Butler's focus in this work is the rise of American evangelicalism from eclectic religious roots. The first major study to reveal the presence and proliferation of Hermeticism in America was John L. Brooke's monumental work, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (1996). Though Brooke is especially keyed to the occult practices which exerted an influence on the development of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith, Brooke's exhaustively researched study provides invaluable information about the occult character of early America. Brooke unveils a little-known culture of Hermetically-derived "immortalists," alchemically-derived treasure-hunters, and experimental Freemasons who merged their beliefs with the Boehme-derived religious radicals recently emigrated from Europe. But the narrative of American occultism remained incomplete until the publication of *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* by Catherine Albanese in 2007. Here at last was a text which traced the progress of occultism from what was an essentially European tradition of magic in the seventeenth century clear through to the twentieth century New Age. Albanese incorporates both ver-

⁹⁹ Butler, "Early American Religious Heritage" 318.

nacular practices and learned, literate occult culture into her sweeping study, and pays due attention to Native American, African American, and latter-day multicultural influences on a specifically American brand of metaphysical religion. As a compendium of how Hermetic ideas and practices developed across four centuries of religious culture in America, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* is a boon to the burgeoning field of esoteric studies and leaves little to be desired.

A telling trend in these sparse histories of American occultism is the extent to which occult books, almanacs, and tracts determined the spread of occult practice. Jon Butler theorizes that the decline of occult practice in the mid-eighteenth century was a direct result of the decline of occult publications in England. Seventeenth century England was awash with occult publications on alchemy and astrology, and notable translations like Thomas Vaughan's of the Rosicrucian manifestoes and John Everard's of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. But following this peak in publication, texts devoted to the occult worldview fell off rapidly in deference to the rise of Enlightenment science in the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Mormon scholar D. Michael Quinn advances an alternative thesis about American reading practices, however, by looking carefully at how texts circulated in the colonies.

Quinn cites evidence that American readerships leaned heavily on British imprints and were not confined to domestic publications, and here he is in agreement with Butler.¹⁰¹ But Quinn also argues that occult texts continued to be read long after they had ceased to be for sale. Literally hundreds of occult titles were circulating in Europe in the seventeenth century, with over 300 publications alone dedicated to astrology. Quinn concludes that "Americans were circulating seventeenth-century books of European occultism a hundred or more years after their

¹⁰⁰ Butler, "Early American Religious Heritage" 339.

¹⁰¹ D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987)15.

publication,” following a thorough inventory of eighteenth and nineteenth century book sales.¹⁰² In 1729 a young Benjamin Franklin impersonated an occultist in a newspaper article, and boasted his reading of “Scot, Albertus Magnus, and Cornelius Agrippa.” By Quinn’s reckoning, the occult titles to which Franklin referred had been out of print for sixty-four, thirty-nine, and seventy-eight years, respectively.¹⁰³ Cornelius Agrippa exerted a shaping influence on nineteenth century theurgic occultism in spite of the fact that his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* had been out of print for more than two hundred years. Quinn’s study is also quite useful for establishing that occult readerships did not go out of existence in the eighteenth century. The astrological and herbal sex manual, *Aristotle’s Complete Master-Piece*, went through thirty editions in America between 1738 and 1796, and nineteen more reprints before 1831. Quinn reports the surprising information that the man often considered to be the first English novelist, *Robinson Crusoe* author Daniel Defoe, achieved a hit with a text that verified the authenticity of supernatural appearances. Defoe’s *History of the Devil: Ancient and Modern*, went through twenty-three British imprints between 1726 and 1840, and seven American imprints between 1802 and 1850. By contrast, texts debunking supernatural appearances did not reach the same level of popularity.¹⁰⁴

Quinn’s overview of the occult texts circulating in early America demonstrates definitively that occult readerships were alive and well, even if occult practice was less visible following the seventeenth century. If we include Masonic texts under the occult banner, the seeming decline of occult publication may not even be a tenable conclusion; over 5,000 Masonic imprints

¹⁰² Quinn 14-16.

¹⁰³ Quinn 18.

¹⁰⁴ Quinn 17-18.

appeared in America between 1734 and 1850, with a peak in publication in the 1840s.¹⁰⁵ In any case, Quinn's study reminds us of the occult's dependency on textual transmission:

Scholars and common people alike relied on various authorities and texts for hundreds, if not thousands, of years as part of the transmission of occult traditions, formulas, and rites. Medieval writers on the occult cited ancient authors and recirculated their texts, Renaissance occultists cited both ancient and medieval authors and texts, and nineteenth-century occult works cited authors and texts extending back two millennia ... Because each century's occult works and traditions consciously recirculated occult philosophy and ceremonies of previous ages, there was, and remains, an intentional timelessness unifying occult manifestations in different circumstances, even though occult authorities and philosophies varied at different times and places.¹⁰⁶

Importantly, Quinn emphasizes how occultists recirculated the works of their predecessors, whether through the reprinting of their words or the redistributing of their works in occult communities. While Quinn does not address the culture of reprinting and the loose strictures on plagiarism which characterized early American publishing, his findings point to American subcultures where occult texts were made to live for hundreds of years beyond their formal publication.

Catherine Albanese jokes about the scant likelihood of an "early-nineteenth-century schoolmaster ... hand[ing] Joseph Smith a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*," and yet Smith's writing, philosophy, and career argue strongly that just such a direct transmission occurred.¹⁰⁷ I encountered a similar problem when analyzing a cosmology by Smith's contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe; *Eureka* corresponds point for point with this veritable Bible of the Hermetic tradition, and yet the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not in print in Poe's lifetime, and does not seem to have been reprinted since Everard's translation of the 1650s.¹⁰⁸ The voice of Hermes Trismegistus yet

¹⁰⁵ Kent Logan Walgren, *Freemasonry, Anti-Masonry, and Illuminism in the United States, 1734-1850: A Bibliography* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2003) xliii.

¹⁰⁶ Quinn xx.

¹⁰⁷ Albanese 139.

appeared piecemeal and incomplete in early America, finding its way into popular almanacs by Daniel Leeds and Jacob Taylor in the early seventeenth century, alongside quotations by Cornelius Agrippa.¹⁰⁹ The eccentric and vociferously anti-slavery Quaker, Benjamin Lay, quoted extensively from the “Divine Pymander” in a pamphlet of 1737.¹¹⁰

Collectively these historians of America’s occult heritage reveal a little-known, perhaps little-suspected, culture of magic at work alongside both the Reformation zeal of the first colonists and the rational optimism of American’s eighteenth century Enlightenment. The seminal work of Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (1971), underlies all subsequent forays into early modern occultisms, since it was Thomas who first recognized that the divinatory arts which Enlightenment science discredited had served a religious function for the uneducated masses.¹¹¹ Thomas’s basic thesis is that Protestantism’s rigorous disdain of miracles and magic, and its rejection of Catholic saints as friendly intermediaries to whom the common man liked to appeal, opened the door wide to astrologers, witches, and spagyric doctors who were happy both to foster a belief in wonders and to treat pedestrian complaints. In this sense the occult was the irrational shadow not only of Enlightenment, but also of Protestantism. Much of Thomas’s evidence is derived from the laws passed against occult practice and their enactment, and he effectively demonstrates that witchcraft was prevalent enough in England so as to necessitate the intervention of a thorough legal code.

¹⁰⁸ Antoine Faivre, “Hermetic Literature IV: Renaissance-Present,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 540.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, “Early American Religious Heritage” 331.

¹¹⁰ Brooke 40.

¹¹¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1971).

Historians of the occult in America have largely adopted Thomas's methods, discovering evidence of real occult practice in its legal and public regulation. In 1689, young Puritan divine Cotton Mather (1663-1728) cautioned against the use of magic charms among the laity, and advocated instead for the "amulets" of faith and prayer.¹¹² Within a few years, Mather would become embroiled in the most notorious event in early American history, the Salem witch trials of 1692. Various historical perspectives have been brought to bear on the trials' origins and actors, ranging widely from an analysis of class distinctions between accuser and accused, to a theory of an ergot mold on the grain crop which could have caused hallucinations and convulsions in the young female accusers.¹¹³ Almost immediately after the trials, Mather was vilified for failing to acknowledge any error in judgment, unlike the majority of the judges who expressed regret in thus being snared by Satan's tricks.¹¹⁴ When the trials became a subject of nineteenth century interest, Mather and the trying judges were accused of the superstitious worldview which had allowed them to believe in the occult powers of witches. Contrary to popular conception, the decline in witchcraft cases following the infamous Salem hangings does not represent a collective shift away from religious darkness into Enlightenment, but rather the recognition by Puritan leaders that such occult problems could not be addressed by the law.¹¹⁵ Witches and other "cunning folk" remained a visible presence in the colonies, and so "belief" in them was rather a moot point. The fact that an extant practice may have motivated the "irrational projections" of the ac-

¹¹² Butler, "Early American Religious Heritage" 332.

¹¹³ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974). Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science* 192.4234 (Apr. 2, 1976) 21-26.

¹¹⁴ Mather published a defense of the trials in 1693 called *Wonders of the Invisible World*. The Boston merchant Robert Calef issued a retort in *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700), which effectively determined Mather's reputation as a Puritan bogeyman for posterity.

¹¹⁵ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992) 225.

cusers is an argument so often lost among sociological interpretations of the trials that when it's made it seems quite fresh; Catherine Albanese names it a "virtual certainty, given the geographical sources of immigration to New England, that cunning folk, witches, and wizards were disembarking from English ships in the Massachusetts Bay along with everyone else."¹¹⁶

Perhaps more surprising than the fact that the seventeenth century colonists engaged in occult practices that they carried with them from England, is the thin line that separates these denigrated practices from the high cultural, speculative pursuits of the colonial elite. Cotton Mather, son of the venerable minister, Increase Mather, and grandson to two prominent divines of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was distinguished not only by birth but also by a precocious intellect. His publications number above four hundred, and he was one of the first American colonials admitted to the Royal Society. Yet Cotton Mather knew how to cast an astrological chart, a practice he admitted as useful for farming, and his medical theories were in line with alchemical healing methods. "Mather's most original medical theory – positing the existence of the Nishmash Chajim, a part-physical, part-spiritual element physically present in every body, mediating between the physical and spiritual worlds," may strike us as delightfully New Age, but was in fact derived from the Paracelsan school of medicine.¹¹⁷ Mather's modest accomplishments in occultism, however, pale in comparison to those of another son sired by a Puritan saint, one whom Mather memorialized for his alchemical wisdom in *Magnalia Christi Americana*: John Winthrop, Jr. was both a "true adept" and a "Hermes Christianus" (Christian Hermes).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Albanese 68.

¹¹⁷ Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Williamsburg: North Carolina UP, 2010) 207.

¹¹⁸ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702; New York: Russell and Russell, 1967) 57, 162.

John Winthrop, Sr. was the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and a formidable political force in the state's early history. Around the time that Winthrop sailed from England with several hundred colonists in 1630, his son John Winthrop, Jr. (1606-1676) was returning from an expedition in Turkey to search out alchemical knowledge, in emulation of the fabled Christian Rosencreutz of the Rosicrucian manifestoes. Not only did the younger Winthrop make repeated attempts to contact the authors of the manifestoes, he also pursued alchemical studies in England, a hobby (or perhaps, devotional practice) which he developed over his entire life. When Winthrop, Jr. sailed for Massachusetts Bay in 1631, he also carted with him "alchemical glassware and chemicals and a barrel full of alchemical texts," and wasted no time in setting up his alchemical furnace at his father's house in Boston.¹¹⁹ Yet Winthrop was no prodigal son, rather embarking on a colonial career that rivaled his father's in being "A Model of Christian Charity":

Twenty-five years old and the firstborn son and namesake of Massachusetts's governor, Winthrop was destined by birth for colonial preferment and position. His affable, entrepreneurial personality, intercultural sensitivity, political savvy, and scientific knowledge helped him parlay that preferment into positions of Atlantic world eminence. Over the next half century, Winthrop would found three colonial towns, serve as a Bay Colony assistant for nearly two decades, govern the colony of Connecticut for eighteen years, secure that colony a charter from the restoration court of Charles II granting it virtual independence, found several New England iron foundries, serve as physician to nearly half the population of Connecticut, and become a founding member of the Royal Society.¹²⁰

Winthrop's biographer, Connecticut state historian Walter W. Woodward, claims that all of these impressive accomplishments were suffused with Winthrop's vision of Rosicrucian utopianism and a magical-alchemical worldview, one which he effortlessly harmonized with Christian piety. Winthrop's forays into mining were simply the high cultural octave of the treasure-hunting pas-

¹¹⁹ Woodward 41-42.

¹²⁰ Woodward 43.

time of the lower classes, both of which depended on geomantic techniques, alchemical belief in transmutation, and spiritual purity for success. In the mid-seventeenth century, Winthrop practiced spiritual and spagyric medicine in New London and achieved great renown for his healing powers; that Winthrop considered his a Rosicrucian mission is told by the fact that he administered his alchemical medicines for free.¹²¹ The sole occupation of a Rosicrucian, according to the manifestoes, should be to “heal the sick, and that gratis.”

Winthrop is also an interesting figure to isolate because of his connection to one of the most famous and influential magicians in the British world, John Dee (1527-1609), personal astrologer to Queen Elizabeth, crystal-gazer, and seeker after the primordial language of angels. Dee met with some hard fortunes following the ascension of James I to the throne, and Winthrop was able to acquire texts from the remains of Dee’s prodigious library through his friendship with Dee’s son, Arthur.¹²² This places Winthrop in a direct line of intellectual transmission from one of England’s magical elite, and Winthrop, too, amassed a hefty alchemical library over the course of his lifetime. It included not only works of alchemy, astrology, and medicine, but also magical manuals like Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, and others with tantalizing titles such as *Cave of Magic and Medicine, in Which There Is a New, Secret, and Overflowing Treasure of Magico-Physical Secrets, of Seals, Signs, and Magicall Images* [sic].¹²³ Winthrop was so taken with Dee’s 1564 text, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, that he adopted the “hieroglyphic monad” as his personal symbol, with which he marked his alchemical crates and books (see Fig.

¹²¹ Woodward 191-193.

¹²² Brooke 36.

¹²³ Woodward 216.

1)!¹²⁴ More than just a glyph, contemplation of this magical symbol was supposed to yield a personal experience of cosmic unity.

Though all evidence points to Winthrop being a foundational figure of American Hermeticism, John L. Brooke notes the very recent discovery of Winthrop's investment in the occult and urges caution in arguing for his wide influence. The majority of Winthrop's occult pursuits were conducted in private or shared with a very small club of like-minded correspondents in England and the colonies. The elite and confidential exchanges of high cultural occultism among the Puritans does not suggest, for Brooke, a firm basis for the Hermetic beliefs which would develop in uniquely American ways in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather, it was the great masses of immigrants who appeared after the first Puritan migrations, destined for the spiritually permissive colony founded by William Penn, who would nurture mysticism and occultism with their progressive take on religion: "In the migrations of Quakers, Baptists, Pietists, and perfectionists, coming primarily to the new provinces of Pennsylvania and the Jerseys, and swelling to greater and greater numbers between the 1650s and 1730s, the Radical traditions of Adamic restoration and hermetic divinization were definitively brought to the New World."¹²⁵ Two of the writers who are comprised in my study were born and raised in Pennsylvania, amidst these religious cultures which prized mystical union with God.

There is evidence that occult speculation persisted among New England's high cultural elite into the eighteenth century. Theses considering the efficacy of astrology were written at Harvard past the mid-century mark, and when Judge Samuel Danforth died in 1777, his friend Ezra Stiles noted in his journal that the man was a believer in the "Philosopher's Stone" and was

¹²⁴ Woodward 33-37.

¹²⁵ Brooke 38-39.

“deeply studied in the writings of the Adepts.”¹²⁶ Danforth was grandson to the renowned Massachusetts minister of the same name. Stiles had served as a Congregational minister in Newport for twenty years, and rounded out his career as President of Yale College from 1778-1795. He was aware of John Winthrop, Jr.’s alchemical experiments, and corresponded often with other New England scientists who were seeking the Philosopher’s Stone. He was a student of the Jewish Kabala and a Hebrew scholar, and also explored mining possibilities in Connecticut. Stiles even wrote a letter to Count Cagliostro, the Masonic innovator who had ingratiated himself into the grandest courts of Europe, seeking alchemical advice.¹²⁷

Though the Hermetic and occult character of eighteenth century America is difficult to sum up, based as it is on individual practitioners and isolated groups who often merged their beliefs with Christianity, scholarly accounts of American occultism reveal a syncretism of beliefs in the eighteenth century, suggesting the existence of networks devoted to the exchange of occult information. In post-Revolutionary America, Freemasonry, elite traditions of magic and alchemy, and the spiritual radicalism of religious exiles who practiced a Christian Hermeticism learned from Boehme, were united by a common belief in the perfectibility and innate divinity of the human being. The present study derives much from the previously mentioned cult of Kelpius, also known as “The Society of the Woman in the Wilderness,” which practiced the Hermetic arts in the first decade of the eighteenth century outside Philadelphia. The spiritual community which arose out of this group, Ephrata, may be fairly termed “the highwater mark of religious hermeticism in the American colonies.”¹²⁸ Yet though these Pennsylvania groups may have been the most organized emissaries of Hermeticism in early America, the tenor of their be-

¹²⁶ Brooke 92.

¹²⁷ Brooke 93.

¹²⁸ Brooke 44.

liefs was not rare, as John Brooke enumerates in his impressive study. Ezra Stiles recorded one instance of the “Immortalism” which developed in the Congregationalist stronghold of Massachusetts: “Nat Smith proceeded to assume & declare himself to be the Most High God & wore a cap with the word GOD inscribed on its front. His Great Chair was a Holy Chair & none but himself must sit in it. He had a number of Adorers & Worshippers, who continue to this day [1793] to believe he was the Great God [sic].”¹²⁹ Though decidedly less sophisticated than Pennsylvania Hermeticism, belief in human divinization was a discernible preoccupation of New England’s occult fringe on the eve of the nineteenth century.

Brooke’s study also covers the burned-over district of New York state, so-called for the waves of religious enthusiasm to which it was prone. The family of Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith (1805-1844), moved to New York from Vermont when Smith was still a child. Though this project is not especially concerned with Mormonism, Smith’s antebellum career yet provides a useful analogue for the writers in my study. In fact, American literary studies would gain much from reading Smith’s *Book of Mormon* (1830) as cultural context for the period, perhaps bridging it to discussions of the Transcendentalist classic, *Nature* (1836), by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Though Smith was a mystic and not a professional writer, as were Brown, Poe, and Lippard, the occult traditions to which he was exposed show the sorts of Hermetic transmissions available in early America; Smith’s career as a mystic seems overdetermined. He was born into a family which practiced ceremonial magic and spirit-raising, used divining rods and seerstones, and constructed astrological sigils and talismans. His father had participated in the treasure-digging community in Vermont, the “mecca” of such activities in the colonies.¹³⁰ Smith supplemented these folk expressions of Hermeticism with a thorough reading of the occult treatises cir-

¹²⁹ Brooke 56.

¹³⁰ Albanese 144-145.

culating in early America, picking up the major tenets of the *Corpus Hermeticum* via the circuitous channels through which they descended. The Masonic affiliations of the Smith family were present in their daily practices, and whole books have been dedicated to what Smith's Mormon vision owes to Freemasonry.¹³¹ Though Smith did not become initiated in Masonry until the 1840s, he was over-familiar with Masonic myths and origin narratives by the time of his visionary period in the 1820s, perhaps through the welter of Masonic exposés frequently reprinted in the nineteenth century.

Smith's *Book of Mormon* is a veritable compendium of the occultism Smith learned in early America. The golden plates which appeared to him in the ground connote the local pursuit of treasure-hunting and the larger legacy of speculative alchemy. The "reformed Egyptian" of the plates' hieroglyphs suggests inheritance from a mythical Egypt and Hermetic meditation on symbols.¹³² Smith's interest in American "lost races" reveals the Masonic hallmark of constructing ancient origins. As Brooke notes in his introduction, "the Mormon concepts of the coequality of matter and spirit ... and of an ultimate goal of human godhood," resemble quite strikingly "the philosophical traditions of alchemy and Hermeticism, drawn from the ancient world and fused with Christianity in the Italian Renaissance."¹³³ These same central tenets of Hermeticism, and the contemporary occult cultures through which they flowed, were available to the American writers Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, and George Lippard. Though each writer invoked different strands of the Hermetic tradition – Brown the possibility of human divinity, Poe the coequality of matter and spirit, and Lippard, à la Smith, the mythologizing of the new

¹³¹ Albanese 137. In addition to Brooke and Quinn, see S.H. Goodwin, *Mormonism and Masonry* (Washington D.C.: Masonic Service Association, 1924); Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); and Michael W. Homer, "'Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry': The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27.3 (1994): 3.

¹³² Albanese 147.

¹³³ Brooke xiii.

nation's occult past – these variant expressions of occult belief were united by a common, philosophical inheritance. As Joseph Smith's visionary career and remarkable legacy attest, the Hermetic worldview could be re-imagined as a wholly American product, and also be religiously productive in nineteenth century America. Antebellum writers gave voice to this “underground river” of occultism which had flowed to America long before the Enlightenment fascination with animal magnetism, and which continued to flow beneath such high cultural, speculative schools as New England Transcendentalism.

Philadelphia Writers

While the present study is not especially concerned with establishing the literary uniqueness of Philadelphia, it is certainly notable that, following my broad inventory of early American literature, I should arrive at three Philadelphia writers as having the most to say about occult themes. Charles Brockden Brown was born and died there, George Lippard was born in neighboring Chester County and died in Philadelphia, and Edgar Allan Poe lived there during his most productive period, from 1838 to 1844. Each writer engages the city and surrounding areas in his fiction to a varying degree: Lippard excessively, Brown to a lesser degree, and Poe barely at all. But of the three, Poe's style is the most fantastic, and he was prone to sketching romantic portraits of exotic locales to which he had never personally traveled; Poe, Sam Otter explains, “does not think through the circumstances of a historical place.”¹³⁴ Yet critics still posit life in Philadelphia as a shaping influence on Poe's highly regarded work of the period, in stories such as “Ligeia”(1838), “William Wilson”(1839), and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”(1841), to name just a few. In a recent exhibition at the Library Company of Philadelphia, entitled “Philadelphia

¹³⁴ Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) 172.

Gothic: Murders, Mysteries, Monsters, and Mayhem” (2008-2009), Poe, Lippard, Brown, and another writer, Robert Montgomery Bird, were identified as the major voices in a regional trend of fiction-writing in the vein of gothic horror. Bird’s 1836 book, *Sheppard Lee*, is an extended narrative of metempsychosis, though one stripped of its spiritual register and Neoplatonic origins.¹³⁵ At the exhibit’s opening reception, Professor Christopher Looby gave a talk which posed an intriguing challenge to literary historians: why did the gothic achieve its fullest American form in writers who lived and worked in Philadelphia?¹³⁶

For Looby, the answer is rooted in paradox. Just as the English gothic illustrated that superstition and irrationalism had not been eradicated by the progress of Enlightenment, so too the American gothic mode gave vent to the problem that the populace could not be governed by reason alone. The paradox that Philadelphia embodied, of a benevolent, orderly city founded on the principles of toleration and brotherly love, yet also one which frequently broke out into ethnic and racial violence, produced the rich, imaginative fiction which connects early America’s most notable gothic writers. The graphic violence which appears in the works of Brown, Poe, and Lippard articulates this tension between an unruly citizenry and Philadelphia’s vaunted position as the birthplace of a rational and democratic nation.

While this is a likely theory, the question of why Philadelphia writers were drawn to the gothic genre immediately invites, for me, the context of the region’s religious roots. As many critics have commented, the English gothic had a grisly, medieval past to which it could turn for imagining Catholic mysticism and folk legends, and visual relics in the landscape like imposing castles peopled by the ghosts of lords and ladies. The United States had no comparable ancient

¹³⁵ Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written By Himself* (1836; New York: New York Review Books, 2008).

¹³⁶ Christopher Looby, “The Paradox of Philadelphia Gothic,” *The Library Company of Philadelphia* (Oct. 29, 2008). Podcast, 12 July 2012. <<http://www.librarycompany.org/collections/exhibits/gothic.htm>>.

markers or mythic past, and so American gothic writers discovered eruptions of supernatural and sadistic excess in contemporary life. In Brown's *Wieland*, religious radicalism leads to mass murder, and in Lippard's *Quaker City*, a decaying, colonial mansion stands in for the labyrinthine horrors of a gothic castle. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), another product of his Philadelphia years, does not include any specifically American elements; the story could take place anywhere, though his heavy use of conventional gothic machinery, like a family crypt in an ancient homestead, connotes a European setting.

If we conceive of the gothic as a negotiation with the irrational past, one which continues to haunt the present in spite of the march of scientific progress, then the religious character of the Pennsylvania pilgrims can help to explain why the gothic developed with a particular force among Philadelphia writers. As Brooke argues, "The peoples of these transplanted Protestant sects, the inheritors of the traditions and texts of the Radical Reformation, constituted a deep reservoir of occult practices and perfectionist doctrines."¹³⁷ Brooke isolates the post-1660 migration of English Quakers and German sectarians to Pennsylvania as creating a groundwork for Hermetic belief in America, a movement to which both Brown and Lippard could trace their ancestors.¹³⁸ Thus, the crisis of paradox which the gothic genre thematizes could stem – for these writers – from the contrast between deep roots in a cultural tradition of heart- and spirit-centered inwardness, and the exigencies of city life in the country's largest urban center. The rather sudden appearance of a two-hundred-year-old wizard in Lippard's urban exposé of contemporary Philadelphia provides a striking example of such occult hauntings. Brown's *Wieland* is con-

¹³⁷ Brooke 39-40.

¹³⁸ Brooke 34. See Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2004) 18, for the emigration of Brown's English Quaker ancestor to the border town of Burlington, New Jersey. Lippard's German and English ancestors sought religious refuge in Germantown and Brandywine. David S. Reynolds, *George Lippard* (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 2.

cerned with the legacy of religious radicalism inherited from Germany; the novel's immigrant patriarch belongs to an exclusive sect of one, and his spiritual ardor is so fierce that he spontaneously combusts. Though Poe is something of an outlier to this tradition, by upbringing and by birth, it's intriguing that Poe composed *Eureka* following his stint in Philadelphia. I link *Eureka's* attempt to harmonize the epistemologies of science and intuition to a tenet of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which runs that all knowledge is undifferentiated because it is all derived equally from God. The difference between "reason" and "intuition" is a false, human distinction, an incursion onto a holistic matrix. The Quakers had always held the same tenet of the equality of reason and revelation as vehicles to truth, and Pennsylvania was a Quaker stronghold.

In 1872, the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier published a narrative poem, "The Pennsylvania Pilgrim," about the German colonial leader, Francis Daniel Pastorius. "The Pilgrims of Plymouth have not lacked historian and poet," Whittier states in his introduction. "Justice has been done to their faith, courage, and self-sacrifice, and to the mighty influence of their endeavors to establish righteousness on the earth. The Quaker pilgrims of Pennsylvania, seeking the same object by different means, have not been equally fortunate ... No Cotton Mather wrote their Magnalia."¹³⁹ Thus Whittier dutifully memorializes the Quaker convert Pastorius, and notes his friendly terms with the Germantown cult of Kelpius, that "maddest of good men," "weird as a wizard" and presiding over mystic arts under cover of the woods. Whittier's note to the poem informs us that Kelpius disposed of the Philosopher's Stone in the Schuylkill River before he died.¹⁴⁰ By the time that Masonic scholar Julius Friedrich Sachse wrote *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* some twenty years later, the tale had grown considerably.

¹³⁹ John Greenleaf Whittier, *The Pennsylvania Pilgrim, and Other Poems* (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1872) xi-xii.

¹⁴⁰ Whittier 33, note on 59.

Kelpius receives word in prayer that he may not ascend bodily into heaven, but must “die like unto all children of Adam.” He then asks his assistant to dispose of a large casket of alchemical material. Kelpius intuits that the assistant has disobeyed his command and chastises him, and after being found out by such occult means, the assistant is sufficiently frightened into carrying out his master’s task: “The MS goes on to state that as the mysterious casket touched the water the ‘Arcanum’ exploded, and for a time flashes of lightning and peals like thunder came from out of the water.”¹⁴¹ Though the accuracy of the story is difficult to assess, it might be said that the Kelpius myth, of the Pietist turned alchemist and Hermetic magus, underlies the antebellum gothic of Philadelphia.¹⁴²

In keeping with the metaphor of an “underground river” of occultism which has sustained Hermetic belief over the centuries, the Philadelphia writers in my study are linked by the trope of a river – or more properly, a creek – which stands in metonymically for the area’s occult history. Peter Kafer has made much of the fact that the temple erected by the German Wieland in Brown’s novel is located in an area where Kelpius and his fellow hermits lived, and there may have been some extant ruins of their buildings remaining in Brown’s day.¹⁴³ Though truthfully Wieland’s temple, an open-air structure distinguished by twelve Tuscan columns and covered by

¹⁴¹ Julius Friedrich Sachse, *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Sachse, 1895) 246-247.

¹⁴² Sachse claims to have found this story in a manuscript by the German Lutheran and missionary to Pennsylvania, Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, in the possession of a library at Halle an der Saale in Germany. According to Sachse, the story was related to Mühlenberg by Daniel Geissler, the assistant to Kelpius named in the story (Sachse 246). While clearly it is a legend, one in keeping with both the group’s actual occult activities and the Germantown folklore which grew up around them, there is always reason to suspect Sachse’s claims (see note 146). However, even though Sachse is not trustworthy, the appearance of a similar story about Kelpius in Whittier’s poem suggests that it was a well-established legend, one which predates the 1872 publication of *The Pennsylvania Pilgrim*. Whittier used the German language articles of Professor Oswald Seidensticker as his source material (Whittier x), and here another obstacle to accurate history presents itself: a great deal of the history of the Pennsylvania Pietists is written in a foreign tongue, out-of-print, and/or residing solely in archives.

¹⁴³ See Kafer 114-121. Note that Sachse’s *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* is Kafer’s source (Kafer 227-228).

a dome, has more in common with Masonic architecture than the pilgrims' rude buildings, Kafer is correct in connecting the area itself to the colony's Pietist history.¹⁴⁴ Wieland builds his home on the Schuylkill; the Kelpius group settled on the Wissahickon Creek in Germantown, a few miles north of where this tributary met the Schuylkill. Today the ancient site of the group also known as "the Chapter of Perfection" is included in the Fairmount Park System of greater Philadelphia. Brown invokes this Pietist site as gothic ruin, symbol of the area's irrational roots and a mysticism with dangerous implications. Though the Wieland children appropriate the temple for a sort of Enlightenment salon following their father's explosive death, the irrational returns to haunt their secluded home in the body of a wayward ventriloquist.

For George Lippard, the Pietist history of the Wissahickon is a fount of supernatural resonance to court, not shun. Lippard's 1847 novella *The Rose of Wissahikon* imagines that an ancient, non-Indian race erected structures of marble there. Lippard wrote *Paul Ardenheim, The Monk of Wissahikon* the following year, and explicitly invokes Pietist ruins on the creek as the eighteenth century site of the Rosicrucian transmission to America; it is also where the occult anointing of future president, George Washington, takes place.¹⁴⁵ In Chapter Three, I extensively consider the claims that latter-day occultists have made for Kelpius's, and Lippard's, Rosicrucianism. Sachse is a particularly problematic historian of the Pennsylvania Pietists and the Wissahickon, since he does not substantiate his facts and has been known to falsify documents, and yet is taken at his word by almost all subsequent historians.¹⁴⁶ Sachse's source on the

¹⁴⁴ Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland: Or, The Transformation* (1798; New York: Prometheus Books, 1997) 16.

¹⁴⁵ Lippard favors the spelling "Wissahikon" while Poe uses "Wissahiccon." Contemporary orthography has settled on "Wissahickon."

¹⁴⁶ Anyone attempting to discover more about Hermetic practice in either the Chapter of Perfection or the Ephrata community to which it led will inevitably confront the dominance of Sachse's 1895 history. Sachse's sources are largely manuscripts in his private possession or information related by distant witnesses on his own

Rosicrucian character of the Wissahickon Pietists is a familiar one – George Lippard.¹⁴⁷ Of particular interest here is an extant stone building, the “Monastery,” where all the occult transmissions in *Paul Ardenheim* occur (see Fig. 2). In *Annals of Philadelphia* (1830), John F. Watson concludes that the structure dates to the era in between the death of Kelpius in 1708 and the founding of Ephrata some twenty years later, when the remaining “Hermits on the Ridge” were transferring their Hermetic wisdom to the next generation of Pennsylvania’s Pietist communitarians. Here Watson describes this relic of the Pietist movement which Brooke calls “the high-water mark of religious hermeticism in the American colonies”:

Intimately connected with the fame and reputation of Germantown is the now frequently visited stream, the Wissahiccon, made attractive by its still native wildness, and rugged, rocky, woody character; there is also there, under the name of the “Monastery of the Wissahiccon,” a three-storied ancient stone building of an oblong square, situated on high ground, near to a woody, romantic dell, through which the Wissahiccon finds its meandering way. About this house, so secluded and little known to the mass of the people, there have been sundry vague and mysterious reports and traditions of its having been once occupied as a monastery. A name, and purpose of use, sufficiently startling, even now, to the sensibility of sundry protestants.¹⁴⁸

authority, leaving the interested scholar scant reference material on which to follow up. One of the few scholars to address this problem is Jeff Bach, who appends the following note about Sachse to his history of Ephrata: “The most important way to begin any bibliography of Ephrata is to warn that most of the secondary literature depends too uncritically on Julius F. Sachse ... His work is not reliable ... Sachse was not above altering material to suit his purposes. All work that depends primarily on Sachse must be approached cautiously.” Bach’s book includes before and after images of an Ephrata illuminated manuscript which was altered by Sachse to appear to have Rosicrucian elements. Jeff Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2003) 197 and 119-120.

¹⁴⁷ Sachse’s Rosicrucian history of the Pennsylvania Pietists leads me to suspect that Lippard, or perhaps Lippard’s Rosicrucian Brotherhood of the Union which was extant at the time of Sachse’s writing, was Sachse’s source. The problem that the object of my study, Lippard, seems to have invented the history which is then read backwards and applied to him, is an interesting one, to be sure. On the one hand, it is a nuisance, but on the other it provides powerful evidence that Lippard’s mythmaking has exerted a shaping influence on the historical narrative of the region.

¹⁴⁸ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants From the Days of the Pilgrim Founders* (Philadelphia: E.L. Carey and A. Hart; New York: G.,C., and H. Carvill, 1830) 42.

The Fairmount Park website claims that the structure was built in 1752 and derived its name from the “monks” (hermits) who congregated there prior to the building’s erection.¹⁴⁹

Edgar Allan Poe’s contribution to Wissahickon lore appears in a gift book of 1844, *The Opal*. Poe’s “Morning on the Wissahiccon” does justice to the rugged beauty and natural features of the area, but it does not strike a supernatural key.¹⁵⁰ Yet Poe was aware of the Wissahickon’s Pietist legacy; the first issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* under Poe’s editorship included a piece called “The Wissahiccon.”¹⁵¹ The unnamed author repeats Watson’s material regarding the “Hermits on the Ridge,” including the detail that the stone Monastery had since been refitted for private residence. The only embellishment to Watson is the writer’s assertion that spirits now haunt the Monastery. Floating along in a skiff on the creek on a sultry day, Poe allows his imagination to “revel in visions of the Wissahiccon of ancient days.”¹⁵² But before these visions can take shape, Poe is disturbed by the appearance of an elk on a high cliff. The massive animal soon reveals itself to be a *pet* of a local family attended by a negro servant! Perhaps this utterly “domestic” deflation of a Romantic reverie articulates Poe’s feelings about the potential of American locales to embody gothic themes. The sublimity of the Wissahickon gorge is ruined by the intrusion of the domestic and familiar.

¹⁴⁹ “The Monastery,” *Fairmount Park*. Web, 10 August 2012. <<http://www.fairmountpark.org/TheMonastery.asp>>. In *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania*, Sachse describes an elaborate building of the Chapter of Perfection which was erected on principles of Rosicrucian numerology. No evidence of this building exists today, although this is the occult temple to which Kafer refers in *Charles Brockden Brown’s Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* (see note 143). Sachse also makes reference to Lippard’s witnessing of the ruins of this now disappeared building, and declares that this Rosicrucian Tabernacle was a different structure than the still-standing stone Monastery (Sachse 71). However, it’s clear to me that Lippard’s *Paul Ardenheim* appeals to this Monastery, by name and description, as its set-piece. Sachse’s account of the Monastery agrees with Watson’s, which theorizes that it was built by the precursors of Ephrata.

¹⁵⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. 3: Tales & Sketches, 1843-1849*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978) 249-256.

¹⁵¹ “The Wissahiccon,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* 2.1 (Dec. 1835): 24-27. See also Otter 172.

¹⁵² Poe, *Collected Works* 254.

While there may be no documentary evidence of George Washington being blessed by Rosicrucians in Germantown, or the Philosopher's Stone exploding in the Schuylkill, the gothic myths engendered by the Wissahickon Pietists fueled the production of gothic literature in Philadelphia. Future studies might look more minutely at Philadelphia's early receptivity to Freemasonry, for example, and other local manifestations of the occult nurtured by Pennsylvania's steeping in the esoteric sympathies of the Radical Reformation. However, in this project I am more concerned with the broader arc of how the occult as religious alternative came to enter American fiction.

The question of whether these Philadelphia writers in the gothic vein knew of each other also arises here. Lippard was certainly aware of Brown, lovingly dedicating *The Quaker City* to Brown's memory.¹⁵³ Poe wrote positively of Brown, his predecessor not only in the American gothic also but in the particular technique of epistemological horror, in his critical reviews.¹⁵⁴ Lippard and Poe were friends, Lippard writing glowing accounts of Poe's work in various periodicals, and Poe providing more tentative, but still affable, encouragement of Lippard's efforts. Lippard even rescued Poe from starvation in the months before his death, taking up a collection from his Philadelphia friends to return the beleaguered Poe to Richmond. "To L[ippard] ... I am indebted for more than life," Poe later wrote his mother-in-law.¹⁵⁵ As exciting as these connections are, each writer in my study owes more to the occult novel tradition in Europe for his themes than to a domestic source, and to that end I look next at transatlantic influence on the

¹⁵³ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 3. Lippard also wrote a warm tribute to Brown, with whom he felt a "deep kinship," in Charles Chauncy Burr's *Nineteenth Century Magazine*. Reynolds, *George Lippard* 16.

¹⁵⁴ For more on specific connections between Poe and Brown, see Boyd Carter, "Poe's Debt to Charles Brockden Brown," *Prairie Schooner* 27.2 (Summer 1953): 190-196.

¹⁵⁵ See David Reynolds, introduction, in Lippard, *The Quaker City* xi-xii, xvii.

American occult novel. Tellingly, the magi created by Lippard and Brown are educated in Europe, and Poe is apparently unable to conceive of magic as a domestic product.

The Occult Novel in Europe

While literary studies often consider the cultural inheritance of writers who are active in the same region, “Occult Americans: Invisible Culture and the Literary Imagination” is concerned with establishing a lineage of writers connected by their participation in an utterly unique religious and philosophical tradition, one dependent in large part on reprises in text for survival. Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, and George Lippard were all literary critics, and all served as magazine editors at various points in their lives. These roles put them in touch not only with American talents, but also with the great flow of popular literature arriving from Great Britain, and with the European authors whose works were being rapidly translated for consumption in American magazines. Each writer in my study of American occult novels took inspiration from an occult writer across the Atlantic, and I detail these lineages below. The legacy of Friedrich Schiller, Thomas Moore, and Edward Bulwer Lytton to American occult fiction illustrates that the occult novel tradition is both transnational and transatlantic.

Friedrich Schiller’s 1789 novel *Der Geisterseher* was the pinnacle of the European Masonic novel, both paradigmatic of the hundreds of Masonic fictions circulating in the eighteenth century and representing its highest philosophical expression. Though the gothic novel is said to have come into being with Horace Walpole’s fantastic tale of medieval Spain, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), critic Harry R. Warfel names Schiller’s novel as equal in importance to the development of the gothic genre.¹⁵⁶ This places *Der Geisterseher*, or *The Ghostseer* as its English

¹⁵⁶ Harry R. Warfel, “Charles Brockden Brown’s German Sources,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 1 (1940): 358.

translators presented it in 1795, at the head of both the gothic and occult novel traditions, and it was also a product of the high cultural milieu of the German Enlightenment. Schiller was a professor of philosophy at Jena from 1789-1799, a legacy which was so important to the history of philosophy that the institution has since renamed itself Friedrich Schiller University. Schiller's presence there attracted Schlegel, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, the widely influential philosophers who established Jena's world renown. In "Charles Brockden Brown's German Sources," Warfel considers Brown's reading habits, tastes, and the contemporary vogue for German horror fiction in the 1790s, as well as circumstances like the largest German-speaking population in the country inhabiting Brown's native Pennsylvania. Brown, as editor, "printed more items of German literary intelligence than any other contemporary American," leading Warfel to conclude quite definitively that Brown read *The Ghostseer* in translation.¹⁵⁷ But others had made the claim for Brown's debt to Schiller long before the twentieth century. British poet John Keats noted that Brown's enigmatic villain in *Wieland* was a "domestic prototype" of Schiller's, and named Brown himself "A strange American scion of the German trunk."¹⁵⁸

My interest here is not to prove that Brown's Illuminatus villains, Ormond and Carwin, were entirely derived from *The Ghostseer*, but rather to posit that the occult speculation which characterizes Schiller's novel was a theme which resonated sufficiently for Brown, America's first gothic writer, to take it up in two major novels and an unfinished prequel to *Wieland* called *Carwin*. For Schiller's ominous "Armenian," dubbed the "Unknown" by one of his associates, is not simply another gothic monster modeled after the Wandering Jew, but a fictional embodiment of the real life magi fascinating Europe at the time, such as Cagliostro and Louis Claude de

¹⁵⁷ Warfel 358-362.

¹⁵⁸ Keats quoted in Warfel, note 1 on 357.

Saint-Martin, as Schiller himself acknowledged.¹⁵⁹ Like Brown's Ormond, Schiller's Armenian is a master of disguise and has no discernible national affiliation or loyalties: "He is nothing of what he appears to be. There are few conditions or countries of which he has not worn the mask. No person knows who he is, whence he comes, or whither he goes ... Here we know him only by the name of the Inscrutable."¹⁶⁰ But it is the epistemological horror which the Armenian wreaks, far more than his enigmatic appearance, which made the deepest impact on Brown's imagination and the gothic tradition as a whole.

The Ghostseer stages philosophical debates surrounding the various psychic and supernatural phenomena which appear to a skeptical Protestant Prince. The Armenian is later revealed to be the agent of much of the uncanny phenomena, even engaging actors in an elaborate tableau to penetrate the Prince's mental reserve; ultimately, the Prince converts to Catholicism to make sense of these visitations from the invisible world. The Armenian, an agent of a Jesuit secret society, has expertly performed his part in the plot. Narrowly rational readings of the novel interpret it to mean that any serious contemplation of ghostly phenomena leads to ruin, as in the Prince's religious (and political) conversion, a theme which we see replicated in Brown's *Wieland* and the title character's religious "transformation." But these readings entirely miss Schiller's larger point; it is not the machinations of the Armenian which unsettle the Prince's mind, but a ghostly apparition which appears to be entirely authentic.¹⁶¹ In other words, the Armenian mixes a little truth in his imposture. Similarly, Brown leaves *Wieland's* ending open to the possibility that a godly or satanic command governs *Wieland's* transformation, and *not* the

¹⁵⁹ Schiller quoted in Abbott 41. Louis Claude de Saint-Martin published his controversial theosophical books under the pseudonym of the "Unknown Philosopher."

¹⁶⁰ Schiller quoted in Stefan Andriopoulos, "Occult Conspiracies: Spirits and Secret Societies in Schiller's *Ghost Seer*," *New German Critique* 35.1 (Spring 2008): 72.

¹⁶¹ "Despite its borrowings from Enlightenment treatises, the narrative thus invokes spiritualist notions in a manner that goes beyond the boundaries of rationalist discourse." Andriopoulos 71.

machinations of Carwin, Brown's "domestic prototype" of the Armenian. The horror generated by the idea that communication between man and spirit may occasionally occur, with no possible rational explanation, is Schiller's legacy to the gothic tradition. I explore the specific use Brown make of this epistemological horror extensively in Chapter One.

One final feature of Schiller's *Ghostseer* which justifies its place at the head of the occult novel tradition is its ominous portrayal of a secret esoteric society. Stefan Andriopoulos suggests that we understand the Armenian not as a type of Cagliostro, but rather "as a literary personification of a corporate association or secret society ... [T]hese agencies have the seemingly supernatural ability to exert their agency at multiple locations, since they are quite literally present at different places at the same time."¹⁶² *The Ghostseer's* resonance with "league fiction" is strengthened by Schiller's close proximity to some of the most controversial secret societies in Europe. Though Schiller never became a Mason, his good friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe enthusiastically joined both the Masonic Order and the Illuminati in the 1780s.¹⁶³ Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Kant's first interpreter and popularizer, was another close associate and dedicated Illuminatus:

Friedrich Schiller knew Reinhold as a colleague at the University of Jena, and he was acquainted with Christoph Martin Wieland and his daughter Sophie, Reinhold's future wife. He met frequently with both and mentions them in his letters. Reinhold's book [*The Hebrew Mysteries, or the Oldest Religious Freemasonry*] inspired Schiller in the writing of both his famous ballad *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais* (1795) and his essay *Die Sendung Moses (The Legation of Moses; 1795)*. For Schiller, the decisive discovery was the identification of the god of the philosophers, that is, the god of reason and enlightenment, with the deepest and most sublime secret of the Egyptian mysteries.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Andriopoulos 73.

¹⁶³ Abbott 43, 64.

¹⁶⁴ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 126.

These connections raise a number of intriguing trajectories, too numerous to explore here, such as the relationship of Schiller and Reinhold to the writer Wieland, for whom Brown named the German immigrant family in his first novel; Christoph Martin Wieland was also a Freemason and the author of a number of league novels.¹⁶⁵ Just a cursory look into the intellectual background of *The Ghostseer* presents us with the seemingly contradictory fusion of unlike elements: Reinhold's Kantian affiliation and Jena prestige did not preclude a passion for ancient mystery rites, and Schiller's borrowings from Reinhold served to yoke Judaism with the Egyptian mysteries. In "The Legation of Moses," Schiller defends the Egyptian mysteries as the foundation of modern society, and also implies that Egyptian priests had access to real magical powers.¹⁶⁶

Brown's occult fictions echo the speculative milieu of Friedrich Schiller, who drew on contemporary fascination and debate about the Illuminati and Freemasonry for his own occult novel, *Der Geisterseher*. Through a somewhat more convoluted lineage, Edgar Allan Poe was also inspired by the legacy of Masonic fiction for the allegorical initiation that occurs in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The French novel *Sethos* (1731), cited earlier as the first Masonic novel, was the template on which Irish poet Thomas Moore constructed his only novel, *The Epicurean* (1827).¹⁶⁷ Poe was a dedicated fan of Thomas Moore throughout his life. In his second book of poetry, published in 1829, Poe inserted the following, troubling footnote to "Fairyl-land": "Plagiarism – see the works of Thomas Moore – passim."¹⁶⁸ "Passim" suggests the pervasive influence Poe thought Moore to have had on his poetry, and indeed, other critics have said

¹⁶⁵ Abbott 11, 45-46.

¹⁶⁶ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* 136-139.

¹⁶⁷ Roberts 17. See also Moore's introduction in *The Epicurean* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, Carey, and Small, 1827) ix.

¹⁶⁸ Poe quoted in Burton R. Pollin, "Light on 'Shadow' and Other Pieces by Poe; Or, More of Thomas Moore," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 68 (1972): 166.

as much.¹⁶⁹ Poe spontaneously quoted several lines of Moore in a somber mood in the months before his death, and left a copy of Moore's *Irish Melodies* with his friend John F. Carter just before his fatal trip to Baltimore.¹⁷⁰ In the intervening decades between this youthful anxiety of influence and fond recollections of Moore's lyrics in his turbulent last days, Poe padded his critical notices with copious references to Moore, almost all of them positive. In an 1841 review of a Dickens novel, Poe praised Moore extravagantly, styling him,

[T]he most skillful literary artist of his day – perhaps of any day – a man who stands in the singular and wonderful predicament of being undervalued on account of the profusion with which he has scattered about him his good things. The brilliancies on any one page of *Lalla Rookh* would have sufficed to establish that very reputation which has been in a great measure self-dimmed by the galaxied lustre of the entire book.¹⁷¹

Poe's enthusiastic reception of Thomas Moore would not have surprised his contemporaries as much as it surprises us today. Though now largely forgotten, perhaps for the reason that his literary efforts were comprised more of style than of substance, Moore was a lion of nineteenth century letters; his fame in poetry was comparable to Scott's fame in novels. From his first book of poetry, *Odes of Anacreon*, whose popularity gave its author the nickname of "Anacreon Moore," to several versions of *Irish Melodies* and the oriental fantasy *Lalla Rookh* (1817), Moore achieved a hit with almost every publication, leading his works to be reprinted more than any other poet's in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷² Moore's next success was a satire of English manners, *The Fudge Family in Paris* (1818), and he soon became notorious as the man whom Byron had appointed as his literary executor. Moore destroyed Byron's controversial

¹⁶⁹ Pollin 166. See also Hoover H. Jordan, "Poe's Debt to Thomas Moore," *PMLA* 63.2 (Jun. 1948): 753-757.

¹⁷⁰ Pollin 172.

¹⁷¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Toronto: Dover, 1999) 36.

¹⁷² Pollin 166.

memoirs, but released a collection of his letters and journals in 1830. Early Americans may have been especially gratified by Moore's "grand tour" of their young country, which Moore put into verse and published in 1806. Charles Brockden Brown reprinted Moore's "Lines written on leaving Philadelphia" in the *Literary Magazine and American Register* in 1806:

Alone by the Schuylkill a wanderer rov'd,
And bright were its flowery banks to his eye;
But far, very far were the friends that he lov'd
And he gazed on its flowery banks with a sigh ...¹⁷³

Though no esoteric river of a specifically American character runs through Moore's sentimental Philadelphia poem, his later novel *The Epicurean*, about initiation into an Egyptian mystery cult, proved to be a powerful influence on Poe. Moore's popular novel went through numerous editions in England and America before being published with Moore's lyric poem, "Alciphron," in 1839, with engravings by Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner.¹⁷⁴ We know that Poe read it because he called *The Epicurean* "a model of fine writing" in 1835.¹⁷⁵ Burton R. Pollin has traced the influence of Moore's novel through major stories like "Masque of the Red Death" and "Some Words With a Mummy," and argues for Poe's early exposure to this occult fantasy via a Philadelphia reprint of 1827.¹⁷⁶ Yet no critic has yet made the explicit case for Poe's debt to *The Epicurean* in his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

¹⁷³ Albert H. Smyth, *The Philadelphia Magazines and Their Contributors 1741-1850* (Philadelphia: Robert M. Lindsay, 1892) 114. The complete poem is eight stanzas in length.

¹⁷⁴ Mark D. Hawthorne, "Thomas Moore's 'The Epicurean': The Anacreontic Poet in Search of Eternity," *Studies in Romanticism* 14.3 (Summer 1975): 268.

¹⁷⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The History of Ireland, by Thomas Moore," *Southern Literary Messenger* 1.10 (Jun. 1835): 595. Poe also adds in this review, "Very truly, Anacreon Moore is, in our opinion, no ordinary man." Poe reviewed "Alciphron," a verse version of *The Epicurean*, in 1840 when it appeared in an edition with the novel and Turner's paintings. However, here I am interested in demonstrating Poe's knowledge of *The Epicurean* prior to composing *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, begun in 1837 and completed in 1838.

¹⁷⁶ Pollin 169. See also Burton R. Pollin, "Poe's 'Some Words With a Mummy' Reconsidered," *ESQ* 60 supplement (1970): 60-67, and Burton R. Pollin, "Poe's 'Shadow' as a Source of 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 6 (1968): 103-106.

Poe's strange novel, with its emphasis on initiation, the mystical propensities of a hollow earth, and Egyptian hieroglyphs, owes much of its imaginative richness to Moore's tale of third century Greece. Here I quote from Marie Roberts' summary of the plot:

Alciphron, a young Epicurean philosopher, is advised to journey to Egypt in search of the secret of immortality. On his arrival, he is instructed to "go unto the shore of the dark Nile, and thou wilt find the eternal life thou seekest." Determined to discover some spell or talisman "to make the spirit within us as deathless as the stars" and to "open to its desires a career like theirs, burning and burning throughout all time," Alciphron visits the Temple of the Moon, where he witnesses the spectacle of nymphs dancing for the goddess Isis. From there he sails to Necropolis, the City of the Dead, where he gazes upon the visage of the god Osiris. Finally, he ventures into a pyramid to undergo the initiation of fire, water, and air.¹⁷⁷

While this synopsis is quite adequate, in truth there is no way to convey effectively the sheer mass of sensual occult imagery with which Moore loads *The Epicurean*. Alciphron is also exposed to the mummies of beautiful queens encased in crystal, a chamber inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs and painted with "the winged globe with a serpent," and a massive ritual hall distinguished by a dome with a "ceiling of azure, studded with stars" and "colossal columns." He must descend deep into the earth for his initiation, and the atmosphere is strangely lighted with "a sort of golden moonlight"; Alciphron describes a blue sky visible in the hollow earth. Upon encountering the pyramids, Alciphron contemplates the legend of the "Table of Emerald, on which the Thrice Great Hermes engraved, before the flood, the secret of alchemy, that gives gold at will."¹⁷⁸

The Epicurean is a veritable compendium of occult themes and images, and the unexpected antebellum appetite for such esoteric fare can provide new context for *Pym*, a novel written by an author whom the reading public associated with the strange and fantastic, and whose

¹⁷⁷ Roberts 17.

¹⁷⁸ Moore 52, 104, 62-65, 75, 38.

style owed something to Moore. There are several thematic commonalities which indicate that Poe borrowed from *The Epicurean* for his American adventure tale, *Pym*. In both, a callow adventurer travels from the secure world of the West into an exoticized, fantastic realm under the earth, where he encounters the portal to unspeakable mysteries. A certain thread of esoteric speculation posited that the entry points to the hollow earth were located at both the equatorial Nile, where *The Epicurean* stages its initiation, and the earth's poles, where Pym is transformed by a godlike presence.¹⁷⁹ Poe even appends a final note to *Pym* which echoes a long note of Moore's in *The Epicurean*. Refuting both eighteenth century theorists and classical authorities, Moore marshals the work of several contemporary writers in order to state, definitively, "that the ancient Egyptians were of the Caucasian race, not of the Ethiopian."¹⁸⁰ Given the context of Poe's knowledge of *The Epicurean* and Moore's conspicuous racial concerns, it's probable that Poe penned his enigmatic note about Egyptian, Arabic, and Ethiopian verbal roots as something of a joke on the nineteenth century mania for determining racial identity. As I argue in Chapter Two, Poe's note raises more questions than it answers, evoking the mystery of Egypt as *mystery* by refusing to clarify *Pym*'s denouement. Though Poe wrote *Pym* a few years before J.M.W. Turner's gorgeous paintings were printed with an 1839 edition of *The Epicurean*, the image of Alciphron's initiation provides a visual index of the nineteenth century occult tropes circulating in the nineteenth century: burning censers, towering columns, hovering angels, scarabs, sphinxes, and serpents all crowd the small frame wherein an initiate enters the mysteries (see Fig. 3).

Turner's teeming painting of "The Chaplet" is also a fitting emblem for the prose style of the last novel I will introduce here, Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*. *Zanoni* enjoys the distinction of being the most famous occult novel ever written, a novel which may be responsible, in

¹⁷⁹ See John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 78-81.

¹⁸⁰ Moore 232-233.

large part, for educating the prodigious Madame Blavatsky in the lore of the invisible world. “No novelist is more closely associated with Rosicrucianism than Edward Bulwer Lytton, who, apart from writing Rosicrucian novels and short stories, is reputed to have been a Brother of the Rosy Cross.”¹⁸¹ While there is no clear evidence that Lytton belonged to such an order, the writer hinted darkly throughout his career of certain occult matters that he was bidden never to discuss, and this suggestive stance fueled a belief in his status as a secret Rosicrucian adept. Madame Blavatsky was certainly convinced of Lytton’s rarefied knowledge; she credited Lytton’s novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, with inspiring her to compose Theosophy’s first massive tome, *Isis Unveiled*. For Blavatsky, Lytton’s authenticity could be verified by the loveliness of his prose in *Zanoni*, which made “his words sound more like the faithful echo of memory than the exuberant outflow of mere imagination.”¹⁸²

Intriguingly, *Zanoni* and *Isis Unveiled* are engaged in much the same plot. Lytton put his plans for the novel rather succinctly in a letter to Benjamin Disraeli: *Zanoni* would illustrate that “the Theurgia or White Magic [of] the Pythagoreans and Platonists [was] transmitted to the Rosicrucians and some other sects of amiable and noble self-delusion.”¹⁸³ In other words, Lytton sought to connect ancient Greek and Egyptian magical practices to both the seventeenth century Rosicrucians and other manifestations of the magical tradition that had arisen over the last two thousand years. Blavatsky shared the same goal of revealing the historical progression of magic, although she went about demonstrating the linkages between the ancient, medieval, and modern expressions of “Theosophy” in a much more offhand and confounding way. One could actually

¹⁸¹ Roberts 156.

¹⁸² Blavatsky quoted in Roberts 159-160.

¹⁸³ Lytton quoted in Leslie Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003) 135.

learn more about the history of magic from the excessive footnotes and learned digressions in Lytton's novel, than from Blavatsky's sibylline and unsubstantiated pronouncements in *Isis Unveiled*. Lytton's precious, ponderous, and utterly Victorian prose is as cluttered with high cultural occult references as Turner's paintings for *The Epicurean* are with occult symbols. Lytton's casual turns to Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Saint-Martin, Cagliostro, Mesmer, and Schiller, as well as to the esoteric systems of Enochian magic, Kabala, alchemy, and astrology, give some sense of the intellectual scope of his endeavor, and also reveal the extent to which the present project overlaps with *Zanoni's* goal.

Zanoni's popularity is difficult to assess. Though the novel has always been highly prized by occultists, Lytton thought of it as something of a failure in that its abstruse subject matter did not pique the public's interest. Yet Lytton's sense of *Zanoni's* poor reception is belied by the fact that it spawned a key, *Zanoni Explained* (1853), by his friend Harriet Martineau, as well as a spoof by the American writer Bret Harte, called "The Dweller of the Threshold."¹⁸⁴ George Lippard estimated that Lytton had "delighted hundreds of thousands with the pure thought of *Zanoni*."¹⁸⁵ The fact that *Zanoni* was serialized almost immediately after its 1842 publication in two American weeklies, *New World* and *Brother Jonathan*, is as much a testament to Lytton's established popularity as to any special quality of *Zanoni's*. In any case, *Zanoni* was also quickly adapted into a play, which was performed at the Chestnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia in the summer of 1842.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Roberts 174.

¹⁸⁵ Lippard quoted in David Reynolds, *George Lippard, Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical 1822-1854* (New York: Lang, 1986) 255.

¹⁸⁶ Carl Ostrowski, "Inside the Temple of Ravoni: George Lippard's Anti Exposé," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 55.1 (2009): 7.

The incredible popularity that the novels of Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) enjoyed in the nineteenth century is probably one reason why *Zanoni* has receded into the background of Lytton criticism; this novel was only a minor hit for the prolific writer, unlike the enormously successful *Last Days of Pompeii*, which went through thirty-two editions between 1834 and 1914.¹⁸⁷ Like Moore's novel *The Epicurean*, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was set in the Mediterranean basin in the early days of Christianity, and both novels feature a bewitching priestess of Isis, a tyrannical Egyptian priest, and a benevolent disciple of the new Christian faith. *The Last Days of Pompeii* also thematizes Schiller's argument about the political function of the Egyptian mysteries. Lytton's writing career spanned almost fifty years, from the 1820s to the 1870s. His modern biographer records 618 items under his authorship at the British Library, and notes that collected editions of his works continued to be published after Lytton's death, numbering in the thirties of volumes.¹⁸⁸ The fact that Lytton is so widely unknown today is a function of the massive shift in popular taste from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. Lytton's dandyism, antiquarianism, aristocratic sympathies, and verbose style perfectly suited Victorian mores, but the democratic notions of Dickens, whose fame has survived the age and with whose career Lytton's may be compared, were more in tune with the political trends of the twentieth century. Lytton was not only a leading Victorian poet and novelist, but also a member of Parliament (albeit one with a strange fondness for astrology and Spiritualism), though today he is remembered chiefly for his "It was a dark and stormy night" excesses in prose.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Lytton's novels on the imagination of George Lippard. While Lippard's fascination with secret societies was also a product of the Anti-Masonic fervor raging in America, as I argue in Chapter Three, from Lytton he learned that

¹⁸⁷ Mitchell xvi.

¹⁸⁸ Mitchell xvi.

the Rosicrucian magus could be a redemptive figure and force in world politics.¹⁸⁹ Lytton's *Zanoni* was not only an immortal magus and recipient of the ancient "Chaldean" magic, but also a secret agent in the French Revolution (Lytton praised the ideals of the French Revolution but disdained the sordid turn of the ensuing Reign of Terror in *Zanoni*). Lippard expands this political role for his own wizard, Ravoni, whom he locates at several world-historical events, including the American Revolution, in *The Quaker City*. Aside from the striking similarity of their names, both *Zanoni* and *Ravoni* are symbolic embodiments of a secret "White Brotherhood" (i.e. the Rosicrucians), and both sacrifice themselves for the love of a woman, *Zanoni* taking *Viola*'s place at the guillotine, and *Ravoni* throwing himself in front of a knife thrust meant for *Mabel*. Such specificity of detail leaves little doubt that Lippard had read *Zanoni* prior to beginning work on *The Quaker City* in 1844, perhaps encountering Lytton's book around the time of the rather sudden introduction of *Ravoni* in the fourth book of his serialized novel. The young writer, whose first sustained fictional effort he described as "done up in Bulwerian style,"¹⁹⁰ left traces of his enthusiasm for Lytton throughout *The Quaker City*: the rake *Lorrimer* reads his sexual victim, *Mary*, by leaving out a copy of Lytton's play, *The Lady of Lyons*, and *Luke Harvey*'s consternating dentist irks him with the small talk, "What's your opinion of Bulwer?"¹⁹¹

Lippard also draws heavily from *Zanoni* in his Rosicrucian novel, *Paul Ardenheim*. In this novel, the protagonist's role as the secret enabler of the American and French Revolutions is made more explicit, and *Paul Ardenheim*'s first attempt to learn the secrets of Rosicrucianism reflects one of the most famous scenes in *Zanoni*. The would-be Rosicrucian in *Zanoni*, *Glyn-*

¹⁸⁹ This is the primary argument of Roberts's chapter on Lytton in *Gothic Immortals* 156-207.

¹⁹⁰ Lippard quoted in Ostrowski 3.

¹⁹¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 126, 196.

don, enters the ritual chamber of his master unprepared, and is accosted by the incorporeal “Dweller of the Threshold” who induces a swoon.¹⁹² Paul Ardenheim, similarly, attempts to enter the Rosicrucian chamber of his father unbidden and is summarily rendered unconscious by the invisible guardians of the space. The shadow Lytton’s *Zanoni* cast on Lippard was long. In one of Lippard’s last fictional efforts, *Adonai: The Pilgrim of Eternity* (1851), the angel Adonai and the ghost of George Washington tour the lamentably fallen state of the democratic ideal in antebellum America.¹⁹³ Adonai also serves as *Zanoni*’s good angel in Lytton’s novel, guiding him toward the highest path, and both Lytton’s and Lippard’s emphasis on these “ascended masters” in their fictions certainly justifies the idea that Blavatsky’s New Age of Theosophy was learned, in part, from the occult novel tradition.

¹⁹² Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Zanoni* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1842) 231.

¹⁹³ George Lippard, *Adonai: The Pilgrim of Eternity*, in *The White Banner* (Philadelphia: Lippard, 1851).

The Triumph of Unreason: Charles Brockden Brown's Occult Moment

Brown's Occult Moment

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) is best-known today for penning a novel about a mischievous “biloquist” (ventriloquist) who inadvertently causes the patriarch, Wieland, to slaughter his entire family, by imitating the voice of God. If this plot summary of the plot were true, it would be easy to characterize Brown as a rationalist, one who criticizes the idea of religious revelation, or direct communication with God, through this Enlightenment retelling of the biblical Abraham’s call to sacrifice his son, Isaac.¹ But Brown is after bigger epistemological game in *Wieland* than the exposure of revelation’s shaky basis. Wieland has long been hungry for a personal experience of God, and is thus a victim of the religious mania that runs in his family. Carwin the biloquist confesses to manipulating Wieland’s circle of family and friends by imitating their voices, but claims that Wieland’s auditory hallucination was none of his doing. Did Wieland really hear the voice of God – or was it the Devil? Was it a psychological or constitutional defect which caused him to murder his family? Or is Carwin simply a liar, who has denied his role in Wieland’s undoing in order to protect himself? Brown offers no easy answers to any of these questions, creating epistemological horror through the unknowability of events and their causes. Carwin successfully fools the novel’s rationalist characters by doctoring the source of their knowledge about the world: sensory evidence. By writing a fictional world in which *all* appearances are suspect, with no relationship to objective reality or things-in-themselves, Brown reflects the radical idealism of Fichte – or perhaps the radical empiricism of Berkeley. This terrifying psychological landscape, in which revelation and rational empiricism

¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; Or, The Transformation* 1798, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).

fail equally as reliable sources, is in fact the proper starting point for my discussion of Brown's follow-up to *Wieland*, *Ormond*.

The nihilism inherent to *Wieland's* worldview might be reframed as Brown's comment on the problem of revelation and the limits of rationality. But what then remains to imbue life with order and meaning? The text's answer seems to be human love. The long-suffering Clara Wieland, sister to the religious maniac, is reunited with her admirer Pleyel at *Wieland's* end (Carwin had previously destroyed their relationship). Yet this muted resolution seems but poor consolation for Clara's ordeal with a murderous, insane brother and her tormenting by Carwin. In the end, *Wieland's* redemptive power lies not in its depiction of heterosexual union, but rather in its meta-epistemology, and synthesis of the dialectic between religious and rational world-views. *Both* religion and rationality lead to ruin if pursued at the expense of the other, and both perspectives in moderation are conducive to the health and stability of society and the individual. Far from being a freak of Brown's particular politics, the question of the proper balance of religion and reason in public life was in fact a major concern of the American Enlightenment. In *Wieland*, Brown presents two "limit cases," or epistemological extremes: Wieland's slavish devotion to God leads to his uncritical adherence to a diabolical command, while Carwin's irreligious attitude authorizes his criminal behavior, permitting him to play God with a hapless family. In *Ormond*, the synthesis of these two extremes is expanded to include the natural child of eighteenth century science and religious speculation: the taboo world of the occult. While *Wieland* denies the possibility of Christian revelation, *Ormond* allows for revelation within the province of occult societies and mystery schools.

While the epistemological ground in *Ormond* is no more solid than it is in *Wieland*, *Ormond* marks a change in that its denial of philosophical certainty acts as a preparatory agent for

the occult initiation of its main character, Constantia. In many ways, *Ormond* can be seen as the rewriting of *Wieland*, and understood as representing a further stage in Brown's shifting attitude toward religion. In both novels, a modest and highly rational woman is plagued by the machinations of a "double-tongued deceiver." In both novels, these deceptive characters (Carwin in *Wieland* and *Ormond's* titular villain) are linked to the notorious Order of the Illuminati. In *Wieland*, Clara, the novel's narrator, is mortified to report that she considered murdering her own brother in self-defense. In *Ormond*, Constantia enacts just such a sensational murder by plunging her pen-knife into Ormond's breast. Brown's repetition of certain themes, such as female honor imperiled by double-talk and the specter of female homicide, argues that *Ormond* carries some of the ideas introduced in *Wieland* to completion.

Not only do *Wieland* and *Ormond* share thematic similarities, Brown's "sequel" to *Wieland*, the unfinished fragment *Carwin*, is an in-depth portrayal of an initiation into a secret order. Brown wrote *Carwin*, more of a prequel than a sequel, in the months following *Wieland's* publication in September, 1798, but ultimately abandoned the piece to work on *Ormond*.² *Carwin* is primarily concerned with Carwin's relationship to his cryptic initiator in the Illuminati, Ludloe. The occult states broached in *Carwin* reappear in Constantia's dialogue with the enigmatic Illuminatus, Ormond. *Carwin* thus offers vital insight into *Ormond* because of its more explicit discussion of the occult, a valuable context for the latter novel which is heavily submerged in impenetrable allegory. Brown wrote *Carwin* at the height of the Illuminati panic in America, and its plot reflects popular depictions of the scheming conspirators in the public imaginary. By re-

² *Ormond* was published in January, 1799. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, eds., *Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness, With Related Texts*, by Charles Brockden Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009) liii. Brown was apparently at work on Carwin's narrative even prior to *Wieland's* publication. *Carwin* was printed serially from 1803-1805 in the *Literary Magazine*, during which time Brown extended the original story begun in 1798. Michael Cody, *Charles Brockden Brown and The Literary Magazine: Cultural Journalism in the Early American Republic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004) 184, note 13.

writing Carwin's tale as a male-to-female initiation in *Ormond*, Brown adds a level of sexual intrigue and dynamism lacking in Carwin's largely philosophical dilemma of whether to commit his life to the Illuminati. Brown also exploits Constantia's sex for comic potential, by overlaying gendered allegories of illumination onto his seduction plot in *Ormond*.

Before turning to *Carwin's* references to the occult as necessary context for *Ormond*, some account of Brown's own religious background is in order. Brown was a product of Quaker Philadelphia, the descendant of several generations of pious men. Yet his own father had a dubious relationship to this community, having been disowned by the local Meeting (or church) before Charles was born; he never attempted to regain his standing.³ The Browns were nevertheless active Quakers, and Brown attended only Quaker schools. The extremely precocious and intellectually curious Brown sought the fellowship of like-minded young men, and this he attained through involvement in a series of literary societies, the most important being the one he joined in New York in his mid-twenties, the Friendly Club. Brown's reading of William Godwin's *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) quickly transformed him into a religious and political radical.⁴ Brown had contemplated writing an anti-Christian novel as early as 1795, and in the era of *Carwin* and *Ormond's* composition (fall of 1798), he enjoyed "many hearty laughing spells" with his friends in the Friendly Club over Thomas Paine's scathing critique of Christianity, *The Age of Reason*.⁵ W.M. Verhoeven characterizes Brown's Friendly Club years in New York as an experimental time and a "blissful period of intellectual liberty," one during which he antagonized the beliefs of his Quaker friend, Joseph Bringham, but also resisted the

³ Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2004) 31.

⁴ See Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, and Mary Shelley* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

⁵ Bryan Waterman, "The Bavarian Illuminati, the Early American Novel, and Histories of the Public Sphere," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62.1 (Jan. 2005): 21, note 25.

full-fledged atheism of his medical student friend, Elihu Hubbard Smith.⁶ Verhoeven concludes that Brown's beliefs can be described as Deist during this period, and perhaps the best evidence we have that Brown rejected the idea of an interventionist God appears in his novel, *Wieland*: the prospect of communication with God is rendered not only impossible, but also treated as a farce with dangerous implications.

Shortly after *Wieland* was printed in 1798, Brown and his friend Elihu Hubbard Smith both contracted yellow fever. Brown delineates the horrors of this disease in two of his novels, *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn* (1799). But while Brown recovered, Smith did not; Brown's young peer from Connecticut, who had played the role of mentor to the Philadelphia writer, succumbed to yellow fever in September of 1798. Many of Brown's biographers attribute Brown's incredible literary outpouring in 1799 (comprising three complete novels, no less) to the trauma and anxiety occasioned by Smith's death.⁷ The Yale-educated Smith showed more early promise than Brown, an aspiring writer who had made the unconventional choice to abandon a law apprenticeship in order to give full scope to his literary vision. Yet now Smith was gone and Brown survived, and the fact of Smith's atheism must have surely complicated Brown's feelings around the inevitable religious questions which such intimate contact with mortality prompts. According to Caleb Crain, Brown "defected from deism" in the aftermath of Smith's death.⁸

⁶ W.M. Verhoeven, "'This blissful period of intellectual liberty': Transatlantic Radicalism and Enlightened Conservatism in Brown's Early Writings," *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic*, ed. Philip Barnard, Mark L. Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 2004) 25-26.

⁷ Mary Chapman, introduction, *Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness*, by Charles Brockden Brown (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002) 20.

⁸ Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001) 136.

By 1803, when his novel-writing days were behind him and he had taken up the editorship of *The Literary Magazine*, Brown would endorse Christianity as one of the pillars of his new endeavor:

In an age like this, when the foundations of religion and morality have been so boldly attacked, it seems necessary in announcing a work of this nature, to be particularly explicit as to the path which the editor means to pursue. He, therefore, avows himself to be, without equivocation or reserve, the ardent friend and willing champion of the Christian religion. Christian piety he reveres as the highest excellence of human beings, and the amplest reward he can seek, for his labour, is the consciousness of having, in some degree however inconsiderable, contributed to recommend the practice of religious duties.⁹

This is a far cry from the Brown who openly attacked revealed religion in *Wieland*, and the earlier Brown is roundly dismissed by the Brown of 1803: “I should enjoy a larger share of my own respect, at the present moment, if nothing had ever flowed from my pen, the production of which could be traced to me.”¹⁰ While the passage from which this selection is excerpted does not expound upon the source of Brown’s shame, the writer concedes to “tak[ing] much blame to myself for something which I have written”; the anti-Christian sentiment of *Wieland* makes it a likely candidate for inspiring religious guilt. While we cannot know for sure if Brown’s newfound religious allegiance was merely the pose of convention, domestic developments point to a life in which Christianity played a prominent role: in 1804 Brown married Elizabeth Linn, whose father and brother were both Presbyterian ministers.¹¹ Thus, the arc of Brown’s religious life carried him from the mystical, revelation-focused faith of his family’s Quakerism, through a period of experimentation which included the intellectual liberty of Deism, and finally to the staid tradition of conventional Protestantism.

⁹ Brown quoted in Cody 26.

¹⁰ Brown quoted in Cody 28.

¹¹ Cody 26.

Brown's occult fictions, *Carwin* and *Ormond*, date to a period during which he was actively rebelling against the faith of his family, and experimenting with progressive religions such as Deism. In 1798, the Illuminati was a hot topic of conversation in America, for reasons that will be examined shortly. The most logical avenue for Brown's exposure to occult beliefs was anti-Illuminati propaganda which was designed to engender fear about occult practice. Just as George Lippard's entrée into the occult most likely originated with Anti-Masonic propaganda in the Jacksonian era, so anti-Illuminati texts were chock full of the names of mystics, secret societies, obscure practices, and dreadful rites, comprising a veritable handbook for the seeker who desired further information. While Brown's dense and layered deployment of the occult does not derive from one particular source in *Ormond*, the novel's prevailing theme is initiation, and therefore the Illuminati is one of *Ormond's* most important contexts. *Ormond* reveals that Brown delved deeper into the occult than the reading of inflammatory tracts, but how Brown came across the doctrine of Martinism, to use one example, or which of many possible routes led him to understand Sophia as a mystical concept, to use another, are questions which are more difficult to answer. While this chapter does not have much investment in asserting that Brown subscribed to occult belief, it is highly invested in demonstrating that Brown was knowledgeable enough in occult principles to give them sophisticated treatment in *Ormond*. Specifically, Brown is fascinated by the incommunicability of revelation, and by the challenge of describing an experience which resists representation in language. It is certainly possible that Brown experimented with occult belief during his epoch of intellectual exploration, and the recent death of his friend might have made him receptive, or susceptible, to strange doctrines of the spirit. But whether Brown's use of the occult is strictly intellectual or actually reflects his beliefs, *Ormond* represents Brown's most sustained imaginative treatment of the invisible world – his occult moment.

Carwin and the Order of the Illuminati

Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830), a law professor in the Bavarian city of Ingolstadt, concocted the Order of Illuminati out of an enthusiasm for ancient mystery schools and a conviction that the progress of human reason could only proceed unfettered within the confines of a secret order. He launched the Illuminati on May 1, 1776, but it would not gain momentum until it attracted the membership of Baron Knigge, a wealthy Rosicrucian and Freemason, who rewrote the Illuminati's rituals and successfully promoted the order within Masonic networks. Following this revamping in 1780, the Illuminati spread rapidly into other countries and its membership swelled to the thousands with men of all classes. Eventually it counted as members a goodly amount of Princes and Dukes, in addition to the poet Goethe. But in 1784, Carl Theodore, Elector of Bavaria, began an aggressive campaign against the order which rendered it moribund within a few years.¹²

The story of how a defunct secret order came to threaten the political body of the United States ten years after its demise provides a humorous example of transatlantic reading networks at work within glacial communication systems. Yet the Illuminati's power to terrify was augmented exponentially following Robespierre's Reign of Terror in the early 1790s. Suddenly an order calling itself "rational" and interested in the transformation of government around the world looked suspiciously like France, whose rationalist rhetoric had degenerated into a program of wanton bloodshed. The XYZ Affair of 1797-1798 also fanned the fire of anti-French feeling in America. That the original Illuminati had been German hardly mattered – lawless Jacobinism had infiltrated European Freemasonry as a body, and this international network of secret societies menaced the security of the United States. So went the fiction which contained, it turns out,

¹² This history is taken from Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York: Columbia UP, 1918) 146-183.

a modicum of truth, especially concerning the overlap between political and occult societies in Europe. Two writers were responsible for fomenting the idea of the Illuminati as an active political threat in the 1790s: Abbé Barruel, a French Jesuit, and John Robison, a Scottish professor. Elihu Hubbard Smith was aware of the supposed conspiracy as early as the first day of 1798, when he wrote an extensive review of Barruel's claims, a portion of which had been translated and published in the British *Monthly Review*.¹³ It was only natural that Smith would take up this interesting discussion with his closest friend and the man who shared his apartment, Charles Brockden Brown.

The Friendly Club's reception of the Illuminati controversy is actually extraordinarily well-documented. We know, for example, that Smith was reading Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* throughout the summer of 1798.¹⁴ William Dunlap, an early pioneer of the American stage and Brown's first biographer, noted in *his* journal that he had leafed through Robison's book in a shop before meeting Brown for tea, and he reported in September of 1798 that Brown had "taken up the schemes of the Illuminati" for *Wieland*'s sequel.¹⁵ The Friendly Club was also closely connected to the conservative dissemination of the Illuminati scare which was put into the service of Federalist propaganda. Jedediah Morse, a young clergyman from Massachusetts, thundered against the Illuminati and secretive Masonic groups in a sermon he gave on May 9, 1798. Elihu Smith had already had several business dealings with Morse, and received one of the first copies of Morse's printed sermon. Smith was also good friends with the Dwight brothers, Timothy and Theodore. The elder, Timothy, was a distinguished poet and the president of Yale College; both brothers gave anti-Illuminati orations on July 4, 1798, which were also

¹³ Waterman, "Bavarian Illuminati" 18.

¹⁴ Waterman, "Bavarian Illuminati" 19.

¹⁵ Waterman, "Bavarian Illuminati" 18, 19.

quickly put into print.¹⁶ William Dunlap was brother-in-law to the Dwights through his wife. Yet despite these ties of family and friendship, the Friendly Club was decidedly skeptical of the hubbub, of Barruel and Robison's claims, and of the Christian conservatism which motivated the American attack on secret societies. Bryan Waterman is quick to point out that Brown's proximity to the anti-Illuminati campaign, and his "taking up" of their schemes for *Carwin*, do not equate to sympathy with the reactionary politics of Morse and the Dwight brothers.

Brown's critics have often invoked the Illuminati controversy as context, in order to represent Ormond and Carwin as symbols of foreign radicalism and the threat it poses to American innocence, a force embodied in the virginal bodies of his upright, female heroines.¹⁷ Yet no critics have considered that Brown, via fiction, explores the religious threat of occultism which so upset the Christian pundits who blasted the Illuminati; critical debates have centered on Brown's politics, and not on his religious sympathies. Yet both *Carwin* and *Ormond* are light in political intrigue, and heavy in depictions of the cryptic communication which passes between the occult initiate and his or her mentor. Robison's book, the full name of which is *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*, provides an extremely detailed portrayal of how a novice in the Illuminati is selected and cultivated. Robison derived his information from actual Illuminati manuals and correspondence, which were seized by the Bavarian government and exposed in the 1780s. Portions of Robison's text, particularly those which explain how to initiate a

¹⁶ Waterman, "Bavarian Illuminati" 18.

¹⁷ See, for example, Robert S. Levine, "Villainy and the Fear of Conspiracy in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," *Early American Literature* 15.2 (Fall 1980): "Constantia, like America, stands alone, exposed, excruciatingly vulnerable to incurring reality"(136). See also Michael Davitt Bell, "'The Double-Tongued Deceiver': Sincerity and Duplicity in the Novels of Charles Brockden Brown," *Early American Literature* 9.2 (Fall 1974): He describes Ormond as, "of all Brown's characters, the most sexually aggressive and the most clearly linked to the ideals and excesses of the French Revolution"(149).

novice without speaking the order's name or revealing its agenda, clearly inspired large sections of Brown's *Carwin*. The following passage may serve as example:

The Novice and his Mentor are known only to each other ...

Enlightening the understanding, and the rooting out of prejudices, are pointed out to him as the principal tasks of his noviciate. The knowledge of himself is considered as preparatory to all other knowledge. To disclose to him, by means of the calm and unbiased observation of his instructor, what is his own character, his most vulnerable side, either in respect of temper, passions, or prepossessions, is therefore the most essential service that can be done him. For this purpose there is required of him some account of his own conduct on occasions where he doubted of its propriety; some account of his friendships, of his differences of opinion, and of his conduct on such occasions. From such relations the Superior learns his manner of thinking and judging, and those propensities which require his chief attention [sic].¹⁸

The Superior in the Illuminati must thoroughly know his candidate's personal weaknesses and predilections before taking him deeper into the fold, a process of examination which can take up to several years.¹⁹ In *Carwin*, the would-be initiate stalls out in his progress because of his inability to confess his biloquial talent to his Superior, Ludloe.

Carwin, a rude but precocious farm boy from Pennsylvania, first attracts the attention of Ludloe after a public performance of his ventriloquism. The crowd is convinced that a spiritual voice has spoken to them, and Carwin does not reveal his agency in throwing his voice. Ludloe's patronage of Carwin following this incident implies that Ludloe not only knows of Carwin's special talent, but also hopes to refine its possessor for use in the Illuminati Order. Ludloe sets up Carwin in a private wing of his home in Ireland, and then sends him to Spain as part of his education; this time abroad also tests Carwin's ability to blend into a foreign culture. The word "Illuminati" is never spoken between them, and when questioning his patronage Carwin is

¹⁸ John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (New York: George Forman, 1798) 96-97.

¹⁹ Robison 98.

told only that, “A number of persons are leagued together for an end of some moment.”²⁰

Though Carwin desires more information, Ludloe cannot proceed further until Carwin has confessed the entirety of his history to Ludloe:

For [initiation], it was necessary, he said, that I should be informed of a second obligation, which every candidate must assume. Before any one could be deemed qualified, he must be thoroughly known to his associates. For this end, he must determine to disclose every fact in his history, and every secret of his heart. I must begin with making these confessions, with regard to my past life, to Ludloe, and must continue to communicate, at stated seasons, every new thought, and every new occurrence, to him. This confidence was to be absolutely limitless: no exceptions were to be admitted, and no reserves were to be practised; and the same penalty attended the infraction of this rule as the former. Means would be employed, by which the slightest deviation, in either case, would be detected, and the deathful consequence would follow with instant and inevitable expedition.²¹

Carwin has already pledged a vow of eternal secrecy to the order, but as for the vow of full disclosure to his Superior, he cannot believe any man could have knowledge of his ventriloquism except himself. Though Ludloe frequently reminds Carwin of the “deathful consequence” of keeping secrets from his Superior, Carwin persists in tempting Ludloe to prove his omniscience of Carwin’s past exploits and secret talent. The question of *how* the Illuminati obtains their knowledge of all things underlies the tedious conversations which pass between Ludloe and his novice, and the unspoken answer is the order’s access to occult means of communication.

But before any hint of the Illuminati’s supernatural power of surveillance appears in the text, Brown has already signaled to the reader that Carwin’s own talent of ventriloquism is something of an occult art. As Leigh Eric Schmidt reminds us, “From late antiquity through the early decades of the eighteenth century, ventriloquism was deeply embedded in Christian discourses

²⁰ Charles Brockden Brown, *Carwin, The Biloquist, and Other American Tales and Pieces* (London: Henry Colburn, 1822) 83.

²¹ Brown, *Carwin* 91-92.

about demon possession, necromancy, and pagan idolatry.”²² Early in *Carwin*, the protagonist trains a dog to speak. The dog’s name, tellingly, is Damon, as in daemon/demon, and Brown here alludes to the tradition of Western demonology in which spirits or demons are raised and forced to do the conjurer’s bidding. In Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, this practice is referred to as “ghost-raising” and is said to be one of the special arts of the Illuminati.²³ The dog as animal servant is a fitting emblem of demonology, and Brown also includes another reference to the occult manipulation of invisible entities: at a garden party which Carwin attends, the discussion turns to “Shakespeare’s delineations of aerial beings.”²⁴ Carwin decides to have a little fun by throwing his voice and impersonating one of the aerial creatures under debate. The crowd is treated to a song from *The Tempest*, easily recognized as the melody “which Ariel is made to sing when finally absolved from the service of the wizard.”²⁵ As Brown’s second reference to demonic slavery, Ariel’s control by Prospero can hardly be of incidental import in *Carwin*. Ariel serves as Prospero’s invisible spy in *The Tempest*, and this occult means of surveillance is in fact the only clue offered by the text for solving the mystery of the Illuminati’s omniscience.

Carwin ends with the protagonist’s contemplation of Ludloe’s first proof of his uncanny ability to spy on him. While in Spain, Carwin enters into a dalliance with a young girl, and both have compelling reasons to conduct the affair in utter privacy. Carwin is shocked to hear of Ludloe’s detailed knowledge of the event, and Ludloe adds the ominous information that the girl was killed immediately following Carwin’s contact with her. Ludloe advises Carwin to “Recall all the incidents of that drama, and labour to conceive the means by which my sagacity has been

²² Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) 138.

²³ Robison 57, 62.

²⁴ Brown, *Carwin* 34.

²⁵ Brown, *Carwin* 35.

able to reach events that took place so far off, and under so deep a covering.”²⁶ As the fragment ends, Carwin is still “vainly endeavor[ing] to conjecture”²⁷ Ludloe’s means. Perversely, demonology provides the only logical explanation for how Ludloe can spy on Carwin from the distance of a far-off country, and this solution may have appeared more readily to Brown’s contemporaries – ablaze with sensational tales of the Illuminati’s occult powers – than to his latter-day critics. Any solution which does *not* involve the occult ventures into territory as fantastical as remote spying via demon; perhaps an international network of Illuminati spies exists, and perhaps they employ cutting-edge, technological wizardry in their powers of disguise and invisibility. Here Brown predicts Edgar Allan Poe’s marvelous detective tales, in which the ostensibly rational solutions given by Monsieur Dupin are more comprehensible as acts of intuition or ESP. This murky meeting-point, at which the rational and spiritual worlds begin to resemble one another, is the province of the occult, and Brown encourages such confusion. He even has Carwin worry about being under “suspicion of having entered into compact with a daemon” if he confesses his biloquational ability,²⁸ as a way of illustrating that what was considered supernatural only a generation ago has now been safely contained by empirical science. Ultimately, Enlightenment did not eliminate confusion and superstition, but only shifted the terrain: “Brown ... still played on both sides of the fence as he exposed the inner contradictions of the new learning ... In this juggling of the Enlightenment and magic, reason easily slipped into humbug.”²⁹

Is Carwin’s manipulation of innocent people with his ventriloquism some sort of Enlightenment analogue for the medieval practice of demon raising? Does Carwin’s ventriloquism

²⁶ Brown, *Carwin* 151-152.

²⁷ Brown, *Carwin* 155.

²⁸ Brown, *Carwin* 95.

²⁹ Schmidt 150-151.

function as tacit evidence of humankind's ability to develop Hermetic superpowers, or, to borrow a phrase of Ludloe, show that man is "capable of endless improvement"?³⁰ Are superpowers like invisibility, immortality, ESP, and bilocation (the ability to be in two places at once, not to be confused with Carwin's biloquialism) the real source of the Illuminati's omniscience, instead of the demonology alluded to in the text? Brown's unfinished text does not answer any of these questions, but supernatural surveillance is again tackled in *Ormond*; the novel's subtitle is *The Secret Witness*. The mystery of why Brown abandoned *Carwin* to take up a similar plot of occult initiation in *Ormond* also remains. *Carwin* is more coherent, more topically relevant, and more accessible than *Ormond* – and perhaps therein lies the reason that Brown abandoned the project for one with more allegorical complexity. Just as Ludloe cannot name the occult rites with which he hopes to initiate Carwin, so Brown cannot bring himself to offer authorial commentary on the occult, an unavoidable necessity had he continued in the same vein with *Carwin*. In *Ormond*, the unspeakability of revelation is evocatively woven into the novel's form in a way that is both more compelling, and more cryptic, than Brown's style in *Carwin*. But grasping *Ormond's* particular power and appeal requires us to rethink our own assumptions about its Enlightenment-era context, and to consider the dual application of the related term, illumination.

Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment

In this chapter, I perform a reading of Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* as an allegory of occult initiation. While much textual evidence supports this idea, my reading is greatly strengthened by a reconsideration of Brown's milieu and the surprising prevalence of occult discourse in the early years of the Republic, appearing across a variety of sources. While the Illuminati panic in America, as it has come to be known, has been attributed to the reactionary fears

³⁰ Brown, *Carwin* 72.

of the populace and not to any actual threat, Masonic societies in Europe were, in fact, engaging in controversial rites borrowed from ancient mystery traditions such as speculative alchemy and Hermeticism. That the danger represented by the Illuminati was as much religious as it was political is a fact which has been elided by historians. When Brown was a teenager, the Italian occultist Cagliostro achieved international fame for his role in an attempted swindle of Marie Antoinette, and though he escaped from the infamous “affair of the necklace” relatively unscathed, he was apprehended by the Roman Inquisition in 1789 and died in jail in 1795. Goethe and Schiller were quick to put their fictional interpretations of the enigmatic Cagliostro into print,³¹ and it is doubtful that the erudite Brown could have avoided knowledge of the legendary occultist. Other continental trends in occultism, such as the vogue for Martinism in France, provide almost uncanny context for Brown’s treatment of the occult in *Ormond*, and yet homegrown mystics are an equally likely source for Brown’s exposure to alchemical-Hermetic ideas. A mere fifty miles outside Brown’s Philadelphia, the members of Conrad Beissel’s Ephrata community were performing a spiritual deconstruction of gender in preparation for union with Sophia, or divine wisdom. While I explore all of these diverse manifestations of the occult and Brown’s recourse to them over the length of this chapter, my present object is to position occult speculation in general within the philosophical heart of the Age of Enlightenment.

In reductive narratives of human history, the Age of Enlightenment is characterized by the primacy of reason and reason alone, and yet Enlightenment-era thinkers were far more wary of inflating this new god than we are today. In his celebrated autobiography, American statesman Benjamin Franklin includes a humorous episode about his youthful stint with vegetarianism. Ever imbued with high ideals, Franklin swears off animal flesh at an early age and even consid-

³¹ Serialization of Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher* began in 1787, and Goethe’s *Der Gross-Cophta* appeared in 1791. Scott Abbott, *Fictions of Freemasonry: Freemasonry and the German Novel* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991) 41, 65.

ers fishing a “kind of unprovok’d Murder.” Yet while waiting for a wind to carry them from Boston, the crew members of a becalmed ship catch and fry some cod, and Franklin rationalizes that since the fish eat one another, he may as well eat them. This dubious insight appears, tellingly, only after the cod are presented hot out of the frying pan, smelling “admirably well.” “So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*,” Franklin quips, “since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do.”³²

Franklin’s canny critique of the vaunted faculty of human reason illustrates that even the proponents of the new rationalism were keenly aware of its limits. Though he is the paragon of Enlightenment culture in America, Franklin peppers his *Autobiography* with instances of the folly produced by the over-valuation of reason, another example being the ambitious but unattainable program of virtue he writes for himself. In this episode Franklin suggests that many ideas “pretend[ing] to be Reason” reveal themselves to be mere “Foppery in Morals,” leading him to conclude that “*a speckled Ax was best*,” i.e. living with one’s flaws is preferable to frustrating and fruitless attempts at perfection.³³

Franklin’s concessions to expediency undercut the power of reason to act as a panacea against the baser manifestations of human behavior. His pragmatism here is not unique and in fact characterized the philosophical position of social factions forging a Counter-Enlightenment in America and abroad. These religious and politically conservative groups argued that only the spiritual and emotional force of Christianity could successfully combat vice, and that reason alone was insufficient to govern human impulses. Historian Darrin M. McMahon finds that the Christian Counter-Enlightenment was more copious and cohesive in its publications than any

³² Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Penguin, 1986) 39.

³³ Franklin 99.

Deistical movement, lending credence to his claim that “the Counter-Enlightenment invented the Enlightenment.”³⁴ While clearly the eighteenth century oversaw an Enlightenment in the form of an identifiable trend toward rational empiricism among scientists and philosophers, McMahon encourages us to see the stereotype of the rabid Jacobin as, in part, the creation of traditional religious groups threatened by the onset of secularism. Reason may have been briefly celebrated as the motive power behind the French Revolution, but the Reign of Terror which followed on this triumph offered up primary evidence of the unreasonable extremes to which unchecked reason might lead. Even before the French Revolution, proponents of the Enlightenment had not promoted reason to the exclusion of all other faculties, but rather speculated upon its proper role in human life and human society:

If there was a single central problem that preoccupied German philosophers in the 1790s, then it was the same problem that had plagued them in the 1780s, and indeed throughout most of the eighteenth century: the authority of reason. What are the limits of reason? Does it have the power to justify our basic moral, religious, political, and commonsense beliefs? Or does it end in complete skepticism and nihilism?³⁵

Understanding the phenomena of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment as a dialectic in the quest for knowledge,³⁶ as opposed to a war between polarized ideologies, helps to frame the argument that the occult functioned as a median space where these two claims to knowledge could meet and effect a synthesis.

Occult philosophers in the eighteenth century sought to balance the best of Enlightenment rationalist thought with the intuitive wisdom of the human heart, and to salvage the immediate knowledge provided by revelation from the confines of Christian dogma. In this way they could

³⁴ Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 32.

³⁵ Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 2.

³⁶ McMahon 202.

assert a total wisdom based on the integration of various avenues to knowledge, an epistemological aggregate that was yet more than the sum of its parts. Franklin's vacillating vegetarianism still serves as a salient example of reason's failure to act as a transcendent guide for human conduct, since today in the West individuals on either side of the vegetarian question can produce equally compelling justifications for their positions. Reason's capacity to support diametrically opposed truths undermines its utility as a governing principal and furthermore reveals its instability as a concept easily distinguishable from revelation. Franklin winks at this problem in his *Autobiography* with the vegetarian episode, but other Enlightenment thinkers went further toward dismantling the imprudent exaltation of a faculty always conditioned by the culture through which it is defined.

The German philosopher and Pietist, Johann Georg Hamann, is perhaps most famous for immediately responding to Kant's first *Critique* with a "Metacritique of the Purism of Reason," in which he chastises Kant for neglecting language, "or rather, [Kant's] attempt to rid reason of its debt to language in all its forms ... For Hamann, there is no reason before language."³⁷ Hamann anticipates the insights of twentieth century post-structuralists by shifting the terrain of philosophy from transcendental forms to semantics: just what exactly does the term "reason" describe, and how can it be distinguished from other modes of knowledge? The fact that Hamann's very modern-seeming, linguistic metacritique should appear so close on the heels of Kant's momentous publication in 1781 upsets a linear model of philosophical history, yet such precocious insights are not rare when we broaden the definition, and sample, of intellectual history. In his remarkable text, *The Occult Mind*, Christopher Leirich demonstrates that the occult "continually manifests similar impulses and constructions to those we associate with mainstream intellectual

³⁷ Diane Morgan, *Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened* (London: Routledge, 2000) 209.

trajectories, particularly those loosely called ‘theoretical.’” Reviewing several occult thinkers from antiquity through the Enlightenment era, Lehrich reveals that occult thought often bears striking resemblance, in both its methodology and conclusions, to the twentieth century system developed by Derrida.³⁸ Hamann’s earlier attempt to dismantle, or deconstruct, a loaded term like reason provides evidence of a Counter-Enlightenment that worked to temper the encroachment of rational thought upon too vast an epistemological sphere.

Isaiah Berlin names Hamann as a pivotal figure of the German Counter-Enlightenment, while Darrin McMahon identifies less sophisticated, religious reactionaries as the agents of a Counter-Enlightenment in France.³⁹ What both writers have in common is a desire to qualify the latter-day construction of eighteenth century Enlightenment as an unchallenged and impregnable fortress of reason. Then as now, Enlightenment had its detractors, and then as now its truth-claims and validity were debated alongside competing epistemologies, and negotiated within both public sphere and private hearts. In an article about the eighteenth century occultist Saint-Martin, from whom the term “Martinism” derives, David Bates attempts to explain Saint-Martin’s appeal by depicting a culture in which reason and mysticism could still inform one another:

It is of course only within the “rationalist” readings of Enlightenment thought that the idea of an irrational or speculative dark side can be elaborated. It may be possible here to redefine the relation between the “mystery” at the heart of mysticism and the pursuit of truth that marked all Enlightenment thought; it was not simply a matter of the sensationalists rejecting metaphysics as error and the mystics rejecting the physical world as deception. The boundary was never wholly effaced, and

³⁸ Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007)182, 177.

³⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1979).

attention to error and illusion can help elucidate eighteenth-century conceptualizations of this border zone in which humanity wanders.⁴⁰

Ultimately, Enlightenment, as a quest for truth, comprised spiritual illumination along with rational inquiry, although historians have tended to redact this dialectic into an overly simplistic pursuit of an entity called “reason.” That eighteenth century Enlightenment was not at all simple is crystallized in a brief episode of 1778 involving two of its chief representatives. In April of that year, Benjamin Franklin assisted in the initiation of the aging, arch-rationalist Voltaire into the French Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters.⁴¹ Our understanding of both of these men as highly rational beings might lead us to assume that any order they joined was equally so, and yet Freemasonry is by and large a speculative organization which seeks an ultimate truth beyond the scope of human reason. Franklin and Voltaire might have participated in more rational modes of Enlightenment than did the mystic Saint-Martin, but we gain more insight into this period if we think of their common goal of illumination as spanning a continuum between reason and faith.

Freemasonry is no incidental example of the Enlightenment’s irrational shadow or unrecovered sympathy with mysticism. Even though Freemasonry purported to uphold a rational and scientific worldview, it was also the eighteenth century repository for the Western occult tradition. Just as Hermeticism had carefully traversed the dark ages in the guise of Christian mysticism or an alchemy stripped of speculative import, so occult ideas circulated in the eighteenth century within private brotherhoods affecting a merely social agenda. In his history, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*, John L. Brooke theorizes that these speculative fraternal organizations were the primary channel of occult transmission to the New

⁴⁰ David Bates, “The Mystery of Truth: Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin’s Enlightened Mysticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61.4 (Oct. 2000): 637.

⁴¹ S. Brent Morris, R. William Weisberger, Wallace McLeod, eds., *Freemasonry on Both Sides of the Atlantic: Essays Concerning the Craft in the British Isles, Europe, the United States, and Mexico* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) 316-317.

World: “a revitalized hermeticism was flowing from an increasingly dense network of Masonic orders and from a broader revival of the occult that was beginning to shape the Romantic and Gothic sensibility”⁴² of the century to follow. While much of this chapter works against the notion of nineteenth century occult revival by recovering the discourse of Enlightenment-era occultism, there is some truth to the familiar narrative that disenchantment with the psycho-spiritual aridity of rationalism engendered the Romantic revival of the occult:

Far from unveiling the most hidden secrets, the so boldly inaugurated conquest of the universe had ended in drab ideological schemes whose contrast to reality was becoming ever more evident. Now the mystically inclined remembered that before the reign of rationalism there had already been many attempts to grasp the deepest cosmic mystery and to open to the soul, which once had dwelt with it but then had strayed, a way of return. This way, or rather these ways, had always been irrational and suprarational; they had been called magical, theosophical, or mystical; and their rediscovery was needed now if what the Enlightenment had been unable to give was to be attained after all.⁴³

Brown’s novels all date to the turn of the eighteenth century, the arbitrary dividing line between the eras of rationalism and Romanticism, and they can be usefully read as articulating the inner contradictions of Enlightenment, which ultimately gave way to the Romantic redemption of the soul.

A Critical History of Ormond

America’s first professional novelist was also a gothic one. Charles Brockden Brown’s penchant for highlighting philosophical and moral gray areas generates the epistemological horror for which his novels are known, and his equivocal writing style leaves readers in the dark as to whether his intent is benevolently didactic or chillingly morbid. Of the four novels written

⁴² John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 93.

⁴³ Heinrich Schneider, *Quest for Mysteries: The Masonic Background for Literature in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1947) 76-77.

during Brown's period of intense creative outpouring, *Ormond*, the subject of this chapter, is the most inscrutable, the most disjointed, and the least discussed. On the quality of *Ormond's* prose, Steven Hamelman remarks, "Nowhere in his fiction do Brown's syntax and nominalizations seem so intentionally impenetrable; the text's wall of grammar and rhetoric, its latinate diction, and convoluted passives benumb the reader."⁴⁴ The marked impenetrability of *Ormond's* narrative style creates some confusion about the literal events of the novel's plot, and has led those critics who attribute the text's difficulty to Brown's craft instead of his haste to concoct reflexive arguments about his project. Thus for James Russo, *Ormond's* untrustworthy narrator and unreadable con artist characters mean that "the theme of the novel (deception) is also the form of the novel (narrative unreliability)."⁴⁵ The prevailing trend in *Ormond's* criticism has been to push this argument a bit farther and to construct the novel as Brown's fictional meditation on his own anxieties as author: "Brown ... insists ... on universalizing the artist's trauma"; "In Brown's novels political and social conflict are absorbed in the prior problem of artistic conflict"; "*Ormond* [is] one of the earliest allegories of authorial self-fashioning in American literature."⁴⁶ While doubtless Brown's angst over his controversial decision to pursue full-time writing is reflected in his texts, this biographical emphasis in his criticism bypasses the fascinating epistemological conundrums that he pursues in *Ormond*.

The prevalence of occult ideas in *Ormond* lends the text's theme of self-fashioning a Hermetic cast. Brown's mysterious character Ormond is easily pegged as a member of the Illuminati, in part because, "His political projects are likely to possess an extensive influence on the

⁴⁴ Steven Hamelman, "Secret to the Last: Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," *Literature-Interpretation Theory* 11 (2000): 321.

⁴⁵ James R. Russo, "The Tangled Web of Deception and Imposture in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," *Early American Literature* 14.2 (Fall 1979): 205.

⁴⁶ Bill Christophersen, "Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*: The Secret Witness as Ironic Motif," *Modern Language Studies* 10.2 (Spring 1980): 41; Bell 159; Hamelman 322.

future condition of this Western World.”⁴⁷ Yet the critics who have explored the Illuminati’s influence on Brown’s thought have stripped the order of its occult associations, resulting in readings of *Ormond* which understand the novel as “a sort of handbook of conspiratorial anxieties.”⁴⁸ The Illuminati’s focus may have been political, but many of its members were active occultists; one of Brown’s primary sources, John Robison, fulminates over the occultism that runs rampant in both the Illuminati and brother groups like Masonry in *Proofs of a Conspiracy*. In *Carwin*, Brown gives us an extended view into what initiation by the notorious order might look like, but as with *Ormond*, critics have found much to fault in the Illuminati’s free use of psychological manipulation, and have failed to comprehend the spiritual ends that are served by such non-rational means. Admittedly, Brown’s depiction of the Illuminati in both texts is deliciously ambiguous, refusing to either endorse or condemn the group. But Brown is more forthcoming in *Carwin* as to the rewards of membership in the Illuminati; here Ludloe enumerates the benefits that will devolve upon Carwin once he passes through the initial hazing process:

Yet if your fidelity fail not, great will be your recompence. For all your toils and self-devotion, ample will be the retribution. Hitherto you have been wrapt in darkness and storm; then will you be exalted to a pure and unruffled element. It is only for a time that temptation will environ you, and your path will be toilsome. In a few years you will be permitted to withdraw to a land of sages, and the remainder of your life will glide away in the enjoyments of beneficence and wisdom.⁴⁹

Though vague, the reference to a “pure and unruffled element” suggests a transcendence of earthly life involving the attainment of Hermetic superpowers. Interestingly, Brown’s novella

⁴⁷ Brown, *Ormond* 126. (This and all subsequent references are to the Peterborough edition of 2002).

⁴⁸ Levine 138.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Carwin* 87.

breaks off before Carwin ascends any further in the Illuminati's ranks, and the drama of initiation is revisited in his subsequent project, *Ormond*.

Ormond is not a story about the titular magus but rather the peculiar *Bildungsroman* of a 16-year-old girl, Constantia Dudley. As the novel opens, Constantia's father Stephen is defrauded by his employee, the imposter Craig, launching the family into indigence. Before long Constantia's mother dies, Stephen develops blindness and turns to drink, and the city of Philadelphia is thrown into chaos by an outbreak of the yellow fever. Constantia survives these relentless tribulations by keeping a cool head and a positive attitude, cheerfully supporting her father and herself with her meager income as a seamstress. Though the landlord's bill looms large, Constantia turns down propositions of both marriage and prostitution, proving her sagacity by refusing to solve a temporary crisis by compromising her ideals and principles. Constantia is first led to Ormond's rooms by following Craig, from whom she hopes to recoup a portion of the money stolen from her father. Ormond and Constantia are favorably impressed with one another; each discovers his/her intellectual equal in the other. But when Constantia realizes that Ormond is living in sin with her friend Helena, she marshals all of her disinterested wisdom to plead Ormond's moral duty to marry the girl whose innocence he robbed. Constantia's rational discourse has the unintended effect of increasing Ormond's ardor for her; he throws off Helena, Helena commits suicide, and in another unlooked for consequence of her pure intentions, Constantia is restored to her former wealth and home via Helena's death.

At this point in *Ormond*, the narrator becomes an obtrusive presence and identifies herself as Constantia's dear friend Sophia Westwyn. Sophia narrates her quest to locate Constantia in America after her own long sojourn in Europe. Constantia's initial attraction to Ormond has cooled and she eschews both marriage with him and other, less formal arrangements. Sophia is

finally reunited with her friend, and the two exhibit such a passion for each other as to prompt at least one queer reading of the novel.⁵⁰ Ormond now mounts a campaign of harassment whose object seems to be the sexual conquest of Constantia, yet I read his extremely obfuscating language as the prerequisite for her spiritual initiation. Constantia's father is murdered. Ormond stalks Constantia at her isolated country home, where the corpse of Craig silently appears. Ormond reveals to her that he masterminded both her father's death and that of Craig, and has been using human and superhuman means to spy on her. In the last two and a half pages of *Ormond*, Constantia stabs her oppressor with a pen knife, and Sophia defuses the shock concomitant to such a grave act of female violence in the scant space of a paragraph, one which also summarily conveys Constantia's legal absolution on the grounds of defense of her virginity. Constantia departs to Europe with Sophia and readers are left wondering what, if anything, her trials have meant.

Contemporary readers of Brown's novel probably understood it as a seduction narrative, with Ormond a depraved libertine and Constantia the imperiled virgin who takes the unconventional step of turning the knife on her rapist instead of herself.⁵¹ But later critics began to notice Ormond's complexity and depth and the fact that Constantia is, in some indefinable way, enlightened and inspired by him. My reading draws on the tropes of occult initiation as a way of accounting for the novel's abrupt, bizarre, and inconclusive ending, and the problem that Constantia's seducer is also her mentor. *Ormond's* heights of agonized language also suggest an occult reading by disorienting the reader and forcing an allegorical interpretation of the text.

⁵⁰ See Kristin M. Comment, "Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* and Lesbian Possibility in the Early Republic," *Early American Literature* 40.1 (2005): 57-78.

⁵¹ Sydney J. Krause, "*Ormond*: Seduction in a New Key," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 44.4 (January 1973): 570-584. Krause reviews the history of the seduction novel up to *Ormond's* publication, and concludes that Brown performs an ironic twist on the genre, by having Constantia slay Ormond (583). Paul Witherington claims that *Ormond* received scant critical attention in the nineteenth century in "Charles Brockden Brown: A Bibliographical Essay," *Early American Literature* 9.2 (Fall 1974): 183.

The awkwardness of defending a rank libertine as Constantia's occult initiator is offset by the fact that Constantia's entry into the occult mysteries functions as a profound feminist statement. The traditionally male attributes of self-discipline and rational cognition which qualify Constantia for election into the male-dominated world of occult societies enact a Wollstonecraftian ideal. Just as Ormond initiates Constantia into suprarational occult knowledge, so she educates him in the dormant capabilities of womankind. Ormond's realization of his sexist blind-spot intimates the adjustments incumbent upon men in creating a truly egalitarian society of the sort imagined by the Illuminati. *Ormond's* susceptibility to a range of allegorical interpretations seems to have been an intentional conceit of the author's, one which attests to Brown's gift for ambivalence. In stark contrast to those who find Brown's undertaking in this text somewhat confused, Bill Christophersen sees in Brown's attempt at multi-layered allegory a nod toward the complexities of modernity: "By recognizing competing moral assumptions, acknowledging uncertainty, and offering multiple interpretations of events ... *Ormond* anticipates [the] symbolist tack in American fiction," which flowered some fifty years later in works by Melville and Hawthorne.⁵² A feminist revision of occult initiation underlies this novel's cautionary tale of seduction and political contagion.

Though Brown's literary vision can be dark to the point of nihilism and his narratives abstruse to the point of impenetrability, these methods properly elect him the literary forebear of the equally controversial writer, Edgar Allan Poe. Like Poe, Brown works his horror on the level of epistemology, subverting popular assumptions about the nature and structure of reality. In his book on Brown's social and intellectual milieu, Bryan Waterman finds that epistemological questions trumped political questions among Brown and his cohort, and he asserts that, "Brown's

⁵² Bill Christophersen, *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1993) 67.

novels have meanings that are lost when partisan contexts overshadow religious ones.”⁵³ Because political order is an outgrowth of our beliefs about the spiritual or animal nature of the human being, Brown and his compatriots were forced to decide the contest between competing theories of rational humanism, Hobbesian materialism, and Christian revelation. By thematizing the occult synthesis of the secular and the religious in *Ormond*, Brown reminds us that the spirit of discovery which characterized the Age of Enlightenment allowed for the discussion of diverse ideas often elided in latter-day accounts, and indicates that our current archive of “intellectual history” has been too narrowly defined.

Eighteenth Century Occultism

Freemasonry provides the necessary backdrop for Brown’s philosophical exploration of the occult in *Ormond*. *Ormond* may not explicitly invoke Freemasonry, and yet the initiatory rites alluded to in the novel were authorized and perpetuated through Masonic culture. The novel’s most immediate context, the much-publicized Illuminati Order, was an outgrowth of the eighteenth century vogue for secret societies. The enigmatic occultists, Cagliostro and the Comte de Saint-Germain, promoted themselves within Masonic networks, and their remarkable careers are best understood as actualizations of the Masonic synthesis of rational enlightenment and spiritual illumination. *Ormond*’s character appears to have been based, in whole or in part, on these eighteenth century magi, and so I explore their lives and public reception in some detail. Though much of this section describes the occult culture of eighteenth century Europe, the intel-

⁵³ Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007) 55.

ligentsia of the fledgling American Republic were of course attuned to the flow of “books, bodies, correspondence, and criticism [which] crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean.”⁵⁴

Official histories of Freemasonry downplay the order’s centuries-old association with occult secrets and occult rites. The brotherhood’s formal inception dates to London in 1717, and yet popular interest in esoteric fraternities had been stimulated some hundred years earlier by the appearance of several Rosicrucian publications in Germany. Historian Frances Yates has dubbed this period the “Rosicrucian Enlightenment,” a seemingly oxymoronic term which yet accurately describes the quest for mystical knowledge which often accompanied scientific research in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁵ The fact that Sir Isaac Newton, father of modern physics, delved deeply into alchemy as a psycho-spiritual discipline affords us a striking example of this phenomenon, which we should yet hesitate to consider anomalous.⁵⁶ Masonry might have begun as a genuine builder’s guild in the English tradition, but by the eighteenth century “operative” Masonry was on the wane, having been thoroughly supplanted by the mystical agenda of “speculative” Masonry. Elias Ashmole, English polymath and founding member of the Royal Society, was initiated into Freemasonry at a speculative lodge in 1646, suggesting that fascination with Rosicrucianism infiltrated and transformed operative lodges in the age before Masonry’s public founding in the eighteenth century.⁵⁷

Though today we know Masonry as both a highly organized secular body and a benevolent social institution, “Masonry” in the eighteenth century referred to any brotherhood desiring

⁵⁴ Waterman, *Friendly Club* 71.

⁵⁵ Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972).

⁵⁶ See Betty Jo Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s Alchemy: or, “The Hunting of the Greene Lyon”* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975).

⁵⁷ J.M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972) 20.

to take up (or hide behind) that banner. The speculative or mystical bent of the early Masonic movement opened the door to legions of self-styled initiates proclaiming theirs as the one true system dating back to any number of ancient rites, from the Druidic to the Egyptian. The amorphous character of early Masonry describes innumerable organizations whose objectives ran the gamut from the quietly esoteric to the expressly political, though my focus here is Masonry's function as the mainstay for occult ritual and experimentation in the eighteenth century. In a chapter entitled "The Golden Age of Mystification," Masonic historian J.M. Roberts avers that there have "never been so many secret sects and societies in Europe as between 1750 and 1789."⁵⁸ What all of these organizations had in common was a general interest in "initiation into the means of regeneration," whether the occult struck a dominant note or remained a muted strain.⁵⁹ Heinrich Schneider astutely points out that much of the occult substance of early European Masonry did not originate with the movement itself but, rather, the lodges supplied a ready forum for a host of venerable esoteric ideas: "Neo-Platonism, Cabala, the natural philosophy of Paracelsus, the theosophic pansophy of Böhme, and alchemy, and Pietistic, and quietistic, not to mention catholicizing tendencies – all these had been taken up by the lodges and had there found a soil favorable to their conservation and growth."⁶⁰ Importantly, Schneider's history emphasizes the diversity of eighteenth century Freemasonry, as opposed to marking anachronistic distinctions between "true" and "false" schools according to the form the group would ultimately take.

⁵⁸ Roberts 90.

⁵⁹ Roberts 95.

⁶⁰ Schneider 124.

The idea that the American Revolution was the realization of an elaborate Masonic conspiracy does not seem to have enjoyed much currency in Brown's day, and so I do not address it here. Masons were an identifiable, if subdued, presence in early America, and their secrecy and mystical regalia came under attack at various charged moments in the country's early history.⁶¹ However, American Masonry was largely modeled on the English school and therefore did not avow the occult as openly as did the more mystical orders proliferating in Germany and France. Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* contains much hysteria and more hyperbole, but he seems to be accurate in his assessment that "the homely Free Masonry imported from England" had suffered an occult infusion at the hands of these voluptuous foreign powers. In Germany Masonry was "much disturbed by the mystical whims of J. Behmen and Swedenborg – by the fanatical and knavish doctrines of the modern Rosycrucians – by Magicians – Magnetisers – Exorcists, &c [sic]."⁶² Hermetic and alchemical pursuits were widespread in Germany at this time, a phenomenon not unrelated to the fact that Frederick II, who ruled Prussia in the latter half of the eighteenth century, shared these interests and was himself a Rosicrucian.⁶³ Robison claims that Masonic lodges in France had become infected with the native love of refinement, and censures the appalling "novelties, full of tinsel and glitter, and high-sounding titles" which have corrupted his plain and honest English order.⁶⁴ Ironically a Scotsman was behind this frenchifying of European Masonry; Andrew Michael Ramsay introduced the chivalrous degrees of "Scottish

⁶¹ See Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1996) for an impartial history of Masonry in the early American Republic.

⁶² Robison 11.

⁶³ Roberts 98, 103.

⁶⁴ Robison 13.

Rite” Masonry into France in the mid-eighteenth century, and cemented the order’s mythic past in a speech he gave at the Grand Lodge of Paris in 1737.⁶⁵

Though the more occult brand of European Masonry does not appear to have flourished in America in its early period, Robison’s exposé was both popular and influential, leading to the association of Masonic fraternities with occult rites in the public mind. Conservative Masons in America participated in a pamphlet war against preachers who took Robison as their source, and maintained their innocence against charges of both anti-Christian and anti-Republican fomenting. Vernon Stauffer’s book *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* provides an excellent and detailed account of this media battle which peaked around the turn of the eighteenth century, yet Stauffer’s repeated denial of the truth of Robison’s claims contradicts the reality of occult practice within Masonic brotherhoods. Infiltration by questionable occultists was a common feature of the development of Freemasonry, one which made for sensational copy in the European press.

Freemasonry’s rising status allowed for a new brand of secular, enlightened mystic. Brown’s characterization of Ormond as both self-serving opportunist and occult magus may have been inspired by the reputation of the Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, or by that of his more shadowy brother in the field, the Comte de Saint-Germain. Both men were fixtures at the most prominent courts of Europe in the eighteenth century, both traveled widely on the Continent promoting alchemical healing, and both were suspected of being charlatans with secret political agendas. Cagliostro, who began his life in a Sicilian slum as Giuseppe Balsamo, achieved international notoriety for his involvement in the diamond necklace affair which rocked the court of Louis XVI in the 1780s. Cagliostro’s enigma has served as the template for the con artist/conjurer in popular fiction from the time of his own day and continuing, precisely because history has never decided whether he was “the worst scoundrel of his age or a great occult

⁶⁵ Schneider 78-79.

healer”; his biographer Iain McCalman suggests that we view him as both.⁶⁶ The Comte de Saint-Germain’s legacy has persisted in quite another realm altogether. The twentieth century occultist Manly Palmer Hall elevated Saint-Germain to the status of a demigod, and the mysterious figure is apparently still active as an “ascended master” for the I AM society of Mt. Shasta, California.⁶⁷ In life Saint-Germain was almost certainly a spy, conspicuous for his possession of precious stones and his unnerving failure to age. Both Cagliostro and Saint-Germain emphasized the untapped potential of the human being, the highest expression of which was immortality. This curious goal partakes of the Enlightenment interest in mastery over the physical body, or transcendence of it, and Ormond’s display of godlike powers and ambiguous “death” direct our attention to the doctrines of these notable metaphysical adventurers.

Born into poverty in 1743, Cagliostro studied briefly with the prestigious Knights of Malta in the 1760s, where he was able to further his knowledge of magic and alchemy. Though he showed great capacity for healing the sick, he was ultimately released by the clerical order for his bawdy personality and unchristian pursuits, namely forgery and a small trade in talismans and nostrums. Over the next twenty years Cagliostro would combine these talents with his magnetic presence and an embroidered biography to ingratiate himself into the most opulent households of Europe, acting the role of spiritual advisor. The Count and his wife Seraphina met with varied degrees of success in their several removes, but it was Cagliostro’s contribution to a plot to extort money from the French Queen Marie Antoinette which launched his international repu-

⁶⁶ Iain McCalman, *The Last Alchemist: Count Cagliostro, Master of Magic in the Age of Reason* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003) 2. I have used McCalman as my primary source on Cagliostro because, of the many biographies available, his is by far the most scholarly, unbiased, and creditable.

⁶⁷ Manly Palmer Hall, *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (1929; Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society) 2008. A portrait of the Comte faces the title page of Hall’s massive encyclopedia, and he appears again in the closing pages of the book in the chapter, “The Mysteries and Their Emissaries” (CXC VII), thus providing symbolic bookends for this history of mystery. For more on the “I AM” society, see *The “I AM” Activity of Saint Germain Foundation*. Web, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.saintgermainfoundation.org>>.

tation. Cagliostro was ultimately exonerated in the scheme perpetrated largely by prostitute Jeanne de la Motte, but he spent the better part of a year in the Bastille, a fate which predisposed him to English popularity as a martyr to the tyranny of the French.⁶⁸ By 1786, British newspapers were circulating rumors that the famous healer and Masonic scholar was due to arrive on their shores.⁶⁹

The vogue for Masonic initiation was so great in England that Cagliostro was immediately approached by three of George III's disaffected sons upon arrival in London.⁷⁰ He attracted another distinguished disciple during this period as well, the artist Philippe de Loutherbourg, the man who single-handedly revamped British stage effects with lifelike automata and other optical illusions.⁷¹ De Loutherbourg completed a set of eight watercolors symbolically depicting the initiation process of Cagliostro's Egyptian Rite, images which offer surprising context for *Ormond*. The initiate in these scenes is, importantly, a woman, no doubt a nod to a unique feature of Cagliostro's Masonry: its openness to both genders. Unfortunately for Cagliostro, he also formed some questionable alliances while in England; his reputation was certainly damaged by his friendship with Lord George Gordon, rabble-rouser and inciter of the Gordon Riots, and by the designs of the vicious Grub Street journalist and spy, Charles Théveneau de Morande.⁷² Blasted by satirical cartoons and poems in the British press, outed as a fraud in the writings of rival adventurer Casanova, and ridiculed in two dramatic works by Russian Empress Catherine II, who resented the swindler's attempts to penetrate her court, Cagliostro abandoned the fish-

⁶⁸ See the chapter, "The Copt," in McCalman, for a detailed discussion of the "affair of the necklace."

⁶⁹ McCalman 143.

⁷⁰ McCalman 144.

⁷¹ McCalman 162.

⁷² The chapter, "Prophet," in McCalman, details Cagliostro's troubles in England and mockery by the press.

bowl of London for a private retreat in 1787.⁷³ His mystical rites and nebulous healing skill made Cagliostro easy prey for Enlightenment critique, and yet the authenticity of his spiritual power was never doubted by the faithful. Yale President and alchemy enthusiast Ezra Stiles wrote to the “Arabian Count Cagliostro” seeking information about the Philosopher’s Stone, proof that the magician’s fame had crossed the Atlantic.⁷⁴ Following the events of 1789, Cagliostro’s cachet as a prophet was only amplified, because his memoir written in the Bastille seemed to have predicted the cataclysmic progress of the French Revolution.

Before his death at the hands of the Inquisition in 1795, Cagliostro would be immortalized in Schiller’s unfinished and fragmentary novel, *Der Geisterseher*, published in 1789. Saint-Germain is another possible source for Schiller’s enigmatic occultist character who seduces the mind of a Prince because he, too, became intimate with some of the eighteenth century’s most prominent rulers, notably Louis XV and Frederic II.⁷⁵ Saint-Germain’s vast stores of wealth, sophisticated manners, and confession that he used an alias provoked rumors that he was a fallen aristocrat or even a deposed Transylvanian prince. The mystery of his true identity is broached in the correspondence of Horace Walpole in 1745;⁷⁶ an article appearing in the *London Chronicle* in 1760 suggested that Saint-Germain was the possessor of that panacea for all human ills, the Philosopher’s Stone.⁷⁷ The Comte’s reputation as a magus ballooned so much over the next twenty years that the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* reported the by-then familiar anecdotes that Saint-Germain could produce diamonds from lesser stones and had lived since the time of

⁷³ McCalman 182.

⁷⁴ Brooke 93.

⁷⁵ Jean Overton Fuller, *The Comte de Saint-Germain: Last Scion of the House of Rákóczy* (London: East-West, 1988) 100, 217.

⁷⁶ Fuller 67.

⁷⁷ Una Birch, *Secret Societies and the French Revolution* (New York: Lane, 1911) 96.

Christ.⁷⁸ Voltaire famously fueled the Comte's enigma by describing him in a letter to the Prussian King as "a man who never dies and who knows everything."⁷⁹

Though eighteenth century fascination with Saint-Germain's alchemical secrets is not a commonly emphasized feature in retrospective accounts of the Age of Reason, the self-possessed, mysterious man with no national affiliation came to symbolize the triumph of occult science with his ostensible immortality. "I know the reputation of the Comte de Saint-Germain, as the whole of Europe knows it," responded the Masonic enthusiast, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, to the inquiries of Prince Carl of Holstein, in a letter dated 1781.⁸⁰ Though Saint-Germain professed no connection with Masonry in life, he was destined to be folded into the movement's colorful origins by creative historians; his mysterious background and habit of secrecy made it extraordinarily easy to place him at watershed events in occult lore. Jean-Pierre Louis de Luchet sought to capitalize on the fame of the age's leading occultists by concocting a "Memoir" for Cagliostro which he printed in 1785; in it the Sicilian adventurer and his wife are initiated into Freemasonry by the Comte de Saint-Germain.⁸¹ The Comte's unassuming manner and fastidious habits, which included a sparse vegetarian diet, made him less notorious than Cagliostro and also more credible as a true adept. Though Saint-Germain's legacy would only really flower in the nineteenth century via the Theosophic revelations of Madame Blavatsky, his status as a cosmopolitan immortal was already established by the time Brown was crafting his novel, *Ormond*.

⁷⁸ Fuller 239.

⁷⁹ Birch 84.

⁸⁰ Fuller 258.

⁸¹ Fuller 307.

Ormond as Occultist

The assumption that Charles Brockden Brown subscribed to something called the Enlightenment has led critics to look for the rational explanations underlying the occult appearances which recur in his gothic novels. Yet in *Ormond*, rational explanations are not only in short supply, they are also inappropriate to this allegory of occult initiation. Throughout the text, Brown signals to the reader that Ormond is an enlightened magus, a type of Cagliostro or the Comte de Saint-Germain. Ormond possesses superpowers, either of invisibility or astral projection – some means which allows him to spy on Constantia undetected. The violence of Constantia’s initiation is in fact typical of the theatrical rites which accompanied initiatory ordeals in eighteenth century Masonic orders. Ormond’s cryptic language around the much-anticipated event, which he refuses to clarify, is a testament to the impossibility of describing an occult transmission via the limited medium of language. Ormond’s mysterious death, or non-death at the end of the novel, may even be a sly reference to metempsychosis, which was said to have kept the Comte de Saint-Germain alive for many centuries. The text proliferates with occult themes, which become visible once we recover the spiritual applications that terms like “Enlightenment” and “Illumination” carried in the eighteenth century.

Like Cagliostro and the Comte de Saint-Germain, Ormond’s national origins and affiliations are obscured, and his effortless globetrotting augments his characterization as something more than mortal. Consider this genesis narrated by his sister, Martinette: “My mother was a Greek of Cyprus. My father was a Slavonian of Ragusa.”⁸² The brother and sister live for a time in Syria, where their father is employed by the French consulate. The children are orphaned by the plague while onboard a ship carrying the family from Turkey, and are rather unaccountably adopted by the ship’s captain, who next carries them to an Atlantic colony in South America.

⁸² Brown, *Ormond* 193.

Ormond is then placed in a seminary in Switzerland.⁸³ He tells Constantia that he later found “service and promotion in the armies of Potemkin and Romanov” in Russia.⁸⁴ Even a conservative estimate has Ormond fluent in ten languages: the Greek, Slavonic, Arabic, Syriac, and Turkish reported by Martinette,⁸⁵ and the French, Russian, Swiss, German, and English which we can extrapolate from Ormond’s European career. Not only does such fluency create an ideal spy, Ormond’s ability to blend into a wide array of cultures also suggests the legacy of the Comte de Saint-Germain, whose national origins were likewise an enigma.⁸⁶ Perhaps the only definitive information readers are meant to glean from Ormond’s checkered career is his activity on behalf of the notorious Illuminati Order:

He did not hide from [Constantia] that he had . . . executed secret and diplomatic functions at Constantinople and Berlin; that in the latter city he had met with schemers and reasoners who aimed at the new-modelling of the world, and the subversion of all that has hitherto been conceived elementary and fundamental in the constitution of man and of government; that some of those reformers had secretly united to break down the military and monarchical fabric of German policy; that others, more wisely, had devoted their secret efforts, not to overturn, but to build; that, for this end, they embraced an exploring and colonizing project; that he had allied himself to these [sic].⁸⁷

The “schemers and reasoners” in Germany who aimed at “the new-modelling of the world” are easily identifiable as the Illuminati. Yet Brown does not develop the theme of political subversion in the text, rather letting this tantalizing passage stand as shorthand for the politically implicated magus we find a referent for in the Comte de Saint-Germain.

⁸³ Brown, *Ormond* 195-196.

⁸⁴ Brown, *Ormond* 242.

⁸⁵ Brown, *Ormond* 194.

⁸⁶ The *London Chronicle* article of 1760 notes about Saint-Germain that “The country of this stranger is as perfectly unknown as his [real] name,” and then goes on to detail his tour through “several other European kingdoms.” Birch 93. Accounts from the 1740s forward relate his perfect proficiency in several languages, a fact which fueled the enigma of his nationality. Fuller 67.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Ormond* 242-243.

Ormond's narrator, Sophia, complains, "I know of no task more arduous than a just delineation of the character of Ormond."⁸⁸ With the narrator thus vexed, the reader may fare little better in deciphering what is authentic about Ormond. Again and again, Brown informs us that Ormond is unknowable: "His motives and his means were equally inscrutable."⁸⁹ The fact that Ormond is also a master of disguise heightens the terrifying potential of his unknowability. He has impersonated a Negro chimney-sweep among his own servants and not been recognized.⁹⁰ Ormond's skill at masking pulls the epistemological ground out from under the reader, opening up the possibility that any number of the novel's bizarre and consternating characters could really be Ormond in disguise. The man "blended in his own person the functions of poet and actor, and his dramas were not fictitious but real."⁹¹ The description of Ormond as an actor, who has either successfully buried his true identity or so thoroughly transcended his human nature as to put it on and off like a mask, points to the role that he will play as Constantia's mentor in the enactment of a ritual drama. While the text pretends to report some firm facts about Ormond – for example, that he was temperate as "regards the maintenance of health"⁹² (in common with the Comte de Saint-Germain, whose sparse vegetarian diet and alchemical secrets contributed to his youthful appearance and longevity) – any and all knowledge about Ormond is eventually undermined by contradictory information. Ormond is both rational and irrational, honest and dishonest, an ascetic and a libertine. These inconsistencies in his character suggest the legacy of Cagliostro's enigma: anointed healer or low-born thief? Mystic or con artist? Ormond is hardly

⁸⁸ Brown, *Ormond* 125.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Ormond* 214.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Ormond* 145.

⁹¹ Brown, *Ormond* 130.

⁹² Brown, *Ormond* 131.

ostro's enigma: anointed healer or low-born thief? Mystic or con artist? Ormond is hardly a character at all; rather, he is a meditation on the impenetrability of character.

Ormond's indistinct origins and protean identity make him an enigma; his extrasensory perception (or power of invisibility?) makes him superhuman. As implied by the novel's subtitle, *The Secret Witness*, Ormond possesses a preternatural awareness of events at which he could not have been physically present. As is typical in Brown's work, the rational explanation for a strange phenomenon does not satisfy. That Ormond is a master of stealth and disguise partially explains his uncanny knowledge, yet the rational Constantia affirms that in one instance, "All human precautions had been used to baffle the attempts of any secret witness" to her intimate interview with Sophia. She concludes that Ormond must have accessed her conversation "through some other medium than words [overheard]; yet that was impossible."⁹³ It is precisely these rationalist blinders, which preclude any explanation save the empirical, that necessitate Constantia's initiation by suprarational means. The numerous references to the character's omniscience argue that real, occult powers enhance his skill at psychological manipulation. Brown might obscure Ormond's *method* of secret surveillance, but his results are palpable. Ormond has penetrated Helena's mind so completely, that "it was the same thing to speak and to think in his presence."⁹⁴ As Ormond reminds Constantia at the novel's climax, "My knowledge, girl, is infallible."⁹⁵

Ormond, like Carwin in Brown's earlier texts, *Wieland* and *Carwin*, has developed an inborn human ability to the point that a natural talent crosses over into the realm of the supernatural. Contemporary readers perhaps miss the point by dwelling on the question of where one

⁹³ Brown, *Ormond* 249.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Ormond* 137.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Ormond* 265.

stops and the other begins. “We cannot hide our actions and thoughts from one of powerful sagacity, whom the detection sufficiently interests to make him use all the methods of detection in his power,” Sophia concludes reasonably.⁹⁶ Ormond’s cultivation of a natural talent into a supernatural power reflects the goals of many eighteenth century occult groups, which sought to expand the untapped, godlike powers lying dormant within mankind. Ormond is easily aligned with these groups, because “No one could entertain loftier conceptions of human capacity”⁹⁷ than himself. Mystical orders like Martinism believed in the infinite perfectibility of the human being achieved, paradoxically, via a return to the omnipotent condition of Adam before the fall.⁹⁸ Ormond’s name may be broken down into the French words for “golden” and “world,” suggesting this primal state of man’s Adamic superpowers. Ormond’s strange sister, Martinette, also evokes ancient origins with her claim that she was born in a “garden” in Syria, connoting the locale of the Garden of Eden.⁹⁹ Stephen Shapiro shrewdly points out that Ormond and his sister are never seen at the same place at the same time,¹⁰⁰ and Martinette’s alias, “Monrose,” a partial anagram of Ormond, invites further speculation that they are actually the same person. Perhaps Ormond’s skill at masking extends to cross-gender performances, in addition to the cross-racial masquerades we have already witnessed. But in this allegory of suprarational initiation, it is the alchemi-

⁹⁶ Brown, *Ormond* 250.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Ormond* 127.

⁹⁸ Arthur McCalla, “Saint-Martin,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 1025.

⁹⁹ Brown, *Ormond* 193.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Shapiro, “In a French Position: Radical Pornography and Homoerotic Society in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond or the Secret Witness*,” *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York UP, 2007) 376.

cal pairing of opposites, brother and sister, Ormond and Martinette, which effects Constantia's initiation into occult mysteries.¹⁰¹

The French Order of Martinists offers many contexts for *Ormond*, not only in its emphasis on recovering humankind's divine powers, but also in its occult approach to language. Drawing heavily from the alchemically-infused Pietism of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), Martinism originated with the Spanish Jew, Martines de Pasqually, but achieved international attention following the publications of its most famous mouthpiece, Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803). This "Illuminist" movement claimed the same goals as the rationalist, secular Enlightenment, but advocated different means on the path to universal knowledge and human progress:

The Illuminists criticized the excesses of the Enlightenment. They deplored the fact that language had been handed over to the grammarians, and knowledge to the encyclopaedists: for while seeming to respect the "letter," both tended to forget the "spirit." In trying to find alternatives, some Illuminists followed the prudence of the theosopher, Louis-Claude de Saint Martin, who preached the use of reason guided by divine light and emphasized the prayer of the heart.¹⁰²

Saint-Martin's first book, *Des erreurs et de la vérité*, provoked widespread public debate across Europe in 1775, by criticizing the unchecked exaltation of reason and calling for the balancing of the mind with the heart.¹⁰³ This "cardiac way" to Enlightenment defied expression in language. Saint-Martin's later work outlines the degeneration of language in a fallen world, the consequence being that it is impossible to communicate the highest spiritual truth through the imperfect medium of words.¹⁰⁴ Only direct transmission facilitated by the emotional power of ritual

¹⁰¹ Carl Jung avers that "the Brother-Sister pair stands allegorically for the whole conception of opposites," in *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* Vol. 12, eds. H. Read, M. Fordham, and G. Adler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) 317.

¹⁰² Christine Bergé, "Illuminism," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 601.

¹⁰³ Roberts 103.

¹⁰⁴ McCalla 1028.

can effect the union with godhead, a moment dubbed simply “*la Chose*” by Pasqually, or “the Thing.” The failure of language either to describe the experience of “reintegration,” or to prepare the initiate for its onset, is often cited as the reason for secrecy and obscurity among occult practitioners – language is not only inadequate but can potentially cause harm in constructing a false or unattainable vision of illumination.

There is perhaps no more appropriate context than “the Thing” for elucidating *Ormond’s* troubling final scenes. Ormond repeatedly threatens Constantia with a momentous event that will transform her utterly, but refuses to sketch out the mysterious climax any further than this. Most readers assume that Ormond’s cryptic speeches amount to psychological torture, as he obliquely hints to Constantia that she will be raped. At times, Ormond’s intent does seem to be base and physical, and at other times – not. “What is ‘the Thing?’”¹⁰⁵ Occult scholars are still asking this question, and so, perhaps, was Brown, as he has Ormond attempt to describe the indescribable culmination of his relationship with Constantia. The ubiquitous pronoun, “it,” stands in here for “the Thing” which can’t be named:

“Shall I warn you of the danger that awaits thee? For what end? To elude it is impossible. It will come ...

“Come it will. Though future, it knows not the empire of contingency. An inexorable and immutable decree enjoins it. Perhaps it is thy nature to meet with calmness what cannot be shunned. Perhaps, when it is past, thy reason will perceive its irrevocable nature, and restore thee to peace ...

“One more disaster remains. To call it by its true name would be useless or pernicious. Useless, because thou wouldst pronounce its occurrence impossible; pernicious, because, if its possibility were granted, the omen would distract thee with fear. How shall I describe it? Is it loss of fame? No. The deed will be unwitnessed by a human creature. Thy reputation will be spotless, for nothing will be done by thee unsuitable to the tenor of thy past life ...

¹⁰⁵ Jean-François Var, “Martinism: First Period,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 776.

“It is no repetition of the evils thou hast already endured; it is neither drudgery, nor sickness, nor privation of friends ... to grasp it is impossible. The moment we inspect it nearly, it vanishes.”¹⁰⁶

Only the most creative readings could imagine that Ormond’s secret object here is a rape. If he means to torment Constantia with the prospect of sexual violence, why not say this outright?

“The Thing,” which will not be witnessed by a *human* creature, is impossible to grasp, and “vanishes” when it is the subject of too much scrutiny. An occult transmission of unknown (and unknowable) import provides, paradoxically, the most logical solution to the puzzle posed by Ormond.

The text of the novel itself upholds the need for Hermetic silence touching “the Thing.” When Constantia requests that Ormond clarify his language and elaborate upon his schemes, he replies that he “must not say what will not be credited.” Perhaps he is bound to silence by a secret order, but more likely, he recognizes the futility of attempting to reconstruct an experiential truth in the second-hand medium of words. Ormond does his best to convey this predicament to Constantia:

[Ormond:] “Tomorrow I mean to ascertain the heights of the lunar mountains by traveling to the top of them. Then I will station myself in the track of the last comet, and wait till its circumvolution suffers me to leap upon it; then, by walking on its surface, I will ascertain whether it be hot enough to burn my shoes. Do you believe that this can be done?”

[Constantia:] “No.”

[Ormond:] “Do you believe, in consequence of my assertion, that I design to do this, and that, in my apprehension, it is easy to be done?”

[Constantia:] “Not unless I previously believe you to be a lunatic.”

[Ormond:] “Then why should I assert my purposes? Why speak, when the hearer will infer nothing from my speech but that I am either lunatic or liar?”

[Constantia:] “In that predicament, silence is best.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Ormond* 248-249.

Here the cunning Ormond prompts Constantia to admit the justification for Hermetic silence with this hypothetical version of “the Thing.” Brown’s novel, it must be remembered, does not name the Illuminati or any other occult group in its text, but instead conveys these contexts through a method of “piecemeal and imperfect disclosures,”¹⁰⁸ using the same methods that Ormond does to both conceal and reveal himself to Constantia. Brown stopped writing the novella, *Carwin*, when to continue would have meant *naming* the occult arts which Ludloe uses to spy on Carwin. In *Ormond*, Brown succeeds in embedding occult strictures on public disclosure into the novel’s very form, a feat which he exploits in order to *perform* the occult as ritual, as opposed to naming it as a static institution or set of beliefs.

Reading *Ormond* as the staging of an elaborate occult ritual can also account for Ormond’s relentless tormenting of Constantia with the specter of murder or rape. As a youth, Benjamin Franklin participated in a hoax of a Masonic ritual which ultimately killed the object of the jest, who was badly burned by hot oil.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, the initiate would never have submitted to such an extreme form of hazing, if the cultural imaginary did not contain an awed respect for the rites of fidelity which preceded membership in an elite order. Cagliostro, who was first initiated by a second-rate lodge in London, was ordered to fire a loaded pistol at his head to demonstrate proof of his obedience.¹¹⁰ The ceremony was not intended to harm him, but rather designed to effect an extreme psychological state with which to mark the transition from novice to initiate. Significantly, the psychic transmission of initiation can only occur in a vulnerable state of recep-

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *Ormond* 245.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Ormond* 181.

¹⁰⁹ Bullock 50.

¹¹⁰ McCalman 40.

tivity; otherwise the rationalization process of the mind will block the spiritual marvel of illumination. In *Ormond*, the titular magus threatens Constantia with the farthest extreme of defilement particular to her sex, and his enigmatic language and veiled threats constitute a necessary component of the initiation process. Just as a male initiate in the Masonic Order might be emotionally “prepared” by the prospect of physical torture or humiliation, so Ormond menaces Constantia with rape to wrest her out of her wonted rationality.

The ritual death of the initiate is a common feature of induction into Masonic groups, and *Ormond* portrays a ritual murder. Constantia’s stabbing of her instructor represents the final stage of an initiatory ordeal. Such gruesome rites were calculated to effect a psychic and spiritual transformation in the hearts of their actors. In a series of watercolors commissioned by his mentor in 1786, Philippe de Louthembourg depicted the steps by which a female initiate entered into the secrets of Cagliostro’s exotic Egyptian Rite (see Fig. 4). In the penultimate painting, the figure of “false Mercury” is slain by a dagger to the heart, the very spot where Ormond is stabbed by Constantia. In the successive and final watercolor, the initiate glides past Mercury’s corpse and into the illumination streaming from an Egyptian temple.¹¹¹ Such imagery strongly suggests that a life-affirming display of valiance is a prerequisite for Hermetic initiation. Constantia has already proven her masculine hardihood by surviving, amongst other calamities, the death of her mother, her father’s blindness and the family’s ensuing poverty, and a yellow fever outbreak in the city of Philadelphia. Her exemplary diligence, humility, and sagacity in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles recommend her as an occult initiate, but the symbolic slaying of false Mercury in Cagliostro’s rite intimates that the rational faculty should not be over-emphasized; a flaming heart illuminated by both the sun and moon in de Louthembourg’s

¹¹¹ McCalman 167.

watercolors signifies the balancing of the reason-revelation polarity. The prominence of the heart imagery also alludes to the locus of initiation as a transrational communication, i.e., “the cardiac way” to enlightenment. In de Louthembourg’s images, false Mercury is slain by Cagliostro; in *Ormond*, Constantia enacts the ritual murder herself.

Similar to the concluding image of Cagliostro’s Egyptian Rite, *Ormond’s* final tableau includes a corpse – or two or three. Sophia finally succeeds in penetrating Constantia’s isolated retreat, and discovers three bodies lying on the floor, each “breathless and supine.”¹¹² One of these, Constantia’s, is revived and ultimately united with Sophia, whose name means “divine wisdom”; in the occult Order of the Martinists, union with Sophia was synonymous with “the Thing.” Ormond has already admitted to orchestrating the murder of Craig, a “false Mercury” who had earlier defrauded Constantia’s family. As for the state of Ormond himself, critics continue to puzzle over the “smile of disdain” which sits on the features of his ostensibly dead body. Though Sophia reports that Constantia killed him in self-defense with her pen-knife, she also narrates that, “the wound by which he fell was secret, and was scarcely betrayed by the effusion of a drop of blood.”¹¹³ Evidence that we have entered the terrain of unspeakable Hermetic mysteries appears in such authorial commentary as, “An explication of this scene was hopeless,” and, “The silence was uninterrupted and profound.”¹¹⁴ Ormond’s demonstration of superhuman, occult powers throughout the text, combined with his skill as poet, actor, and master of disguise, allow for a reading of the novel in which he has not, in fact, died, but only expertly performed his role as way-shower in occult mysteries. How else to account for the smile on his face, and the fact that his “fatal” wound is so strangely lacking in blood? Constantia’s unbelievable and

¹¹² Brown, *Ormond* 273.

¹¹³ Brown, *Ormond* 273.

¹¹⁴ Brown, *Ormond* 272-273.

summary absolution from murder also argues against a literal reading the novel. *Ormond*, rather, enacts a grand allegory, one in which an initiate, “Constantia” (firmness and perseverance), symbolically slays her master to arrive at the attainment of “Sophia” (divine wisdom).

Occult lore provides another possible explanation for Ormond’s dubious death. Plato’s “transmigration of souls” was interpreted by some of the Neoplatonists to mean that an individual could extend his life indefinitely by transferring his soul to a different body, whenever the present one showed signs of wearing out. Such soul transference was known as metempsychosis, and first appeared in a Rosicrucian context in the seventeenth century, when the narrator of the *Comte de Gabalis* speculates that the magus of the title “is only dead in Appearance, according to the Custom of Philosophers, who make as if they die in one Place, and transplant themselves to another [sic].”¹¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe gave metempsychosis its most chilling fictional treatment in his masterpiece, the short story “Ligeia.” So perhaps “the Thing” which Ormond facilitates is his own metempsychosis, and the body he next occupies – Constantia’s! Ormond has already exhibited some skill in bloodless death; a corpse appears outside Constantia’s chamber door, with “no mark of blood or wounds.”¹¹⁶ The corpse is Craig’s, and Constantia is mystified as to how it materialized so suddenly, and in complete silence. Death without wounds may be death without death; Brown occults the novel’s denouement so thoroughly that it is impossible to say who really survives the ending tableau. Yet whether Ormond has implemented Constantia’s death, and his own, so that he can occupy her vacant body, or masterminded an alternate occult finale, Constantia appropriates some measure of his extraordinary power in either case. This balancing of the male and female polarity, and the sexual overtones of Ormond’s “penetration” of Constantia’s mind, spirit, and body, make up the most lucid elements

¹¹⁵ Villars, Abbé de (Nicolas-Pierre-Henri), *The Count de Gabalis* (London: B. Lintott and E. Curll, 1714) 3.

¹¹⁶ Brown, *Ormond* 259.

tion” of Constantia’s mind, spirit, and body, make up the most lucid elements of Brown’s occult allegory.

Gender and the Occult: Women’s Rites

Charles Brockden Brown was a feminist. His enthusiastic reception of the “Woldwinites,” the intellectual movement surrounding British radicals, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, is an oft-cited factor in his literary and political development. He published a feminist dialogue, *Alcuin*, in 1798, and his first novel, *Wieland*, likewise features a rational and capable heroine. *Ormond* is generally regarded as his most feminist novel, because of its hyperconcern with the fate of women in a sexist society. Though Constantia is intelligent and chaste, thrifty and industrious, Brown shows that these sterling qualities afford her no more than a subsistence lifestyle, all but the most lowly forms of work being barred to women. Constantia’s rejection of marriage marks one renunciation of gender conformity, while her slaying of her oppressor to prevent rape approaches unheard-of extremes of female assertion and violence for Brown’s eighteenth century audience. The lesbian ardor between Constantia and Sophia further challenges expectations of typical feminine behavior, as does the cross-dressing of the female soldier, Martinette. In writing a novel about women behaving in surprising ways, acting “against their nature” as it were, Brown subtly argues that gender distinctions are the result of socialization as opposed to inherent nature. Mary Wollstonecraft’s theory of the rational and spiritual equality of the sexes may be the novel’s most immediate context, and yet *Ormond’s* many references to the occult suggest the related, Hermetic doctrine of the androgyny of the soul.¹¹⁷

One of Brown’s sources for an ethic of spiritual androgyny was Saint-Martin who, in common with Cagliostro, admitted women to his rites. Division of the human race into genders

¹¹⁷ See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; New York: Norton, 1988).

was another consequence of man's fall from an original, divine state, and thus Saint-Martin fostered the return to a condition of sexless perfection. Yet although Brown pursues the thematics of androgyny in *Ormond*, he appears to bear some contempt for Saint-Martin, the man. In a tedious episode which prolongs Sophia's search for her long-lost friend Constantia in America, we are introduced to the buffoon, Martyne, whose "character and manners entitled him to no respect."¹¹⁸ Note the spelling of Martyne's name which forces a French pronunciation of "Martin." Martyne's profession of great intimacy with Sophia (Courtland) of *Ormond* rather definitively points to Louis Claude de Saint-Martin as Brown's inspiration for this character; the French mystic likewise touted association with the Hermetic Sophia as the way to spiritual regeneration.¹¹⁹ But Martyne is a fake; he has gotten a hold of a miniature portrait of Sophia by illicit means, a portrait which once belonged to Constantia. When he meets the real Sophia for the first time, he is greatly embarrassed for having pretended any relationship to her. It's difficult to discern Brown's motive in implying that Saint-Martin's knowledge of Hermetic mysteries was false, given that *Ormond* as a text upholds Martinist doctrines like the failure of language to convey revelation, and humankind's potential for androgyny. Perhaps the scene represents a poke at Saint-Martin's detailed disclosures, in many books, of mysteries that were "unspeakable" according to his own theological formulations; within the world of mystery traditions, too much open discussion can be a sign of the charlatan, as in Martyne's garrulous pretensions of his knowledge of Sophia.

Ormond contains another Martinist character, and this one is a "Martinette." Martinette identifies herself as Ormond's sister, and thrills Constantia with tales of her cosmopolitan adventures and fearless gender-bending. Martinette narrates her military career in drag in the French

¹¹⁸ *Ormond* 234.

¹¹⁹ Var 771.

Revolutionary War, and explains her readiness to adopt the habits and dress of a foot soldier as a function of her being “imbued by a soul that was a stranger to the sexual distinction.”¹²⁰ Such language connotes the Hermetic idea of gender, which ascribes all polarities to our postlapsarian state; the primal Adam is androgynous until his fall, as is the Hermetic initiate who has effected a return to humanity’s original estate.¹²¹ Yet as with the Martyne episode, Brown negatively inflects Martinette’s Martinism. Her ghoulish pride in relating how she dispatched thirteen Austrian officers during the French Revolutionary War fills Constantia with disgust.¹²² Here the real-world implications of a social ethic of androgyny are carried to their furthest extreme, and Brown challenges his eighteenth century audience to consider the jarring scenarios to which a total eradication of gender might lead. Martinette is in many ways as inscrutable and troubling a figure as Ormond and, as mentioned earlier, they may even comprise the same enigmatic entity. True to form, Brown resists any authorial commentary which might direct the reader to feel a particular way about Martinette’s masculine exploits. While clearly Brown is having a bit of fun by sketching a “limit case” of social equality in the form of a female assassin, Constantia is nevertheless initiated by Martinette in the ways of female fortitude. It is doubtful that Constantia could have marshaled the unnatural ferocity to “murder” Ormond in the novel’s culminating episode had she not been previously prepared by Martinette with the specter of female violence. Brown signals that Constantia’s enlightenment is explicitly tied to gender when he hints that her development involves the incorporation of previously dormant masculine attributes; Martinette’s discourse causes her “prospect of mankind” to “*double its ancient dimensions [my italics]*.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Brown, *Ormond* 201-202.

¹²¹ Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany: New York State UP, 1991) 115-116.

¹²² Brown, *Ormond* 206-207.

The reduction of binary genders into a single Hermetic whole underlies the progress of *both* Constantia and Ormond in Brown's novel. Tellingly, both characters are initiated into the knowledge of a woman's capacity for the traditionally male attribute of ratiocination. The idea that men and women possess distinct but equally valuable ways of knowing, men that of the mind and women that of the heart, was a feature of some schools of eighteenth century occultism, but this concept is not given full scope in *Ormond*. Rather, Brown's emphasis on Constantia's mental fortitude and Ormond's sexist blind-spot reveals his thorough indoctrination by the Woldwinites. Mary Wollstonecraft's manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, called for men to foster women's potential for rational thought, but that men might learn from women's emotional wisdom is not emphasized. Though Brown depicts women as the intellectual equal of men in his several novels of the 1790s, he also makes free use of gendered allegories of spiritual illumination in *Ormond's* densely symbolic exchanges between male and female characters. One of his sources for these allegories was clearly Saint-Martin, as *Ormond's* two Martinist characters reveal. Brown also had an additional source for Behmenist allegories in a radical Christian cult not far from his birthplace in Philadelphia.

The spiritual community at Ephrata was roughly equidistant from Philadelphia and Nottingham, the latter being the Quaker outpost where Brown's forefathers had lived for several generations; Ephrata is situated about sixty miles from both cities. The German mystic Conrad Beissel (1691-1768) emigrated to Philadelphia with the intention of joining the Pietist community established by Johannes Kelpius in the 1690s, alternately known as the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness and the Chapter of Perfection. Yet Kelpius had died by the time of Beissel's arrival in 1720, and so Beissel gathered the remaining members of the Chapter of Perfection into a community which flourished for forty years at Ephrata, beginning in 1732.

¹²³ Brown, *Ormond* 204.

Ephrata declined following Beissel's death in 1768, but did not disband until the nineteenth century; membership peaked in the mid-eighteenth century with about five hundred residents, and dwindled to a few dozen by the century's end.¹²⁴ Though early American scholars have evinced more interest in Brown's potential inspiration by Kelpius and his Philadelphia area community,¹²⁵ Conrad Beissel's Ephrata community was still extant during Brown's lifetime, and conspicuous for its attempt to overcome the binary of sex by postulating an androgynous third gender. In fact, the group's unconventional understanding of gender was one of its most unique features: "Beissel's mystical language radically defied traditional gender concepts. Not only did he define women as a lack of what is male, but he also defined men as deficient in what is female. While a similar view was implicit in some other Radical Pietists, Beissel alone sharpened it and created a communal way of life to remedy it."¹²⁶

Conrad Beissel's deconstruction of gender and Saint-Martin's spiritual androgyny have a common source in the German mystic, Jacob Boehme, and Brown likely understood both men as carrying forth the same Pietistic tradition. Saint-Martin was Boehme's chief translator for the French-speaking world, and his sense of the primal Hermetic Adam and goal of metaphysical marriage with the Virgin Sophia were derived from Boehme's sexual-alchemical theology.¹²⁷ Beissel had traveled to the American colonies with the intent of living out Boehme's teachings as they were interpreted and practiced by Kelpius, and the Kelpius pilgrims were in contact with

¹²⁴ Jeff Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2003) 3-4.

¹²⁵ See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990) 225-226. See also Kafer 114-121.

¹²⁶ Bach 109.

¹²⁷ McCalla 1025-1026.

Boehme's proponents in England, the mystical Philadelphia Society.¹²⁸ The Anglican priest and astrologer, John Pordage, redacted Boehme's Sophianic teachings in several seventeenth century publications. His successor, the Protestant mystic Jane Leade, reported her visionary encounters with Sophia in pamphlets such as *The Laws of Paradise* (1695). To give just one example of how imbricated and interconnected the various Enlightenment occult movements were, the developer of Scottish Rite Masonry, Andrew Michael Ramsay, was for a time a member of Leade's Philadelphia Society. For Leade, Sophia was both the "Woman Clothed with the Sun" and the "Wonder Woman."¹²⁹ Though Saint-Martin founded a ritual order in France and Conrad Beissel organized a Pietist commune in America, both men participated in the dissemination of Boehme's ideas in the eighteenth century, and both cultivated a heart-centered, Sophianic wisdom.

Before turning to Brown's deployment of Beissel's gendered allegories of illumination in *Ormond*, I'll note that the history of the spiritual community at Ephrata provides some other useful contexts for Brown's bizarre novel. Though nominally Christian, Ephrata was, like its predecessor the Chapter of Perfection, heavily influenced by the Western esoteric tradition. Jeff Bach counts "magic, alchemy, and astrology" among Ephrata's "deeply held religious beliefs," and many disaffected community members accused Beissel of practicing magic.¹³⁰ Beissel did, in fact, practice magic, though he distinguished between "sorcery" and "divine magic," and only advocated the latter. An English translation of Beissel's work, *Dissertation on Man's Fall*, was first published in 1765 and thus accessible to Brown, and Beissel's successor Peter Miller published a history of Ephrata, *Chronicon Ephratense*, in 1786. Brown's biographer, Peter Kafer,

¹²⁸ Bach 13.

¹²⁹ Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom* (London: Harper Collins, 1991) 274.

¹³⁰ Bach 171-174.

has speculated that the “great-great-grandparents of Brockden Brown ... came into contact with the Hermits of the Wissahickon,”¹³¹ but it is equally likely that Brown’s father and grandfather were cognizant of the thriving spiritual community at Ephrata not far from their own Quaker community in Nottingham. Peter Miller was a vocal representative for Ephrata in the period of Brown’s youth, thus opening the private community to more public discussion.¹³² But of chief interest here is how a certain spiritual tenet of the community mirrors one of the key plot points of Brown’s *Ormond*; apparently, the ineffable moment of enlightenment was consistently represented as a “mystic death” by Beissel.¹³³ That Brown had a local referent for “the Thing” certainly strengthens an occult reading of *Ormond*’s inscrutable finale. Beissel’s reputation as a philandering and unprincipled magician among erstwhile community members likewise argues that Brown borrowed from Ephrata lore for his character, Ormond. One former Ephrata member even accused Beissel of a magical seduction; Beissel appeared in her room “in a form similar to a shadow ... by means of magic.”¹³⁴ This magical penetration of a sealed room provides another

¹³¹ Kafer 115.

¹³² Richard Mott Gummere, “Apollo on Locust Street,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 56.1 (1932): 76. “Ephrata, the home of the German Baptist Brethren, some fifty miles north-west of Philadelphia, was for many years a centre of classical learning, not only for members of that sect, but even for many prominent members of the Province. For sixty-one years Peter Miller, a Heidelberg graduate, headed this movement and was a profound influence throughout the Province – so much so that, in 1768, he was in his old age elected a member of the American Philosophical Society”(76). Miller, “Brother Agrippa,” lived until 1796. Watson’s *Annals of Philadelphia* notes that Miller was hired by the government to translate the *Declaration of Independence* into seven different languages for distribution in Europe. John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in Olden Time Vol. II* (New York: Baker and Crane, 1844) 110. Janet R. White provides further evidence of Ephrata’s fame by recovering its history as a tourist attraction: “A side-trip to the cloister became a customary excursion for eighteenth-century travelers in Pennsylvania.” The unconventional religious community was so famous in both the United States and Europe that “Voltaire even included a description of it in his *Dictionnaire*.” Janet R. White, “The Ephrata Cloister: Intersections of Architecture and Culture in an Eighteenth-Century Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 11. 2 (2000): 58, 61.

¹³³ Bach 46.

¹³⁴ Bach 112. The story comes from a journal by Ephrata communitarian, Ezechiele Sangmeister, written from 1754-1778. The relevance that this magical seduction provides for *Ormond* is somewhat lessened by the fact that Sangmeister’s journal was not published until after Brown’s death. Joseph Baumann released Sangmeister’s journal in several parts during the 1820s, under the title *Mystische Theologie*. However, Sangmeister, a disgruntled

possible source for Ormond's "secret witnessing" of Constantia's private intercourse with Sophia.

Much of Brown's deployment of Beissel's gendered allegories is shot through with humor; Brown revels in the awkward scenarios that arise when spiritual metaphors are literalized in human relationships. For example, Beissel's Ephrata community was devoted to the "gnostic wooing of the Virgin Sophia."¹³⁵ But when the female Constantia enacts her own program of spiritual enlightenment, she is united with Brown's character, Sophia, a "wooing" and subsequent consummation whose gender inversion and homosexual overtones may have prompted amusement in his readership. Beissel echoed Boehme in his belief that humanity's fall from divine power originated in Adam's lust. Adam, the original human, was genderless, lacking both genitals and intestines, and yet he was perfectly married to the feminine face of God, Sophia. Adam's desire for a fleshly woman was a type of "adultery" for Beissel, one which caused his "heavenly femaleness" to withdraw from him. Sophia abandoned humanity at this time, and the lesser Eve was created in her place.¹³⁶ Boehme's reading of Eve's genesis contains particularly caustic implications for women's role on earth: "It is the fate of man to drag this disappointing female counterpart with him through life."¹³⁷ Beissel, however, was more progressive than Boehme, and believed men and women to be equally responsible for man's fall. Because the division of the first human into two genders was the sign of sin's entrance into the world, Beissel mandated that his communitarians dress alike in emulation of a "third" gender (symbolizing the

former community member, may have circulated rumors about Beissel's magical philandering in the eighteenth century and inspired some portions of Brown's novel. Bach 61-63.

¹³⁵ Brooke 42.

¹³⁶ Bach 38-39.

¹³⁷ Weeks 116.

undivided state of man's original perfection).¹³⁸ The Ephrata disciples who hoped to effect a return to the divine life of the primal Adam practiced celibacy, forsaking the sensuality embodied in earthly Eve in order to be available to the divine consort and virgin, Sophia. Despite the fact that physical sexuality was looked down upon at Ephrata, Beissel's dream of a return to Adamic perfection was conveyed using metaphors of heterosexual coitus. In his *Dissertation on Man's Fall*, he wrote that, "the marriage of *male-life or fire* with *Sophianic and celestial femalety* [brings about] the *restitution of all things*."¹³⁹

Strong evidence that Brown was inspired by Behmenist allegory in crafting *Ormond* appears in Ormond's throwing over of the sensual Helena in order to pursue the laudable Constantia. In this schema, Ormond is not magus but mere initiate; Helena represents Eve, and a lust Ormond must forsake if he would woo Constantia. Constantia herself is a type of Sophia, a near-flawless virgin who greets the exigencies of life with a preternatural calm and fortitude. Here again, Brown has some fun in literalizing spiritual allegory; Constantia pleads with Ormond to marry his mistress and thereby redeem Helena in the eyes of the world. Instead, Ormond coldly rejects Helena and she promptly commits suicide. Though on the level of social morality, Ormond's actions are reprehensible and the consequences tragic, on the level of Hermetic allegory, the removal of the obstacle of earthly Eve signifies a victory for Ormond's progress toward "the Thing," or union with divine Sophia. An image from *Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer, aus dem 16ten und 17ten Jahrhundert*, a beautifully illustrated book of Rosicrucian symbols published in Altona in 1785, reveals that the symbolic divide between Eve and Sophia was a common trope of eighteenth century occultism (see Fig. 5). The image distinguishes between the

¹³⁸ Bach 90.

¹³⁹ Conrad Beissel, *A Dissertation on Man's Fall, Translated from the High-German Original*, trans. Peter Miller (Ephrata, 1765) 1-2.

“The Old Birth,” represented by “Earthly Eve,” and “The New Birth,” represented by “Heavenly Eve” or the Virgin Sophia.

The contrast between Helena and Constantia is dramatic, in order to highlight their respective roles in this spiritual allegory. Brown outdoes himself describing the physical endowments of Helena, whose name connotes Helen of Troy and the face that launched a thousand ships. “All those graces of symmetry, smoothness, and lustre, which assemble in the imagination of the painter when he calls from the bosom of her natal deep the Paphian divinity, blended their perfections in the shade, complexion, and hair of this lady.”¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately Helena’s physical charms pall on her lover when he discovers the dearth of her intellect, which lacks even a firm foundation on which he might impress his own ideas. Tellingly, Brown describes Helena in terms of what she lacks as a spiritual counterpart to Ormond: “Her presence produced a trance of the senses rather than an illumination of the soul.”¹⁴¹ Because Ormond rightly recognizes that marriage is a union of equals and that Helena is inferior to him in mind, he forgoes marriage in favor of living in sin. Brown proffers other clues that Helena symbolizes the “disappointing female counterpart” of sensual Eve, whose dependence Ormond must suffer. Helena’s last name, Cleves, is suggestive in itself, with its connotations of both clinging and rending asunder; her name also includes the word, “Eve.” Constantia’s bizarre address to Helena as “Mrs. Eden” likewise alerts the reader to her symbolic function in the text.¹⁴²

In contrast, Constantia represents women’s capacity for dignified conduct and abstract thought. The “manlike energy” of her rational discourse causes the time Ormond spends with

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *Ormond* 132.

¹⁴¹ Brown, *Ormond* 133.

¹⁴² Brown, *Ormond* 148.

her to seem “like a doubling of existence.”¹⁴³ Just as Constantia’s “prospect of mankind” is doubled by conversing with Martinette, so Ormond’s sense of the human race is doubled when he discovers that a woman may be his intellectual equal. This doubling, or mirroring, in which Ormond sees his own rare qualities reflected in another, also inspires him with a new ardor for the institution of marriage as a true union of equals. Constantia functions as an avatar of Sophianic wisdom in Brown’s Hermetic allegory, producing “the illumination of the soul” that liberates Ormond from his conception that women are mere creatures of feeling and sense:

The manner in which this lady had sustained so cruel a reverse of fortune, the cheerfulness with which she appeared to forego all the gratifications of affluence, the skill with which she selected her path of humble industry, and the steadiness with which she pursued it, were proofs of a moral constitution from which he supposed the female sex to be debarred.¹⁴⁴

The trope of blindness, literal and figurative, recurs in *Ormond*, and here it appears that Constantia’s virtues have cured Ormond’s erstwhile blindness to female excellence. The enlightenment of both Constantia and Ormond thus revolves around the revelation that women are capable of feats of bravery and stamina in common with men.

In this chapter, I first presented Ormond as the magus or initiator to the neophyte, Constantia. In this present section on gender, I postulated that Constantia acts as Ormond’s initiator in the dormant capabilities of womankind. The contradiction inherent in arguing that both characters are masters, and both are novices, is one that is contained by the language of heterosexual coupling in Hermetic allegory. Beissel’s sense that a woman is lacking in what is male, and a man is lacking in what is female, suggests the need for an exchange, a symbolic marriage or divine union in which neither gender is dominant. *Ormond’s* various “couples” and their progress (Ormond and Helena, Ormond and Constantia, Constantia and Martinette, Ormond and Marti-

¹⁴³ Brown, *Ormond* 165.

¹⁴⁴ Brown, *Ormond* 147.

nette, and finally, Constantia and Sophia) all play on the novel's theme of doubling and the eventual resolution into oneness, whether by death, sex, or symbolic union. John Brooke identifies "a dialectical interaction between opposites"¹⁴⁵ in Boehme's thought; Andrew Weeks characterizes the Virgin Sophia as an "attracting force."¹⁴⁶ Thus, the Sophia draws the initiate toward the unity of man's original estate by first polarizing the disharmony which plagues us in a fallen world.¹⁴⁷ Wooing Sophia demands the balancing of seeming opposites, resulting finally in a unity with God's will and the realization of the Hermetic goal of co-creation with the divine. Brown's depiction of both Constantia and Ormond as lacking and in need of divine "mirroring" is not only true to the substance of Hermetic allegory, but also progressive in its elevation of women to an equal status with men.

That Brown penned a speculative novel about a woman's entrée into occult mysteries is remarkable, when considered against a history of women acting only as decorative accessories in occult ritual and practice. *Ormond's* portrait of a woman's induction into the Hermetic mysteries on the virtues of her rational intellect and strong character is unprecedented in the literature of initiation. Enlightenment may have been symbolized by the female Sophia, but long-ingrained belief in women's greater contamination with the material world meant that few real women were presented with the opportunity to join esoteric groups. Though some occultists concocted rites for women, more often than not these were simplified, polite versions of official ceremonies, and women's roles in occult practice in the eighteenth century were generally tied to the symbolic potential of their sex.

¹⁴⁵ Brooke 16.

¹⁴⁶ Weeks 125.

¹⁴⁷ Bach 101.

Specifically, the naked female form represented the goddess Nature in a common eighteenth century occult rite, the “true” revelation standing behind mass belief in a transcendent God.¹⁴⁸ For the occult’s detractors, the worship of the female body as Nature was the worst sin of the secret brotherhoods, highlighting both their “atheism” and lascivious intent. Christian pundits may have exaggerated and misinterpreted these rites, but they did not fabricate them. In an American novel published shortly after *Ormond*, entitled *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*, Sarah Sayward Barrell Keating Wood addresses the Illuminati panic raging in her country with an episode about one woman’s flirtation with occult initiation:

A solemn feast was held to nature, the Goddess they adore, and I was requested to personate that Deity; I hesitated, and asked what would be required of me? Judge what is my surprise, when informed that disrobed of all coverings, except a vest of silver gauze, I am to be exposed to the homage of all the society present, upon a marble pedestal placed behind the altar, upon which sacrifices are to be offered.¹⁴⁹

The speaker, Olivia, refuses to participate in the ritual, and warns Julia against this sect which daily increases and “will in a few years overturn Europe and lay France in ruins.”¹⁵⁰ This vignette serves by contrast to illustrate Brown’s far more nuanced understanding of contemporary occultism, not to mention his radical feminist statement in inventing a new role for Constantia within a Hermetic context: intellectual equal to the male magus. Earthy Helena embodies Nature for Ormond, while Constantia’s rousing discourse “seemed like a doubling of existence.” Constantia doubles Ormond’s conception of humankind by exposing him to female competence; she also doubles as the proficient Hermetic adept herself.

¹⁴⁸ See the chapter “The Moses Discourse in the Eighteenth Century” in Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Mystery of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) for a detailed discussion of this rite.

¹⁴⁹ Sarah Sayward Barrell Keating Wood, *Julia and the Illuminated Baron* (Portsmouth, NH: Charles Peirce, 1800) 243.

¹⁵⁰ Wood 243-244.

Eighteenth century rites revealing the female body as holy Nature, representative of the ultimate mystery, date to the ancient world. The first century historian, Plutarch, interprets the significance of the statue of veiled Isis at Sais thusly: “the Egyptians were acting upon the principle that the truth can only be directly transmitted by means of riddles and symbols.”¹⁵¹ The female body functions as spectacle in this rite, silently revealing the knowledge that God does not live outside or above Nature but rather resides within it. In his book *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Jan Assmann elucidates the imaginative hold Egypt exerted on the Masonic mind, and appends several sixteenth and seventeenth century images of Nature (as a voluptuous woman) being unveiled, a visual trope symbolizing ultimate knowledge. Henry Fuseli’s dramatic frontispiece to Erasmus Darwin’s *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society: A Poem* (1803), offers the most evocative realization of this trope, in an image which depicts a female initiate experiencing rapture and awe before Nature with her veil lifted (see Fig. 6).¹⁵² Far from a minor esoteric fascination, veiled Isis at Sais and her Hermetic motto *Hen kai pan*, “one-and-all,” were taken up and explored by the most prominent minds of the German Enlightenment, among them Kant, Schiller, Herder, Hamann, Hölderlin, Goethe, and Schelling.¹⁵³ Though Fuseli’s engraving postdates *Ormond* by a few years, it marks the culmination of a visual trope that had become standard within esoteric circles. Brown breaks

¹⁵¹ Assmann 118.

¹⁵² Erasmus Darwin, grandfather to the famous naturalist who transformed the world with his theory of natural selection, is of more than incidental importance here. Not only was Erasmus Darwin well-known to the Romantic poets in England, he was also well-loved by Brown’s associates in the New York Friendly Club. Brown’s close friend, E.H. Smith, was so taken with Darwin’s scientific poem, *The Botanic Garden*, that he penned an epistle to “Dr. Darwin” for a special edition of it in 1798 (Waterman, *Friendly Club* 46). Though ostensibly a “scientific” poem, Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* exemplifies the occult’s yoking of reason and revelation by thematizing the Eleusinian Mysteries. In Darwin’s lengthy notes covering this psychic inheritance from ancient Greece, the reader is informed that “the initiation into the grand mysteries exactly resembles death.” Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1798)187. Mysteries that resemble death of course “exactly resemble” the plot of *Ormond*.

¹⁵³ Assmann 140.

from convention by decoupling spiritual enlightenment from the female body as spectacle. While Wood invokes the Isis rite to attack the morality of the Illuminati in *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*, Brown argues that the more profound revelation is woman's mind, not her body.

Epilogue

The historical legacy of Cagliostro, the Comte de Saint-Germain, Saint-Martin, and Conrad Beissel, eighteenth century magi who achieved both notoriety and cult followings during their lifetimes, makes Charles Brockden Brown's magus character, Ormond, appear somewhat overdetermined. For example, in common with the Comte de Saint-Germain, Conrad Beissel believed that he would "not die a natural death like other human beings," and instead achieve a type of immortality which would allow his personality to survive physical death.¹⁵⁴ Thus, there are multiple referents for Ormond's cultivation of Hermetic superpowers. Even Brown's rationalist hero, William Godwin, advocated for personal immortality and life extension in the first edition of *Political Justice* (subsequent editions omitted this speculative material).¹⁵⁵ The fact that the Sophia-Eve polarity which Brown invokes in *Ormond* is illustrated so strikingly in a book of *Rosicrucian* figures, provides some justification for wondering whether Brown was thinking of this most secret of secret societies as he crafted his novel. The entire text of *Ormond* is addressed to "I.E. Rosenberg" by the narrator, Sophia, a name we can generously interpret as, "that is, Rosicrucian."¹⁵⁶ Ormond's power of invisibility was also considered one of the special talents of the Rosicrucian sect. Though Brown's two Illuminati novels, *Ormond* and *Carwin*,

¹⁵⁴ Bach 87.

¹⁵⁵ Marie Roberts, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 27-30.

¹⁵⁶ Brown, *Ormond* 37.

would seem evidence enough of the writer's "occult moment," one of Brown's contemporaries reports the interesting information that Brown also wrote a play about ancient Egyptian history. John Bernard read the play before it was destroyed by Brown, and described the plot as concerning a magician's sway over a young couple in love. The work was a tragedy, terminating with the "triumph of the sorcerer and the death of the lovers."¹⁵⁷ Occult forces certainly triumphed in Chares Brockden Brown's novels of the late 1790s; he may not have been a practicing occultist, but his works initiate the reader into the precondition for magic by broadening the terrain of human epistemology.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, our collective, twenty-first century perception of an exclusively rational Enlightenment is a reductive portrait, one that fails to take into account the strenuous efforts of the eighteenth century's greatest thinkers to find the proper balance of reason in human life. The limits of reason were a concern not only for occultists like Saint-Martin, but also for philosophers like Johann Georg Hamann. Hamann, whom Diane Morgan likens to Derrida,¹⁵⁸ disdained Kant's first critique not only because of Kant's failure to recognize the role of language, but also because of Kant's arrogance in assuming he could elucidate what God had rendered obscure. Though Hamann believes in revelation, the limitations of language inhibit perfect communication from a transrational realm: "[Revelation] can never be completely clear, truthful, adequate, because it is produced by God's distortion of Himself ... through the medium of translation." Consequently, "The most that is revealed to us is the impossibility of a complete revelation."¹⁵⁹ The form of Brown's occult novel, *Ormond*, deftly reflects this idea by revealing nothing more than the hopelessness of communicating revelation. The novel culminates in "the

¹⁵⁷ John Bernard, *Retrospections of America 1797-1811* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887) 255.

¹⁵⁸ Morgan 204.

¹⁵⁹ Hamann quoted in Morgan 210-211.

Thing,” a spectacular event which yet remains invisible and indecipherable. Even the philosopher who claimed to draw a rational, empirical sketch of the human mind, Immanuel Kant, indulges in the sublimity represented by Hermetic initiation. In a footnote in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant muses that, “[N]othing more sublime was ever said or no sublimer thought ever expressed than the famous inscription on the temple of Isis-Nature: ‘I am all that is and that shall be, and no mortal has lifted my veil.’”¹⁶⁰ Morgan argues that Kant’s references to Egypt signify a regression to the irrational, an acknowledgement that our ultimate origins are unknowable and obscure: “This image of a goddess covered by a veil never to be lifted by mortal hand conveys a most sublime truth about the limits of human understanding.”¹⁶¹

Interestingly, though none of Brown’s critics has suggested an occult reading of *Ormond*, William J. Scheick theorizes that the novel is unique for its epistemological rejection of Kant’s transcendental system in favor of one which mirrors the occult goal of self-origination. In Kant’s formulation, the human mind is structured by static, *a priori* assumptions which govern perception; in *Ormond*, conversely, direct or *a posteriori* experience creates the mind. In “The Problem of Origination in Brown’s *Ormond*,” Scheick traces the development of Brown’s characters from limiting, *a priori* assumptions about the structure of reality to more empowering, *a posteriori* conclusions based on positive experience. This implicit rejection of the Kantian model leads *Ormond*’s characters to a state of self-reliance freed from both the imprint of their past histories, and the delusive belief that God or society will address their sundry woes:

Dudley apprehends what *Ormond*, *Craig*, and *Martinette* know, what *Constantia* progressively learns, and what *Sophia* struggles to counter: that the human mind is, for no apparent reason, in some inscrutable sense self-originating; that *a posteriori* recognition of the indefinite motives engendered by that mind to some un-

¹⁶⁰ Kant translated by Assmann 129.

¹⁶¹ Morgan 152.

certain degree more accurately defines human experience of reality than does *a priori* belief in divine or natural causality.¹⁶²

Brown's *Ormond* investigates the problem of human epistemology and concludes that the impossibility of plumbing the sources of our knowledge can be countered by the occult goal of becoming "self-originating." Though Scheick never mentions occult practice in his article, the idea that the "capacity for inventing one's identity and for creating events through the power of the will" ultimately leads Constantia "to harken to the genius of her own mind, to give birth to her own motives, in short to become self-originating,"¹⁶³ echoes the Hermetic goal of self-creation. In other words, if the individual is a Lockean *tabula rasa* written upon by her education, environment, and experience, the Hermetic initiate comprehends this passive relationship and strives to become the writer of her own slate.

That Brown's narrative depicting a woman's rational equality to men should appear in a novel which exploits the ways and means of occult practice, comments implicitly on the occult discourse of heightened personal power. Ormond's ascension into the powers of godhead mirrors Constantia's own expansion into the rational sphere of men. Through thinking, speaking, and acting in a manner imagined to be antithetical to the female sex, Constantia articulates a bid for the civil and social equality of women. Ormond's Hermetic creed of cultivating heretofore latent human abilities defies conventional thinking about the limits of personal power, and provides an apt model for Constantia's political desire. Yet *Ormond* also conveys its radical message through play, flirting with androgyny and subverting expectations about typical gendered behavior. It's certainly ironic that Constantia, a young and inexperienced woman, is a paragon of rationality, while the seasoned Illuminatus Ormond is the champion of irrationality. "Strange

¹⁶² William J. Scheick, "The Problem of Origination in Brown's *Ormond*," *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981) 131.

¹⁶³ Scheick 132.

perverseness of human reason!”¹⁶⁴ he laments in response to Constantia’s continued resistance to his mysterious propositions. The anti-rational reaction to reason’s “perverseness,” in terms of its power to turn one from what was “natural” in the emotions and in religion, was a far more common eighteenth century position than retrospective accounts have led us to imagine. *Ormond* initiates the reader into the Age of Enlightenment’s dialectic of reason, one which, like any true initiation, eludes straightforward expression.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, *Ormond* 249.

*Discursive Failure and Imaginative Genesis: Occult Narration in the
Corpus of Edgar Allan Poe*

Poe the Occultist; Critics and Contexts

“There is no such thing as spirituality. God is material. All things are material,” wrote Edgar Allan Poe in 1844, in a letter outlining his personal philosophy to Thomas Holley Chivers.¹ The reader’s reaction to this powerful – but confounding – declaration very much depends on his or her personal sense of who Edgar Allan Poe was and what he attempted to accomplish with his writing. Literary scholars armed with the knowledge of Poe’s hatred of the flimsy Transcendentalisms of his day might deduce that Poe here performs a reclamation of the material world, and demotes God to a mere animating function in nature. Literary critics with a more informed sense of the history of American Transcendentalism and the regional politics that reigned in Poe’s era might skillfully exploit this statement as evidence that Poe was, in fact, himself a Transcendentalist; his erasure of the line between God and Nature in this declaration echoes the Hermetic cast of the movement as a whole. Finally, the general reader, who has inherited the popular impression of Poe as a mysterious and macabre fellow, might be struck by the disturbing idea of God as a material being, and conclude that Poe’s meaning here partakes of the occultism that appears throughout his short stories in his depiction of altered states of consciousness and paranormal realities. My project in this chapter is to make a case for Poe’s occultism, without forgetting how closely this occultism verges on more mainstream currents, e.g. Transcendentalism, in antebellum American letters.

The divide between the popular and critical Poe matters, because in the interest of “rescuing” Poe from his reputation as a tawdry, gothic personality and producer of merely sensational

¹ Poe quoted in Kenneth Alan Hovey, “Poe’s Materialist Metaphysics of Man,” *A Companion to Poe Studies*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996) 347.

stories, literary critics have often closed down upon precisely what makes Poe so interesting, dynamic, and enduring as an American writer: his deployment of occult themes. So while Poe's twentieth century critics have redeemed Poe's intellect, literary innovations, and aesthetic principles, the occultist Poe has been either sacrificed completely or dressed up as an expression of his classical learning. I do not fault these critics in the least for giving Poe his due as a worthy American talent and sophisticated thinker. Poe's reputation *did* need saving, particularly in the wake of Rufus Griswold's now infamous obituary and "Memoir" of the author, which portrayed Poe as one of his own mad narrators: melancholic, irrational, and irascible, and consumed by drugs and drink.² In the late nineteenth century, Henry James set the tone for Poe scholarship by declaring that "to take [Poe] with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection."³ Much of Poe's formal criticism has distanced itself from one of the writer's most obvious enthusiasms – occult states of being – as a way of side-stepping James's assertion that attention to these thematics reflects a want of seriousness, or perhaps a "primitive stage of reflection," in the critic himself! While I am interpolating James's meaning here, by attributing his dismissal of Poe to Poe's fascination with the occult, it certainly seems that Poe's regular depiction of the occult as material possibility (as opposed to psychological state) is a central component of James's disdain.⁴

² Griswold's damning obituary appeared in the October 9, 1849 edition of the *New York Tribune*. One year later, Griswold published an extended and embellished "Memoir" in both the *International Monthly Magazine* and in a third edition of Poe's collected works. Griswold played fast and loose with the facts of Poe's life and even forged his letters to effect a total character assassination. Though Poe's friends rushed to defend him in print, Griswold's falsehoods were widely repeated and still contribute to the popular perception of Poe as a morbid and disturbed man.

³ Henry James, "Charles Baudelaire," *The Nation* XXII (27 April 1876): 279-280.

⁴ It must be noted that James also explored occult states in his short stories, and in such notable works as *The Turn of the Screw*. Yet James's method of "occulting" vital information to create suspense is more a function of

While the popular Poe makes an appearance in our culture every Halloween, in the form of television, film, radio programs, even plays and festivals dedicated to the gothic writer, literary criticism has been slower to embrace this linking of Poe with the occult which obtains in the popular imaginary. Given the sheer mass of dream visions, psychic doublings, and sentient corpses that haunt Poe's fiction, it is remarkable that no critic has yet made an extended claim for Poe's serious investment in the occult. At best the critical literature offers us a piecemeal account of Poe's occult knowledge: Stephen Rowe cites evidence of Poe's readings of David Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic* and William Godwin's *Lives of the Necromancers*; Arthur Versluis suggests the influence of Poe's West Point professor, the prolific occult writer and Civil War general, Ethan Allan Hitchcock, on his thought; Richard Wilbur gives a vaguely Gnostic reading of Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*; Bruce Mills writes usefully of what Poe's fiction owes to the popular science of mesmerism.⁵ A strong case for Poe's occultism appeared in a 1962 review of John Senior's *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature*; Stuart Levine applied Senior's arguments to Poe's literary corpus, having received Senior's endorsement by letter for relating his ideas to Poe. I quote Levine here in full because his use of the term *occult* is quite specific, and also because he neither apologizes for Poe's unseemly enthusiasms nor attempts to demonstrate that Poe's recourse to the occult was a function of some more lofty enterprise.

literary technique than it is an illustration of occult philosophy or occult practice. See Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972). Burton R. Pollin shows that James's opinion of Poe softened in later years, and James even pays Poe some homage in his mature work, *The Golden Bowl*. See Burton R. Pollin, "Poe and Henry James: A Changing Relationship," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 232-242.

⁵ Stephen Rowe, "Poe's Use of Ritual Magic in His Tales of Metempsychosis," *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 4.2 (Fall, 2003): 41-52; Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 73; Richard Wilbur, *Responses: Prose Pieces 1953-1976* (Story Line Press, 2000) 239-270; Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia: Missouri UP, 2006).

Poe [is] an occultist, and not merely, as in the case of some other Americans, a writer who used the occult. First, he believed in the power of words in the occult sense. In the story “The Power of Words” a character *speaks* a star into existence. Second, his understanding of artistic inspiration goes so much further than the usual romantic notions that it has more in common with Blake than that of, say, Wordsworth, and like Blake’s may best be understood as occult. Third, his “scientific prose poem” *Eureka* is a book about “equivalences” in precisely the occult sense of that term, and bases its reasoning on “analogy” in the occult, and not the modern critical, sense of the word . . . Fourth, the heightened sensitivity characteristic of so many of his protagonists is like that by which initiates of occultism perceive their visions . . . Moreover, the manner in which Poe’s characters reach the supersensitive state of receptivity is frequently exactly what Senior calls “the way down.”⁶

While my own argument about Poe’s occultism will proceed along somewhat different lines, Levine here sets an excellent standard of how to approach the occult on its own terms, without mitigating qualifications or contexts.

The problem with naming Poe an “occultist” instead of a “writer who used the occult,” as Levine has done, is that Poe’s large body of short stories and other magazine pieces are rife with contradictory attitudes and ambiguities. In over a hundred years of Poe criticism, his interpreters have claimed him for both a materialist and an idealist, with more or less equally compelling force on either side.⁷ The truth, no doubt, lies somewhere in the middle, and it is to this middle I turn when attempting to account for how ideal forms might obtrude on physical reality. The denial of the separation between physical and spiritual realities is a hallmark of *Hermeticism*; the enactment of this principle with the goal or result of defying the constraints of physical reality, as we understand it, is the province of the *occult*. For example, in one of Poe’s most famous stories, “Ligeia,” the soul of a dead woman effects a reincarnation into the body of a fully grown woman, via the power of her “giant will.” Though the occult phenomenon of metempsychosis,

⁶ Stuart Levine, “In the Mystical Moist Night-Air,” *American Quarterly* 14.2, Part 1 (Summer 1962): 202-203.

⁷ Hovey 348.

as such body-transference was called, is incorporated into the history of Hermeticism, it is hardly to such supernatural feats that historians refer when generalizing about the “Hermetic” roots of Transcendentalism. And yet the Hermetic tradition was the primary carrier of occult practices, which sought to manipulate physical reality with spiritual means. The terms *Hermetic* and *occult* necessarily appeal to one another, and I elaborate upon their definitions over the course of this chapter.

To return to Levine’s claim, that Poe was an occultist and not merely an author who used the occult to good effect in his stories, I would counter that Poe is *both*. Two of Poe’s stories about mesmerism serve as an excellent case in point here. In “Mesmeric Revelation,” Poe portrays mesmerism sympathetically, and uses the frame narrative of a man being interviewed under hypnosis to voice his own beliefs about the survival of personality in the afterlife. Yet in the year following “Mesmeric Revelation,” Poe published “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” a story which likewise features a patient under hypnosis. Instead of presenting a beautiful and coherent vision of life after death as the first story does, M. Valdemar dies while mesmerized and dissolves into a mass of “detestable putrescence.”⁸ By contrast, in “Mesmeric Revelation” the patient Vankirk passes gracefully into the next world in a state of exaltation. There is something for both those in the idealist and materialist camps here; our judgment of where Poe falls in this spectrum will determine which story we think represents the writer’s “true” stance on mesmerism. Unfortunately Poe’s penchant for literary hoaxes and rhetorical ruses severely hampers the critic’s ability to make “the real Edgar Allan Poe stand up.” My claim that “Mesmeric Revelation” represents Poe’s actual beliefs as an occultist, while “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” constitutes an exercise in his employing the occult to horrific effect, though supported by

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales of Mystery and Imagination; The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym; The Raven and Other Poems* (London: Octopus, 1981) 163.

some compelling evidence, could be contradicted by the argument that the first story was meant as a hoax. I read this seeming tension in Poe's corpus, between his exploitation of occult practices for their entertainment value and his earnest portrayals of the occult as redemptive philosophy, as a function of the same literary trajectory; according to Joshua Gunn in *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, vacillation between critique and endorsement is a recurrent feature of occult writing, serving as a strategy to mask the writer's investment in a controversial belief system.⁹

Inspired by the recent critical redemption of "surface reading," a practice which emphasizes the importance of literal interpretations and de-emphasizes the deconstructive work performed by the critic, I center this chapter on a close reading of Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka*, the cosmology he published in 1848.¹⁰ As Poe's most lucid avowal of occult belief, this lengthy treatise "on the material and spiritual universe"¹¹ serves us well as an index of Poe's occult sources and personal convictions. Joan Dayan even proposes that we take *Eureka* as "the rhetorical key" to Poe's entire body of work.¹² While I do not make the mistake of confusing Poe with some of his mad narrators, I do take seriously the earnest, urgent tone he employs in this non-fiction text. Poe's own estimation of *Eureka*'s cosmological speculations may be gleaned from the boastful comment he made to his publisher that "Newton's discovery of gravitation was a mere incident compared with the discoveries revealed in this book."¹³ The fact that Poe died a little over a year after *Eureka*'s initial publication lends some uncanny significance to the lines

⁹ Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2005) 22.

¹⁰ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (Fall 2009): 1-21.

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia, A Chapter on Autography, The Literati* (Boston: Dana Estes, 1884) 1.

¹² Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 7.

¹³ Poe quoted in James M. Hutchisson, *Poe* (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2005) 217.

he wrote to Stella Lewis in a melancholy missive of 1849: “I have no desire to live since I have done ‘Eureka.’ I could accomplish nothing more.”¹⁴ Yet despite *Eureka*’s sincere tone and straightforward language, and Poe’s sense that it was a monumental achievement, the text has most often been interpreted as either a grand hoax or a profound embarrassment. *Eureka* might fail in its attempt to harmonize contemporary scientific knowledge with a Hermetic view of the cosmos, but it does not fail as a statement of religious belief, as Peter Swirski has pointed out.¹⁵ Critical reception of *Eureka* has evolved so far from Poe’s stated intent in the text that it merits some further discussion.

Both the critical effort to redeem Poe as a sophisticated intellectual and a general ignorance of a viable occult tradition in nineteenth century America have contributed to misreadings of *Eureka*. The problem with the “secret tradition” of Hermeticism is that it sometimes passes so quietly through the ages as to leave only faint and dubious material traces – a boon for practitioners jealous of their privacy, a bugbear for the literary historian. A tradition which survives chiefly in obscure and musty tomes, one furthermore kept clandestine by its adherents, is not likely to make its appearance in the historian’s arsenal. Another impediment to appreciating the particular religious view Poe upholds in *Eureka*, one that goes beyond simple unawareness of spiritual diversity in the nation’s history, is the secular bias of the academy. Two examples culled from critics whom I respect very much and whose works figure prominently in this chapter will be illustrative here. In her landmark text *Fables of Mind* (1987), perhaps the first monograph to construct Poe as an intellectual heavyweight, Joan Dayan argues that “Poe writes his

¹⁴ Poe quoted in Hutchisson 241.

¹⁵ Peter Swirski, *Between Literature and Science: Poe, Lem, and Explorations in Aesthetics, Cognitive Science, and Literary Knowledge* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2000) 69.

cosmology *Eureka* as a sermon against the tendency to seek groundless principles of unity.”¹⁶ Why “groundless”? According to Sydney E. Ahlstrom in *A Religious History of the American People*, “unity” or synthesis is the concept underlying almost every religious alternative to the Judeo-Christian mainstream, from homegrown occult or “harmonial” religions to influences from the Eastern world.¹⁷ Furthermore, Poe’s near-obsessive, always exultant return to the terms “Unity” and “One” throughout the text of *Eureka* causes me to wonder why his must be considered a sermon *against*, instead of, more plainly, a sermon.

John T. Irwin, another eminent Poe critic invested in revealing the gothic writer’s intellectual prowess, discusses *Eureka* in tandem with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and all but arrives at the Hermetic resolution of the latter. *Pym* ends famously with the narrator’s confrontation with a large, shadowy white figure, somewhat like a god, and thus it is reasonable to assume that Pym has encountered his deity, his destiny, or his death. The Hermetic idea that man is equivalent to God is consistent with the doubling images that infuse *Pym*’s final pages. Irwin skirts this conclusion, and then promptly evacuates all meaning from the tantalizing prospect of “recogniz[ing] the self as God”: “By interpreting the misty figure with its aura of divinity as Pym’s unrecognized shadow, the reader recognizes/acknowledges that ‘God’ has always been a self-projected, idealized image of man, a personification of man’s alogical desire for a form of consciousness released from the constraints of the body, time, and death ...”¹⁸ Irwin’s assumption of what God “has always been,” not only for Poe but also for his readership, is both pejorative and deflationary, reducing all religious longing to Freud’s dismissal of religion as a neurotic

¹⁶ Dayan, *Fables of Mind* 13.

¹⁷ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972) 1038.

¹⁸ John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 226.

fantasy of wish-fulfillment. Irwin also acknowledges *Eureka*'s drive toward spiritual integration or unity, and admits, "Such is eternity – but such is oblivion as well." These examples serve to illustrate that Hermetic ideas are not lacking organically in Poe's writing so much as Hermetic sympathies are absent in his critics. Irwin's reduction of Poe's beautiful and painstakingly elaborate vision of "eternity" to personal "oblivion" is all his own, and does not reflect Poe's overwhelmingly ecstatic tone in *Eureka*, which opens with "a sentiment of awe."¹⁹

In this chapter I examine the several Hermetic components of Poe's philosophy, which are outlined so starkly in *Eureka*. A hallmark of Poe's tales is the unnerving destabilization of the physical senses; whether acute, as in the extreme sensitivity of Roderick Usher, or dull, as in the inability of "Ligeia's" opium-addled narrator to recall his wife's surname, the senses and their aberrations appear as a conspicuous theme in Poe's corpus. Poe's fascination with the functioning of the senses after physical death ultimately suggests the Hermetic idea of the continuance of perception and identity after the body's dissolution. I dedicate the subsequent section to Poe's claim, in *Eureka*, for the materiality of God. Part science, part speculation, Poe's conclusion that God must be material because only material things exist dovetails neatly with the earlier discussion of perceptual faculties. According to Poe, our difficulty in accepting this proposition is a direct result of the grossness of our senses, most of us lacking the nicety of perception which would allow us to understand God as a substance. Poe's meticulous dismantling of the notion that we perceive solely through the senses, and his denial that God is a spirit, separate from us, lead him finally to the core Hermetic belief: man's equality to God. Thus I account for Poe's rapturous return to "Unity" throughout *Eureka* as the quintessential Hermetic tenet, one that seeks to dissolve the polarities of matter and spirit, body and soul, man and God. I then close the chapter with a consideration of Hermetic elements in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, to

¹⁹ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 1.

the end of arguing that Poe's fiction, as opposed to his bold cosmotheological treatise *Eureka*, garnered him the most influence as an occult writer.

Poe the Transcendentalist; Sources and Similarities

Poe's occult sources are numerous and varied, ancient and contemporary, and also original, in that he was directly inspired by uncanny experiences resisting verbal description. Because so few critics have attempted to establish Poe's occultism, and because the influence of Hermeticism on Transcendentalism has likewise received scant attention, my own claims about Poe are somewhat general and modest in scope. In this chapter I seek to place him within a tradition of Hermetic literature, and not to align him with any particular thinker or source. In so doing, I hope to lay a foundation for understanding Poe, still the most famous and recognized writer of nineteenth century America, as an occult thinker for the benefit of future studies.²⁰ Of the many existing studies that either anatomize Poe's highly idiosyncratic philosophy or argue for his "debt" to other prominent writers, none locates Poe within a literary lineage of Hermeticism. Essays which compare his thought to that of Empedocles and Epicurus, for example, or argue for his emulation of Coleridge and Kant, access isolated portions of Poe's philosophy gleaned from his classical learning and idealism.²¹ But occultism is the larger, umbrella category which encompasses Poe's various enthusiasms and influences, from the popular to the obscure, and from ancient to contemporary thinkers.

²⁰ J. Gerald Kennedy, ed., *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 3. "[N]o American writer of the antebellum period enjoys greater current popularity and recognizability."

²¹ For Poe's debt to the ancient cosmologer Empedocles, see Peter C. Page, "Poe, Empedocles, and Intuition in *Eureka*," *Poe Studies* 11.2 (December 1978): 21-26. For a consideration of Poe's Epicureanism, see Hovey, "Poe's Materialist Metaphysics of Man," cited in note 1 of this chapter. For Poe's reading of Coleridge, see Floyd Stovall, "Poe's Debt to Coleridge," *Studies in English* 10 (July 8, 1930): 70-127, and Alexander Schultz, "Edgar Allan Poe Reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge," *Studies in Romanticism* 47.2 (Summer 2008): 195-224. For Poe's influence by Kant, see Glen A. Omans, "'Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense': Poe's Debt to Immanuel Kant," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980): 123-168.

In recent years, scholars have made the case for an American Hermeticism. One of the only writers to treat occultism as a coherent tradition inspiring much nineteenth century American literature is Arthur Versluis, whose *Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* rather ingeniously draws a parallel between the newly translated Platonic texts which inaugurated the Florentine Renaissance, and the translation of Plato into English which stimulated the Romantic movement in literature.²² *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007), by Catherine Albanese, recuperates the great bulk of America's occult history, and she begins her study with a consideration of the dissemination of Hermeticism, tracking how, "the Hermetic writings made their way out of the closed world of high cultural texts and into the vernacular culture of the West."²³ In *The Refiner's Fire* (1996), John L. Brooke argues convincingly that the American religion of Mormonism was concocted out of Hermetic roots seeded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁴ Poe's nemesis Longfellow (a target for Poe's jealousy because of his New England privilege) wrote conspicuously enough about Hermes Trismegistus as to garner him some mention under that heading in the scholarly *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005).²⁵ Esoteric scholar Antoine Faivre further reports that casual references to the same "Hermes" are scattered throughout Emerson's essays.²⁶

²² Versluis 53, 66. The fifteenth century humanist Marsilio Ficino translated Plato's works into Latin, thus making them widely accessible. Thomas Taylor translated Plato into English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which made Plato's texts available to Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats in England, and Emerson in America.

²³ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007) 23.

²⁴ John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

²⁵ Antoine Faivre, "Hermes Trismegistus III: Modernity," *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 485. Longfellow identifies himself with the demi-god in his long poem, "Hermes Trismegistos" (1881).

With the exception of Versluis, none of these Hermetic historians mentions Poe, though all refer to Ralph Waldo Emerson as the mouthpiece of the revitalized Hermeticism that emerged in the nineteenth century.

Because Emerson's name has become synonymous with the outpouring of Idealist, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic thought in American literature, collectively subsumed under the heading, "Transcendentalism," and because Edgar Allan Poe positioned himself against the Transcendentalist movement, I am compelled here to consider how the projects of these two thinkers differed in their deployment of identical concepts. I conclude, perhaps surprisingly, that Emerson and Poe were actually closely aligned in their philosophical assumptions, though widely divergent in their personalities and literary methods. While Emerson was too much a peer to qualify as an influence on Poe (Emerson was born in 1803 and Poe in 1809), placing both writers within the bounds of the same literary movement opens up more interpretative possibilities for Poe's work than it denies. In other words, both Poe and Emerson drew from the same Hermetic stream that flowed with newly available ancient texts, German Idealism, and popular occult movements like mesmerism. Though I further conclude that there is a substantive difference between Emerson's mysticism and Poe's occultism, this difference is one of degree and has been greatly exaggerated by literary critics, to the end of denying Poe a place among his peers and within the dominant literary mode of Transcendentalism in the 1830s and 1840s.

In the essay "Poe on Transcendentalism," Ottavio M. Casale demonstrates that Poe's regular mocking of the Boston "Frogpondians," i.e. the Transcendentalists, was motivated as

²⁶ Faivre 485. Faivre's assertion is supported by the entry, "Hermes," in "A Concordance to the Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson," which lists six appearances of "Hermes" and one mention of "Hermes Trismegistus." Eugene F. Irey., comp., and Bradley P. Dean, coding, "A Concordance to the Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson," *The Concord Free Public Library* 2005. Web. 5 March 2012. <<http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollect/EmersonConcordance/HEMLOCK-HIGGLE.HTM>>.

much (or more) by literary jealousy as it was by philosophical critique.²⁷ A Southern writer, Poe resented the easy respect won by the New England Transcendentalists with their vague and flowery pronouncements, while he languished in poverty as a magazine hack. Seeing himself as the “victim of a plot, originating in Boston,”²⁸ Poe took aim at Transcendentalism in a number of published pieces. For example, in “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” (1841), Poe pokes fun at the “mystical ... pantheistical ... twistical ... hyper-quizzitistical” ruminations of Coleridge, Kant, Carlyle, and Emerson.²⁹ In “Autography” (1842), Poe performed his most sustained attack on Emerson, one which is no doubt responsible in large part for the rift we have inherited regarding their respective literary legacies:

Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson belongs to a class of gentleman with whom we have no patience whatever – the mystics for mysticism’s sake. Quintilian mentions a pedant who taught obscurity, and who once said to a pupil “this is excellent, for I do not understand it myself.” How the good man would have chuckled over Mr. E! His present *role* seems to be the out-Carlyling Carlyle ... The best answer to his twaddle is *cui bono?* ... to whom is it a benefit? If not to Mr. Emerson individually, then surely to no man living.³⁰

It’s notable that Poe does not attack the philosophical basis of Transcendentalism here, but rather the exploitation of mysticism for mysticism’s sake. In a posthumous essay on criticism, Poe calls the Transcendental style an “affectation – that is, an assumption of airs and tricks which have no basis in common sense.”³¹ He then compares the “curt oracularities” of Emerson, Alcott, and Fuller to Lyly’s Euphuisms, or writing that is mellifluous in cadence but shallow in content. While one might assume that Poe’s critique of the Transcendentalists was rooted in an

²⁷ Ottavio M. Casale, “Poe on Transcendentalism,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 50 (1968 Supplement): 85-97.

²⁸ Casale 91.

²⁹ Poe quoted in Casale 86.

³⁰ Poe quoted in Casale 89.

³¹ Poe quoted in Casale 89.

impatience with spiritual or non-rational contemplation, in fact, just the opposite is true; Poe was intensely serious about his metaphysics, and therefore chafed when his mystical philosophy was invoked for some shallow purpose or conclusion.

Casale cites evidence of Poe's appreciation of Transcendentalist writing outside the Boston mainstream, and also carefully tracks his shifting tone toward Margaret Fuller; it was only after Poe felt snubbed by the New England writer that he insulted her with the epithet, "Transcendentalist."³² Poe called Transcendentalism an "ennobling philosophy" (albeit one which had been degraded by New England cant) in 1844, and in the same year he wrote to Thomas Holley Chivers, "You mistake me in supposing I dislike the transcendentalists – it is only the pretenders and sophists among them."³³ There is copious evidence here to suggest that Poe and Emerson were engaged in the same philosophical quest, however they might have been separated by their regional and socio-economic backgrounds. Yet Poe's public virulence against the Transcendentalists has led to a critical history which constructs these two dominant voices as polar opposites in American literature, as in Clark Griffith's essay, "'Emersonianism' and 'Poeism.'"³⁴ Only a few critics have challenged Poe's vaunted exceptionalism by arguing that "both men expressed, or codified, the spirit of the age in which they lived."³⁵ In an essay which argues for similarities in "The Poetics of Emerson and Poe," James E. Mulqueen lays out basic premises for investing Poe with something of the same mystic sensibility with which we have loaded Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Emerson and Poe were Idealists who saw an eternal spiritual verity underlying the mate-

³² Casale 90.

³³ Poe quoted in Casale 94.

³⁴ Clark Griffith, "'Emersonianism and Poeism': Some Versions of the Romantic Sensibility," *Modern Language Quarterly* 22.2 (June 1961): 125-134.

³⁵ Gerald M. Garmon, "Emerson's 'Moral Sentiment,' and Poe's 'Poetic Sentiment,'" *Poe Studies* 6.1 (1973): 19.

rial universe ... Both poets prize imagination as the faculty which can provide an apprehension of the ideal unity.”³⁶ These premises are particularly useful when considering the likeness of these writers’ most related projects, Emerson’s *Nature* and Poe’s *Eureka*.

Emerson’s literary career began with the publication of *Nature* (1836), and Poe’s career (and life) ended after *Eureka* (1848). A brief comparison of the two works provides the best evidence that the two men shared a Hermetic belief system. The widely differing receptions of *Nature* and *Eureka* also tell us much about where the two thinkers diverged; *Nature* was something of an instant classic, *Eureka* an instant bomb, and to this day *Nature* often serves as the student’s first exposure to Emerson, while *Eureka* is usually the last text one tackles of Poe’s.³⁷ While it is not my purpose here to enumerate all of *Nature*’s Hermetic elements, suffice it to say that in this short text, Emerson calls for man to awaken the perceptual faculty of a god by becoming a “transparent eye-ball,” so that he may say, with Emerson, “I am part or particle of God.”³⁸ In the complex chapter, “Idealism,” Emerson exhorts the reader to perceive the hidden “causes and spirits” which underlie physical reality, and then stresses the creative power of the poet as god in his ability to toss “the creation like a bauble from hand to hand, and [use] it to embody any caprice of thought that is upper-most in his mind.”³⁹ Emerson’s quick return to a materialist viewpoint in the same chapter at first appears contradictory. “I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother [Nature], nor soil my gentle nest,” Emerson reassures us, as he retreats into the

³⁶ James E. Mulqueen, “The Poetics of Emerson and Poe,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 55 (1969): 5.

³⁷ Patrick F. Quinn, “Poe’s *Eureka* and Emerson’s *Nature*,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 31 (1963): 4.

³⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, comp. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 10.

³⁹ Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* 33-35.

physical imagery of corn and melons expanding in the sun.⁴⁰ Yet this near-simultaneous espousal of the ideal and the real is in fact an expression of the “central Unity” he writes so reverently of in the chapter, “Discipline,” and the harmonizing of the two perspectives constitutes a fair articulation of the Hermetic philosophy. In *Eureka*, Poe also urges man to become as God, and his attempt to bridge the epistemologies of science and intuition is a function of the same Hermetic drive to Unity. His project in *Eureka* differs from Emerson’s in *Nature* chiefly in ambition and scope.

Poe’s considerably longer text, *Eureka*, extends the principles of *Nature* by claiming to subsume contemporary developments in science under a single system which also includes the process of intuition and the reach of spiritual sight. To *Eureka*’s detractors (one might say rationalists), Poe’s careless handling of scientific theorems is the text’s overriding sin; to *Eureka*’s champions (one might say believers), Poe’s ability to draw parallels between scientific thought and spiritual realities is the text’s primary attraction. But it must be said that *Eureka* has never had many defenders. Peter Swirski locates the failure of Poe’s cosmology not only in his bungling of scientific fact, but also in his delusion that such a metaphysically saturated text would appeal to scientists. Whereas Emerson “forswears consistency” with such pronouncements as “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself,” Poe pretends to have constructed “a train of ratiocination as rigorously logical as that which establishes any demonstration in Euclid.” He therefore opens himself to “interdisciplinary scrutiny” by overestimating the range of *Eureka*’s audience, whereas *Nature*’s avowed opposition to “cognitive accountability” makes it “invulnerable to epistemic critique.”⁴¹ Both men wish to incorporate the whole of reality, the physical and the ideal, into a single system; Emerson is simply more modest in his scheme, and

⁴⁰ Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* 38.

⁴¹ Emerson and Poe quoted in Swirski 67; Swirski 67.

perhaps more mindful of the limits of what his audience could accept as ideal in origin. But at times he errs like Poe. One of *Nature's* more awkward moments appears in the chapter, "Commodity," in which Emerson proposes human industry as a function of "Nature," which is his word for the ideal manifesting in the physical world. His blithe assimilation of railroad building ("he paves the road with iron bars") and the coarse work of commerce ("mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him") into his system is at odds with both poetic notions of Nature as unsullied wilderness, and the comforting symbiosis between "Nature and the Soul" which he has taken great pains to establish.⁴² It is to be assumed that had Emerson emphasized this industrialist application of his ideas, *Nature* would not be the classic it is today.

Emerson's reluctance to project his system beyond the conventional bounds of religion and philosophy contributed to *Nature's* success. Edgar Allan Poe's considerably more ambitious attempt to yoke things which are inherently unlike, such as mathematical problems and the mind of God, or science and religion, is the cause of *Eureka's* failure. Emerson's lapse in a jarring invocation of railroad tracks can again serve as example here. I balk at this imagery when reading *Nature*, because I don't particularly wish to understand train tracks as an expression of my own soul or of God's divine plan, which are One according to his schema. Human industry and metaphysical Oneness exist rather too far apart conceptually to be so casually integrated; Poe's conflation of the even more widely spaced fields of Enlightenment science and spiritual speculation was so embarrassing to his contemporaries that he was thought to be mentally disturbed. Yet this attempt to enlarge the sphere of spiritual reality's encroachment upon matter is precisely what makes Poe an occultist, because he does so outside a Christian framework. As I shall demonstrate over the course of this chapter, Poe extends to material reality what Emerson was most comfortable conceiving of as metaphor or philosophy. The difference may be expressed in a po-

⁴² Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* 12-13, 8.

larity borrowed from Religious Studies, as that existing between a transcendent and immanent (indwelling) God. Emerson's call to Unity in *Nature* notwithstanding, God is still safely contained in Heaven where he has long reigned. For Poe, on the other hand, the God in self is always on the verge of sublime dissolution into the nature of other, material Gods: "[W]hereas *Eureka* presents a sweeping, post-human exhibition of the self's unification with the universe, the tales show the all-too-human, often terrifying process of self becoming subject to the things around it – becoming, as it were, a thing it-self."⁴³ Matthew A. Taylor makes the claim here for Poe's post-humanism, a new theoretical concept whose prehistory, of course, lies with the occult.

My intent in comparing and contrasting Emerson and Poe's metaphysical views is to upset the idea of Poe's anomalous status in American letters, as a brooding writer of gothic stories and poems whose *outré* interests did not touch the intellectual heights of antebellum literary culture. Yet I also wish to reclaim an aspect of Poe's uniqueness which critical studies of the writer have ignored: his occultism. I present here one further illustration of Poe's departure from Emerson to establish that, in spite of the Hermetic philosophy both men espoused, Emerson had little patience with the occult. The *occult* differs from the *Hermetic* in that it signifies action, an event in which material reality conforms to some invisible force, such as the magician's will or the bereaved husband's longing to contact his deceased wife. An event like seeing a ghost, for example, is called unnatural, supernatural, or uncanny, because a person who now exists only in non-corporeal form (spirit or memory) obtrudes upon the physical world by presenting a recognizable form to the senses. Implicit in the definition of a word like "supernatural" is the connotation of an event which does not occur very often, because events which are regular and consistent are "natural." Thus, when scientists succeeded in predicting the track of comets, their ap-

⁴³ Matthew A. Taylor, "Edgar Allan Poe's (Meta)physics: A Pre-History of the Post-Human," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 62.2 (Sep. 2007): 209. Taylor argues implicitly for Poe's occultism by grounding Poe's "post-humanism" in his mesmeric studies.

pearance was no longer considered a supernatural portent or ominous sign. An example of Emerson's irritation with the occult shows up in his dismissal of Spiritualism, which he termed the "rat revelation." The first widely publicized Spiritualistic phenomena were raps, taps, and cracks imagined to be produced by disembodied spirits, but which Emerson likened to rats gnawing on wood and scratching on floorboards.⁴⁴ The Spiritualists thought they were heeding Emerson's call by perceiving the activity of Spirit manifested in the physical world, but Emerson balked at any irregular display of material reality.⁴⁵

Emerson's essay, "Demonology," is a distillation of his rejection of the occult, consistent with attitudes he expressed over the course of his long career. Though not published until forty years after *Nature*, "Demonology" evinces the same discomfort with taking the Hermetic philosophy too literally as does his inspirational book of 1836.⁴⁶ He begins "Demonology" by stating that all manifestations of the occult "shun rather than court inquiry," in spite of the fact that "every man" has had a few uncanny experiences in his lifetime.⁴⁷ He then consigns the interpretation of dreams to the "limbo and dust-hole of thought."⁴⁸ For Emerson, the everyday world is

⁴⁴ John B. Wilson, "Emerson and the 'Rochester Rappings,'" *The New England Quarterly* 41.2 (Jun. 1968): 248-249.

⁴⁵ "Spiritualists acknowledged their debt to Emerson. They enthusiastically attended his lectures and quoted him in their publications and on their platform. But Emerson eschewed their praise and failed to return the compliment." Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon, 1989) 44-45.

⁴⁶ In the "Idealism" chapter in *Nature*, Emerson owns that "there is something ungrateful in expanding too curiously the particulars" of the more uncanny implications of the Idealist philosophy. Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* 38. "Demonology" was first given as a lecture in 1839, adapted from material in Emerson's journals of 1837-1838. The revised, published version of 1877 also includes materials from Emerson's journals of the 1850s and 1860s. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Demonology," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1904) note on 511.

⁴⁷ Emerson, *Complete Works* 4.

⁴⁸ Emerson, *Complete Works* 7.

full enough of wonders, and he constructs those who search for material assurance of ideal realities, i.e. occultists, as unaware of the contented awe at the mundane which he has achieved:

The lovers of marvels, of what we call the occult and unproved sciences, of mesmerism, of astrology, of coincidences, of intercourse, by writing or by rapping or by painting, with departed spirits, need not reproach us with incredulity because we are slow to accept their statement . . . We are used to vaster wonders than these that are alleged . . . Nature never works like a conjuror, to surprise, rarely by shocks, but by infinite graduation.⁴⁹

Emerson touches on the source of his aversion to the occult here, which is that such irregular appearances do not conform to natural laws. Interestingly, at times Emerson acknowledges the existence of occult realities, but advocates ignoring such mysteries because they threaten the peace of the soul: “There are many things of which a wise man might wish to be ignorant, and these are such. Shun them as you would the secrets of the undertaker and the butcher.”⁵⁰ In “Demonology,” believers in occult revelations are victims of self-flattery and “egotism” by imagining that Nature has bent her rules for the benefit of the lone individual.

Taken altogether, “Demonology” is a cutting treatise, finding little to redeem in occult speculation other than “the inextinguishableness of wonder in man.”⁵¹ Emerson even resorts to gender and ethnic stereotypes as a way to dismiss the upsurge of popular interest in the occult: “The insinuation is that the known eternal laws of morals and matter are sometimes corrupted or evaded by this gypsy principle, which chooses favorites and works in the dark for their behoof; as if the laws of the Father of the universe were sometimes balked and eluded by a meddling Aunt of the universe for her pets.”⁵² Clearly, Emerson was no occultist. Though Poe and Emerson partook of the same historical milieu and each arrived independently at the Hermetic phi-

⁴⁹ Emerson, *Complete Works* 13.

⁵⁰ Emerson, *Complete Works* 21.

⁵¹ Emerson, *Complete Works* 27.

⁵² Emerson, *Complete Works* 19.

losophy, Poe was the more bold of the two by extending the principle of ideal and material Oneness to scientific theory, as he does in *Eureka*, and to mesmeric phenomena, as he does in “Mesmeric Revelation.” The distinction between Emerson’s mysticism, which largely confined Hermetic speculation to the private world of the mind and emotions, and Poe’s occultism, which projected the Hermetic view onto the body and physical reality, is helpful in assessing the use each man made of the foundational Hermetic books contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

In this chapter, I compare Poe’s philosophy as put forth in *Eureka* to major tenets of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. By focusing my inquiry on these ancient texts, I argue not so much for Poe’s direct exposure to them (though this seems likely), as I do for the right to position Poe within the canon of Hermetic literature. Many of Poe’s occult premises in *Eureka* and “Mesmeric Revelation” line up neatly with ideas expressed by Hermes Trismegistus in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. One of the likeliest avenues for Poe’s reading of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was Emerson himself. Although Poe poked fun at the flowery metaphysics of the Transcendentalists, E. Arthur Robinson has shown via an agglomeration of references that Poe was most certainly “a professional reader of *The Dial*,”⁵³ the short-lived Transcendentalist organ. In January of 1844 – the same year in which Poe composed his philosophical tale “Mesmeric Revelation” – there appeared in *The Dial* under Emerson’s editorship some “Ethnical Scriptures” attributed to one Hermes Trismegistus. It is on these scriptures that I build a case for Poe’s knowledge of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

In an 1842 letter to his brother, Emerson reports that his friend Bronson Alcott has returned from London with some thousand volumes of mostly “mystical & philosophical books.” So impressed was Emerson by the contents of the “cabalistic collection” that he listed two hun-

⁵³ E. Arthur Robinson, “Thoreau and the Deathwatch in Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” *Poe Studies* 4.1 (Jun. 1971): 14.

dred of the titles in the April 1843 edition of *The Dial*. He also named the acquisition of “this cabinet of mystic and theosophic lore” by Americans as “a remarkable fact in our literary history.”⁵⁴ Included in those titles listed by Emerson is *The Divine Pymander of Hermes Trismegistus*, i.e., the first fourteen books of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Here it is safe to assume that Bronson and his friends had gotten a hold of an edition of John Everard’s 1650 translation of the *Pymander*, the first to be made into English and the standard in Hermetic literature until 1906, a date which marks a turn toward more objective scholarship of these ancient occult texts.⁵⁵

Though I will be devoting copious attention to the “Ethnical Scriptures” of thrice-majestic Hermes quoted in *The Dial*, I should point out that the possible ways Edgar Allan Poe may have been exposed to the philosophy of Hermeticism are innumerable. The influential tome, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) by the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, discusses the *Corpus Hermeticism* in some detail and was instrumental in disseminating Hermetic ideas among the intelligentsia.⁵⁶ In *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher* (1858), Poe’s former instructor Hitchcock identifies the *Corpus Hermeticum* as the predominant inspiration of the eighteenth century Swedish mystic; however, he also takes the trouble to reproduce several paragraphs from the Hermetic canon, “as the *Pymander* is out of print and scarcely known.”⁵⁷ Both omnipresent and functionally invisible, Hermeticism informs almost every ontological deviation from the norm exploited by Poe for fictional purposes, from mesmerism to metempsychosis.

⁵⁴ Emerson quoted in Patrick F. Quinn, “Emerson and Mysticism,” *American Literature* 21.4 (Jan. 1950): 404.

⁵⁵ Antoine Faivre, “Hermetic Literature IV: Renaissance-Present,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Boston: Brill, 2005) 540.

⁵⁶ Faivre, “Hermetic Literature IV” 538.

⁵⁷ Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Swedenborg, A Hermetic Philosopher* (New York: D. Appleton, 1858) 132. This text postdates Poe’s death in 1849, but Arthur Versuis has made the case that Hitchcock’s occult learning could have influenced Poe when he was Poe’s instructor at West Point. See note 5 in this chapter.

An Occult Premise: The Harmonizing of Reason and Revelation

In the first chapter of this dissertation I made the claim that the occult societies which informed Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Ormond*, drew from the provinces of both reason and revelation in order to achieve a more holistic knowledge that was greater than the sum of its parts. I then argued that Brown and other savvy critics of the Enlightenment were quick to note the subjective quality of reason, and were therefore less likely to dismiss those enterprises arbitrarily deemed "irrational." Edgar Allan Poe contributes to this same critique of Enlightenment in *Eureka*, although his explicit target is "science," not reason. Most likely Poe's status as an amateur purporting to solve the grand secrets of the universe motivated his defensive stance in *Eureka*, but his potshots at the professional chauvinism of science are in fact quite relevant to his overarching project in the text: the dismantling of easy epistemologies. Poe writes of scientists that "a more intolerant, a more intolerable, set of bigots and tyrants never existed on the face of the earth. Their creed, their text, and their sermon were, alike, the one word '*fact*' – but, for the most part, even of this one word, they knew not even the meaning."⁵⁸

With his deep interest in semantics, Poe recalls Kant's critic Hamann, who deconstructed *The Critique of Pure Reason* by asking, what precisely falls under the heading of the word, "reason"? Poe goes even further than his Counter-Enlightenment counterparts by refusing to draw a line between reason and revelation, or noble empiricism and degraded intuition. Thus Poe's object in *Eureka* is not the synthesis of competing epistemologies, but the reduction of humanity's multifarious roads to knowledge into one great "Unity" of understanding. The root of Poe's quibble with false binaries lies in the paucity of language to convey the magnitude of topics under discussion. As he affirms early in *Eureka*, words like "God" and "spirit" are "by no means the expression of an idea, but of an effort at one." They stand at best "for the possible attempt at

⁵⁸ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 8.

an impossible conception.”⁵⁹ Poe’s cognizance of the failure of language to directly convey personal revelation links him to one of the larger preoccupations of the Hermetic tradition.

As we might expect from a writer more interested in effect than exposition, Poe championed the graces of poetic inspiration throughout his career, a tendency in prominent display in *Eureka*. An exception can be found in his 1846 essay, “The Philosophy of Composition,” which roundly mocks the idea that poets “compose by a species of fine frenzy,” and then goes on to claim that “The Raven” was written in accordance with some statistical insight into popular taste.⁶⁰ While I do not feel qualified to hand down the last word on one of the great literary conundrums of the nineteenth century (Is the essay a hoax? Can a poem really be written “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem?”), I will comment that *Eureka*, at least, *does* seem to have been composed in a species of fine frenzy. Furthermore, *Eureka*’s wholesale embrace of divine intuition bears out sentiments articulated earlier in Poe’s career.

In his 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” considered by many to be the first detective tale, Poe begins with a thoughtful deconstruction of the act of detection: “The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects.”⁶¹ Poe draws attention to the fact that rational processes are as mysterious in origin as intuitive knowledge. Though Poe’s detective hero Dupin is not possessed of supernatural prescience, only very fine perception, Poe consistently undermines Dupin’s scientific objectivity by hinting that his method is not strictly analytical: “His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intui-

⁵⁹ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 18.

⁶⁰ J. Gerald Kennedy, ed., *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 544-545.

⁶¹ Kennedy, *Portable Poe* 238.

tion.”⁶² Dupin’s rational faculties verge on “intuition” and remain “little susceptible to analysis.” The detective’s analytical powers may allow him to solve the bizarre murders depicted in the story, but he reads the mind of the narrator early on in Poe’s tale, and the sophisticated explanation he gives for this feat is more comprehensible as ESP than analysis. Dupin traces the narrator’s thoughts from the moment he was bumped in the street by a merchant, through the stereotomy of street stones, the theories of Epicurus, the constellation Orion, a newspaper review of a stage performance, and finally to the physical stature of a local actor.⁶³ That Dupin knows his companion is thinking of the actor’s height a full fifteen minutes after the merchant bumps him in the street indicates uncanny psychic powers more so than it does a logical mind. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe creates a character so incredibly rational as to appear supernatural; by the time he writes *Eureka*, he no longer distinguishes reason from more numinous inspiration.

Poe cites “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in *Eureka*, commenting that he has “elsewhere observed” that the path to truth is often uneven, inscrutable, or unrelated to any rational progression whatsoever.⁶⁴ Poe’s reference to a story penned some seven years earlier gives credence to the idea that his Hermetic sentiments were in place long before he set out to solve cosmic mysteries in *Eureka*. That *Eureka* is Poe’s paean to the intuitive faculty is a well-established convention in Poe scholarship. Poe heaps lavish praise on Kepler in his treatise, because the seventeenth century astronomer intuited what later scientists would only arrive at by experiment or logical deduction. James V. Werner shows that Poe’s celebration of the intuitive leap of discovery was drawn directly from Humboldt’s *Kosmos*, a lengthy text from which the gothic writer also lifted a fair amount of his scientific data. Werner is also careful to point out that Poe’s cri-

⁶² Kennedy, *Portable Poe* 238.

⁶³ Kennedy, *Portable Poe* 243-245.

⁶⁴ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 51 (Poe’s note).

tique of scientists does not constitute an attack on the scientific method *per se*, but rather on the narrow-mindedness that would confine the pursuit of truth to arid, analytical methods: “Poe is not attempting to dispute the validity or usefulness of induction or deduction; he is arguing that the insightful mind will instinctively use both (and others), and should not be bound by blind faith in either one exclusively.”⁶⁵ While the standard critical line on *Eureka* is that Poe means to harmonize rationality with imagination, faculties which he lauds equally throughout his corpus, Poe’s undertaking goes one step farther by re-defining the essence of thought altogether.

It should not be surprising that a treatise which proclaims, “The Universe is a plot of God”⁶⁶ would seek to denature cognition itself. Poe’s invocation of intuition as his muse prompts him to define it thusly: “It is but *the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression* [Poe’s italics].”⁶⁷ Notice that in Poe’s definition, intuition does not differ qualitatively from either induction or deduction; rather, intuition is the equal of rational thought, with the exception that its source remains mysterious. This definition agrees with Poe’s near-conflation of reason and intuition in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” All thought or inspiration is of one nature and, to extrapolate from *Eureka*, this follows because all thoughts emanate from a single source: God. From the perspective of God, the original Unity, humanity’s seeming triumphs of mind are but mere gropings in the dark, and furthermore only occur under the auspices of divine will. As Pymander, or the mind of God, explains to his pupil in the thirteenth book of Hermes Trismegistus, “Sense and Understanding seem to differ, be-

⁶⁵ James V. Werner, “‘Ground-Moles’ and Cosmic Flaneurs: Poe, Humboldt, and Nineteenth-Century Science,” *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3.1 (Spring 2002): 58.

⁶⁶ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 124.

⁶⁷ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 25.

cause the one is material, and the other essential. But unto me, they appear to be both one, or united, and not divided in men.”⁶⁸ Poe’s subsuming of reason and intuition into a single faculty under God bespeaks his engagement with the Hermetic tradition.

The Senses: Unmediated Perception and the Power of Words

Poe’s equalization of reason and revelation as alike in divine origin is reflected elsewhere in his corpus as the de-centering of the physical senses as the doors to perception. Just as we are distracted from “*the Original Unity of the First Thing* [sic]”⁶⁹ by the false dichotomy of rational thought and ineffable intuition, so too are we confused and hamstrung by the distribution of our perceptual apparatus over five senses. For Poe the “intuition,” variously the “fancy,” remains a holy and mysterious agent which both bypasses and supersedes the functioning of the physical senses.

The following excerpt from *Eureka* illustrates how Poe invokes a spiritual, extrasensory perception as the authority for his claims; the passage also demonstrates the extent of his comfort with spiritual explanations to scientific queries. Touching on why atoms repel each other in space, Poe writes:

The *design* of the repulsion – the necessity for its existence – I have endeavored to show; but from all attempt at investigating its nature have religiously abstained; this on account of an intuitive conviction that the principle at issue is strictly spiritual – lies in a recess impervious to our present understanding – lies involved in a consideration of what now – in our human state – is *not* to be considered – in a consideration of *Spirit in itself*. I feel, in a word, that here the God has interposed, and here only, because here and here only the knot demanded the interposition of the God [sic].⁷⁰

⁶⁸ John Everard, ed. and trans., *The Divine Pyramider of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus*, intr. Hargrave Jennings (1884; Minneapolis: Wizards Bookshelf, 1973) 87.

⁶⁹ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 2.

⁷⁰ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 32.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the paragraph is Poe's unselfconscious pronouncement that human perception lies at the mercy of divine volition, i.e. our collective scientific understanding proceeds only in accordance with God's will. But more pertinent to the topic at hand, Poe in this passage qualifies perception in our "present ... human state" as limited, in contrast to the holistic understanding we will gain in a future, spiritual state.

Just as Emerson begins the classic Transcendentalist text, *Nature*, with the image of a "transparent eyeball," Poe opens his own epistemological study with a related image of unlimited perception. Poe informs us that his treatise will present a "survey of the Universe," only to immediately disqualify himself for this task by asserting the practical impossibility of such a feat: "He who from the top of *Ætna* casts his eyes leisurely around, is affected chiefly by the *extent* and *diversity* of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness* [sic]"⁷¹ Here Poe foregrounds the limits of human perception, our lack of panoramic vision in particular, by asking the reader to imagine the incomplete view afforded the stationary observer on top of a steep summit. The remedy Poe offers, that of whirling on the heel, is inadequate in that the vista could only be glimpsed in a temporal sequence instead of simultaneously. Poe's insistence on our narrow perspective in comparison to God's may be intended as rejoinder to Emerson's presumption, in *Nature*, that mere philosophy engenders the transcendent vision of a deity. His mountain-top observer provides a ready metaphor for his ongoing discussion in *Eureka* of the physical barriers to divine understanding. One of the crucial tenets that emerges in the *Corpus Hermeticum* is the necessity of taming and ultimately forgetting the physical body to achieve unity with the mind of God. That Poe proceeds in his survey of the universe after having demonstrated that the merely human perspective is inade-

⁷¹ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 2.

quate to the task argues strongly that he believed he had accomplished such a synthesis with divine mind.

Throughout *Eureka*, Poe exalts the intuitive faculty and undermines the quality of data received through the senses. In this he closely resembles his American predecessor in gothic literature, Charles Brockden Brown; both men corroborated the validity of uncanny or extrasensory experience, and both poked holes in the supposed unassailability of empirical evidence. Having already shown that our perception is necessarily limited because confined within a human body, Poe then dedicates a considerable section of his treatise to the constraints placed upon our discernment by the poverty of our scientific tools. Here Poe comments on former astronomical discoveries debunked by recent technological advancements in telescope-making: “Thus it was supposed that we ‘had ocular evidence’ – an evidence, by the way, that has always been found very questionable – of the truth of the hypothesis.”⁷² The problem of restricted vision has not been solved by modern equipment, however. Poe meditates on the limits incumbent upon perceiving something grand through the extremely narrow range of our perspective on earth: “Now I have already hinted at the probable bulk of many of the stars; nevertheless, when we view any one of them, even through the most powerful telescope, it is found to present us with *no form*, and consequently with *no magnitude* whatever. We see it as a point and nothing more [sic].”⁷³ If Poe is not aiming at metaphor, he may as well be. The figure of a lone man attempting to comprehend the vastness of a remote star with a glass tube is certainly analogous to the struggle of an individual soul to grasp the divine principle with the handicap of a human body. For Poe, the unsatisfactory data available through the physical senses may be supplanted by direct revelation, or unity with the mind of God.

⁷² Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 89.

⁷³ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 117.

In the second book of the *Pymander*, Hermes Trismegistus explains what he has learned from the mind of God: “For the sleep of the body was the sober watchfulness of the mind, and the shutting of my eyes the true sight.”⁷⁴ The quieting of the senses leads to the higher insight which Poe exalts in *Eureka*. This extrasensory perception also appealed to Emerson, who mixed and matched quotes from the *Pymander* in the “Ethnical Scriptures” he reproduced in *The Dial*. The following long passage describes how the intuition or inner sight is freed by sensory silence:

The sight of good [Everard uses “light of God”] is not like the beams of the sun, which being of a fiery shining brightness maketh the eye blind by his excessive light; rather the contrary, for it enlighteneth and so much increaseth the power of the eye, as any man is able to receive the influence of this intelligible clearness ... they that are capable ... do many times fall asleep from the body into this most fair and beauteous vision ...

For the knowledge of it is a divine silence, and the rest of all the senses. For neither can he that understands that, understand anything else; nor he that sees that, see anything else, nor hear any other thing, nor move the body. For, shining steadfastly on and round about the whole mind, it enlighteneth all the soul, and loosing it from the bodily senses and motions, it draweth it from the body, and changeth it wholly into the essence of God. For it is possible for the soul, O Son, to be deified while yet it lodgeth in the body of a man, if it contemplates the beauty of the Good.⁷⁵

Emerson’s well-chosen excerpts express the essence of Hermeticism in a few lines: they that would emulate God must turn their sight inward and close off sensory input. Those who succeed in putting the body to sleep are gifted with a visionary perspective and enlightened from the inside out, the body transformed by the soul. Several of Poe’s tales explore the possibilities evoked by these Hermetic articles, treating of the rest of the senses in sleep, trance, or death as a gateway to a higher life.

⁷⁴ Everard 16.

⁷⁵ *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion*, Vol. IV (Boston: James Munroe, 1844) 402.

In Poe's speculative tale "Mesmeric Revelation," a mesmerist identified only as "P" puts his patient Vankirk into a trance at the latter's behest. Knowing his death is imminent, Vankirk seeks information about the nature of the soul; his wavering belief in an afterlife has grown since beginning mesmeric healings with P: "I repeat, then, that I only half felt, and never intellectually believed. But latterly there has been a certain deepening of the feeling, until it has come so nearly to resemble the acquiescence of reason, that I find it difficult to distinguish between the two."⁷⁶ As in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," intuition and reason have verged so closely upon each other as to become impossible to differentiate. This is of particular importance because Vankirk is one of Poe's sanest protagonists. He expires while under P's trance, and so ostensibly his discourse on the afterlife is given from "out the region of the shadows."⁷⁷ Thomas Mabbott takes the fact that Poe referred to "Mesmeric Revelation" as an essay, and not a tale, to indicate that the writer was seriously engaged in the philosophical issues under discussion.⁷⁸ Bruce Mills cites Poe's overwhelmingly positive reference to Chauncy Hare Townshend's *Facts in Mesmerism*, the leading handbook on mesmeric technique, as evidence of Poe's enthusiasm for the new science: "we regard [it] as one of the most truly profound and philosophical works of the day – a work to be valued properly only in a day to come."⁷⁹

Poe signals his endorsement of mesmerism by having Vankirk pass into the world beyond with "a bright smile irradiating all his features."⁸⁰ I interpret the story, which is light on affect but heavy in abstruse metaphysics, as a sincere statement of Poe's own conclusions about

⁷⁶ Poe, *Complete Tales* 469.

⁷⁷ Poe, *Complete Tales* 474.

⁷⁸ Mills 53.

⁷⁹ Poe quoted in Mills 57.

⁸⁰ Poe, *Complete Tales* 474.

the nature of God, matter, death, and corporeity. For this reason I quote from it extensively throughout this chapter, although my immediate object is to demonstrate the Hermetic slant Poe gives to sense reality in his fiction. When P queries Vankirk on how the mesmeric state resembles death, he answers that perception through the five senses is replaced by perception of another order in both conditions: ““When I say that it resembles death, I mean that it resembles the ultimate life; for when I am entranced the senses of my rudimental life are in abeyance, and I perceive external things directly, without organs, through a medium which I shall employ in the ultimate, unorganized life.””⁸¹ As in the selection from the *Pymander* quoted by Emerson, the “rest of all the senses” produces in Vankirk a perception released from the tyranny of “idiosyncratic organs.”⁸² When pressed further, Vankirk describes the human sensory organs as fitted only to the highly restricted condition of embodiment:

“Organs are contrivances by which the individual is brought into sensible relation with particular classes and forms of matter, to the exclusion of other classes and forms. The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only; his ultimate condition, being unorganized, is of unlimited comprehension ... You will have a distinct idea of the ultimate body by conceiving it to be entire brain ... in the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body ...”⁸³

Once again, echoes of the *Pymander* appear in Vankirk’s depiction of the “ultimate body,” which enjoys the “unlimited comprehension” of a deity. Poe’s deflation of the senses as impediments to godlike perception not only agrees with Hermetic dictums, but also reflects his writerly agenda of revealing the biases (and boundaries) of a human perspective. Though Poe is most famous for his gruesome stories, his corpus also features tales which delight in the fancy unleashed by the senses’ quiescence.

⁸¹ Poe, *Complete Tales* 472.

⁸² Poe, *Complete Tales* 473.

⁸³ Poe, *Complete Tales* 473.

“Mesmeric Revelation” intimates that spiritual enlightenment may be facilitated by trance, and Poe’s 1841 tale “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” recasts the grim specter of death as a doorway to higher consciousness. The conversation of two souls in the afterlife, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” also points to Poe’s longstanding sympathy with Hermetic ideas. The main characters’ names allude to the core Hermetic idea of the dissolution of all polarities into the great “One,” or mind of God. Monos and Una unsettle, among other polarities, the distinction between life and death, and the division between body and spirit. Monos narrates his sensations after physical death, and insists that material impressions persist in the afterlife; for Poe this emphasis on materiality is a way of validating the actuality of spiritual entities. Before arriving at the unlimited perspective of a god, Monos experiences the fading of his senses as a type of synaesthesia: ““The senses were unusually active, although eccentrically so – assuming often each other’s functions at random. The taste and the smell were inextricably confounded, and became one sentiment, abnormal and intense.””⁸⁴ The interchangeability of the “idiosyncratic” sense organs has the effect of unseating their sway over the developing consciousness of Monos. The body’s death ultimately weans Monos from his dependence on the fractional reality provided by the five senses, and gives way to an unrestricted “sixth sense,” described variously here by Poe:

“And now, from the wreck and chaos of the usual senses, there appeared to have arisen within me a sixth, all perfect. In its exercise I found a wild delight – yet a delight still physical, inasmuch as the understanding in it had no part ... there seemed to have sprung up in the brain, *that* of which no words could convey to the merely human intelligence even as indistinct conception. Let me term it a mental pendulous pulsation ... And this – this keen, perfect, self-existing sentiment of *duration* – this sentiment existing (as man could not possibly have conceived it to exist) independently of any succession of events – this idea – this sixth sense, upspringing from the ashes of the rest, was the first obvious and certain step of the intemporal soul upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Poe, *Complete Tales* 196.

The decline of the senses and the godlike vision which supplants them particularly fascinated Poe. In “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” the development of a “sixth sense” corresponds to the higher states of perception that will be experienced in the next world.

Poe’s *Marginalia*, a hodge-podge of desultory commentary on various topics he published as an itinerant magazinist, offers glimpses of the writer’s theories on art, literature, philosophy, and occasionally – the life of the soul. In a rather extraordinary submission published in *Graham’s* magazine in 1846, Poe attempts to describe his own flights into the spiritual aether; this otherworldly state is markedly similar to those depicted in “Mesmeric Revelation” and “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” Just as in these stories, Poe struggles to employ the proper word to encapsulate an experience for which language falls short:

There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word *fancies* at random, and merely because I must use *some* word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquility – when the bodily and mental health are in perfection – and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams.⁸⁶

The ineffable condition to which Poe can only apply the term “fancy” occurs when his senses are in a state of blessed rest, a rare circumstance for the writer who was plagued by increasing bouts of illness, now thought to have been caused by a brain tumor which contributed to his death.⁸⁷

Lest we mistake Poe for writing rapturously of the poetic imagination, he clarifies the ostensible source of his reveries: “I regard the visions ... through a conviction (which seems a portion of

⁸⁵ Poe, *Complete Tales* 197.

⁸⁶ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 193.

⁸⁷ Hutchisson 245-247.

the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the human nature – is a glimpse of the spirit’s outer world.”⁸⁸ Furthermore his impressions, though still sensual, are transmitted to him through a medium which resembles nothing on earth: “It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality.”⁸⁹ Poe’s sensual but still numinous communion with the mind of God reveals his personal experience with the Hermetic worldview and occult states of being.

Speculation about a “sixth sense” of direct revelation and unlimited comprehension may not seem radically esoteric. But Poe’s next move is. Continuing in the *Marginalia*, he writes: “Now, so entire is my faith in the *power of words*, that, at times, I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to describe [sic].”⁹⁰ His sentiment is downright occult, in that it replaces passive perception with the creative faculty of a god. By engaging in poesis, the writer creates a world he may then inhabit. In a story appearing the year prior to the *Marginalia* quoted above, Poe voices a similar idea. Reflective of “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” in style and setting, “The Power of Words” likewise depicts a conversation in the afterlife. Agathos the teacher prods Oinos, the neophyte, and again Poe foregrounds the concept of “oneness” (oinos/unus), this time coupled with “good” (agathos). Asks Agathos at the tale’s conclusion, “Did there not cross your mind some thought of the *physical power of words*? Is not every word an impulse on the air [sic]?”⁹¹ The statement is neither abstract nor metaphorical; Agathos imbues words with the *physical* power to create. Poe’s 1846 *Marginalia* and “The Power of Words” justify Levine’s claim that he was an “occultist” as opposed to mere “writer who used the occult.” Both pieces suggest that the creative

⁸⁸ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 194.

⁸⁹ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 194.

⁹⁰ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 194.

⁹¹ Poe, *Complete Tales* 569.

“writer who used the occult.” Both pieces suggest that the creative activity of the mind, articulated in words, can produce concrete results in the physical world. The classic representation of this idea in an occult context is the storybook magician who intones magic spells, but it has a more modern referent in Brown’s illuminated magus, Ormond, whose capacity to live out the dramas he has authored gives him a position of worldly power and eminence.

Poe’s attention to the power of words to engender material forms and circumstances is one of the occult premises which leads him to conclude, in *Eureka*, that “Each soul is, in part, its own God – its own Creator.”⁹² His emphasis on the creative faculty of language and thought partakes of a central principle of occultism which can be traced from ancient Egypt through the “Mind Cure” movement of the latter nineteenth century, and up to the twenty-first century New Age. Catherine Albanese identifies “mental magic” as one of the defining characteristics of an American metaphysics: “In mental magic ... the central ritual becomes some form of meditation or guided visualization – so that the mental powers of imagination and will can affect and change the material order.”⁹³ Mental magic, as distinct from ceremonial magic which is enacted outwardly with ritual tools and regalia, provides a particularly nuanced context for Poe’s occultism; Poe does not seem to have evinced any interest in the sort of colorful, theatrical rites endorsed by George Lippard, for example, but rather to have entered occult states via mental contemplation alone. Though Poe’s mental magic may seem confusingly similar to the intellectual Hermeticism which, I have argued, characterizes the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, further elaboration of the first term by Albanese clarifies the difference: “Metaphysical forms of religion have privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance,

⁹² Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 148.

⁹³ Albanese 7.

and its relatives such as ‘revelation’ and ‘higher guidance.’”⁹⁴ Poe’s mental magic paradoxically depends on access to the non-rational state of unmediated, non-“sensed” perception with which the present section has been concerned.

In the tenth book of *The Divine Pyramander of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus*, Pyramander discourses upon the imaginative quality in man and its likeness to the creative faculty of God. The end of the lecture is to enlighten Hermes, the pupil, about his sameness to the godhead: “Command thy Soul to go into *India*, and sooner than thou canst bid it, it will be there. Bid it likewise pass over the Ocean, and suddenly it will be there; not as passing from place to place, but suddenly it will be there.”⁹⁵ Blurring the line between imagination and astral travel, this selection from the *Pyramander* argues that for the sophisticated adept the creations of the mind are one with the movement of the body. Nineteenth century Americans in the antebellum period were familiar with this Hermetic tenet through the popularity of mesmerism. In a public trial of 1784, Mesmer’s amazing healing powers were accounted for by the fructifying potential of imagination, as opposed to the invisible physical fluid that the Frenchman had theorized. The disproving of “animal magnetism” as physical force actually increased the cachet of the incredible power of the mind.⁹⁶ In *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance*, Bruce Mills argues that “the last half of the eighteenth century and first part of the nineteenth witnessed this emphasis on the similarity of the movement of physical bodies and the motion of thought.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Albanese 6.

⁹⁵ Everard 68.

⁹⁶ Mills 35.

⁹⁷ Mills 33.

Poe's legacy to the speculative and often sentimental fiction that would sweep the popular market in the years following the Spiritualism craze of 1848 has gone largely unrecognized. Related to mesmerism, Spiritualism developed as a religion in its own right, with an emphasis on spirit communication as opposed to the medical application of the mesmeric trance. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps achieved instant fame with the Spiritualist novel, *The Gates Ajar*, in 1868, and followed this success with several more novels in the same vein. In Phelps's *Beyond the Gates* (1883), it is difficult not to think of Poe's otherworldly tales when the main character muses that, in heaven, "thought itself might have been my vehicle of conveyance; or perhaps I should say, feeling."⁹⁸ Both "the power of words" and the augmentation of the senses after death characterize ontological states in *Beyond the Gates*. The recently deceased narrator reports that life in her spiritual body is richer in impression than perception in her earthly shell: "So far from there being any diminution in the number or power of the senses in the spiritual life, I found not only an acuter intensity in those which we already possessed, but that the effect of our new conditions was to create others of whose character we had never dreamed."⁹⁹ Just as Poe does in his tales, Phelps imagines that in the afterlife sensory reality will be freed from its earthly restrictions. And just like Poe, Phelps struggles to express this extrasensory perception through the limited medium of language: "Perhaps no illustration can better serve to indicate the impediments which bar the way to my describing to beings who possess but five senses and their corresponding imaginative culture, the habits or enjoyments consequent upon the development of ten senses or fifteen."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Three Spiritualist Novels*, intr. Nina Baym (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2000) 173.

⁹⁹ Phelps 210.

¹⁰⁰ Phelps 211.

While Poe's depictions of the afterlife are decidedly less comforting than the Summerland heaven imagined by the Spiritualists, particular facets of his vision yet contributed to the conventions of this important nineteenth century occult movement. Poe's emphasis on the materiality of the spirit and the expansion of sensory reality after death are marked features of Spiritualism, as is the idea that the body becomes "entire brain" and travels on the wings of thought. Since the Spiritualist craze was the product of a media event that occurred the year before Poe's death, it can truly be said that he was ahead of his time in detailing the ontology of the afterlife in his fiction. While we can't know if Poe would have approved Spiritualism as enthusiastically as he endorsed mesmerism, Spiritualists across the country claimed him as their prophetic champion, and verified this claim in the séance room: "Edgar Allan Poe had died just in time and in mysterious enough circumstances to be a favorite of the literary mediums."¹⁰¹

The Matter of Matter

Eureka has been remembered in the critical literature as either Poe's joke or Poe's shame because in it, the gothic writer attempted to forge the union of two fields that were drifting toward a permanent rift in the nineteenth century: science and theology. Ten years after Poe's death, Darwin published *The Origin of the Species*, delivering the finishing blow to a split that was several centuries in the making. Had Poe published his treatise on natural philosophy two hundred years earlier, it might have met with more approval, but in the era of scientific specialization Poe's unfounded speculations could be dismissed as "a mountainous piece of absurdity," to quote his friend and publisher Evert A. Duyckinck.¹⁰² Yet Poe was both behind and ahead of the times in regard to many of his insights in *Eureka*. His natural theology, or extrapolating of

¹⁰¹ Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1972) 17.

¹⁰² Hutchisson 216.

theological concepts from the design of the universe, may have been the province of days gone by, yet he also predicts such profound twentieth century discoveries as the fundamental relationship between matter and energy and the space-time continuum.¹⁰³ Poe's apparent prescience of the claims of quantum physics also uncannily aligns his project in *Eureka* with one of the current preoccupations of the New Age movement: the linking of Hermetic beliefs about the cosmos with the mysteries of quantum theory, in an esotericist version of the teleological argument.

The meeting place for Poe's by turns scientific and spiritual inquiry is the smallest unit of matter, the atom, or to employ his terminology, the particle. Atomism had been highly controversial in the preceding centuries for manifold reasons. To begin with, the increasingly mechanistic view of the world that atomism promoted rankled religionists, who felt that this emphasis on the biological wheels and pinions diminished God's agency in creation. Atomism also remained purely hypothetical prior to the twentieth century, there being no technology with the capacity to produce empirical proof of the existence of atoms. Though the word "atom" originated from the Greek *atomos*, meaning "uncuttable," the issue of whether an atom could be broken into component parts was as old as the atom's theorization by Democritus in the fourth century BCE. Scientists in the Enlightenment era were invested in maintaining the Christian division between heavenly spirit and earthly matter, and struggled with the implications of the atom's indivisibility; if the smallest unit of matter could not be divided, then the atom resembled one of the chief attributes of spirit in no insignificant way. Either matter and spirit were alike in their indivisibility (a proposition bordering on blasphemy), or matter was infinitely divisible.

¹⁰³ Hutchisson 217. The extent of Poe's scientific prescience regarding the quantum theory of the twentieth century is highly arguable. Peter Swirski offers the best review of these claims in *Between Literature and Science* (53-54). While Poe is indeed prescient, he is not precise, leading Swirski to caution, "Let us remember that vague analogies do not prove that their author had anticipated anything of contemporary science"(58).

As a sort of halfway measure, seventeenth century scientists like Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton adopted the corpuscular theory, which proposed an atom or corpuscle that was divisible or penetrable in some ways but not in others. Yet the divisibility issue remained a bugbear for the metaphysically-minded Newton throughout his long career, leading him to “both assert and deny that space is divisible.”¹⁰⁴ Newton was still the reigning scientific intellect for the nineteenth century, so we glean some sense of Poe’s relationship to this discussion by taking into consideration Newton’s quandary and wavering conclusions. It is hardly surprising that an itinerant magazinist with a penchant for drink was not taken very seriously in his marvelous attempt to improve upon Newton and harmonize matter and spirit, but Poe’s layman-level learning in science also afforded him the freedom to dispense with the more entangled implications of his theories and jump to spiritual conclusions. Unfortunately for Poe, his macabre stories and “tomahawk” viciousness as a critic did not recommend him as a spiritual authority. In any case, Poe proceeds in *Eureka* from the premise that matter and spirit exist on a continuum, and that therefore what we deem spirit is really matter. As interesting as this idea is for its own sake and its Hermetic resonance, it also provides a heretofore missing context for the cryptic ending of Poe’s only completed novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

Before turning to *Pym*, I would first like to establish Poe’s philosophical agenda in denying the distinction between matter and spirit: this synthesis of heaven and earth serves to broaden God’s dominion by viewing all creation as one matter. The Hermetic impulse to harmonize polarities is in evidence here, and provides a particularly fine context for Poe’s blunt admission in a letter to James Russell Lowell that “I have no belief in spirituality.”¹⁰⁵ While such a

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Janiak, “Space, Atoms, and Mathematical Divisibility in Newton,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 31.2 (Jun. 2000): 205.

¹⁰⁵ Poe quoted in Hutchisson 160.

confession would seem to close the book on any claim for Poe's spiritual life, he argues in the same letter that physical matter must necessarily arrive at a point where it can no longer be broken down, and at that "unparticled" juncture it merges with spirit. For Poe, spirit is simply the unparticled matter which impels all things, otherwise known as God.¹⁰⁶ Poe might just as easily have written, "I have no belief in materiality." But in his reduction of all manifestation into the great One, he favors the term "matter," presumably because it offers a sort of theoretical proof of the much-contested actuality of spiritual forms.

"Mesmeric Revelation" was written in the same year of Poe's contemplative letter to Lowell, and presents the most straightforward elucidation of this concept in its theological applications. P asks the mesmerized Vankirk whether God is spirit or matter, and he answers negatively to both propositions. When prompted to elaborate by P, he explains:

He is not spirit, for he exists. Nor is he matter, *as you understand it*. But there are *gradations* of matter of which man knows nothing; the grosser impelling the finer, the finer pervading the grosser ... These gradations of matter increase in rarity or fineness, until we arrive at a matter *unparticled* – without particles – indivisible – *one* ... This matter is God [sic].¹⁰⁷

Poe highlights the limited perceptual faculties of human beings by theorizing gradations of matter imperceptible to the average person. He also lifts a tenet from the *Pyramander* to clarify his thesis of the embedded quality of matter and spirit. In the January 1844 issue of *The Dial*, Emerson appended the following passage to his list of Hermetic excerpts: "Of matter the most subtile and slender part is air; of the air, the soul; of the soul, the mind; of the mind, God."¹⁰⁸ This selection from the *Corpus Hermeticum* posits a progressive spectrum connecting matter and spirit, one which Poe was almost certainly aware of, because he modifies it slightly to illustrate his point in

¹⁰⁶ Hutchisson 160.

¹⁰⁷ Poe, *Complete Tales* 470.

¹⁰⁸ *The Dial* 403.

“Mesmeric Revelation.” Vankirk expounds, “Take now, a step beyond the luminiferous ether; conceive a matter as much more rare than the ether, as this ether is more rare than the metal, and we arrive at once (in spite of all the school dogmas) at a unique mass – an unparticled matter.”¹⁰⁹ Poe was especially fascinated with the particulate components of air or aether, which appears to contain no mass and thus differs only in theory from the unparticled expanse of empty space. That Poe employs almost the exact same sequence to demonstrate the continuous nature of matter and spirit in his personal letter to Lowell (“Matter escapes the senses by degrees – a stone – a metal – a liquid – the atmosphere – a gas – the luminiferous ether”¹¹⁰) reveals his serious investment in Hermetic synthesis by 1844.

But the novel Poe finished six years prior in 1838, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, betrays a like interest in erasing the line between spirit and matter, suggesting that the writer’s Hermetic sympathies were in place a full decade before *Eureka*’s publication in 1848. In chapter twenty-five of *Pym*, the narrator, his companion Dirk Peters, and an islander named Nu-Nu drift listlessly toward the South Pole, where the atmosphere emits a stifling heat. The characters are propelled into an ever-encroaching vapor, described five times in as many pages. Vapor, being the union of aether and matter, represents the liminal state between things of earth and things of heaven. As Pym moves nearer to an unknown or untranslatable beyond, he first wanders through a subtle medium on the verge of immateriality. The other word Poe applies to the atmosphere around the South Pole, “ash,” exists likewise on the borderlands between spirit and matter. The remnant of matter consumed by fire, ash hovers in the air and appears to bear only the slightest resemblance to a material substance.

¹⁰⁹ Poe, *Complete Tales* 471.

¹¹⁰ Poe quoted in Hutchisson 160.

This “fine white powder resembling ashes – but certainly not such”¹¹¹ begins to overwhelm Pym’s craft, obscuring the horizon. Poe reinforces the liminal connotations of his misty spirit-matter with an explicit image connecting heaven and earth:

The white ashy material fell now continually around us, and in vast quantities. The range of vapor to the southward had arisen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound.¹¹²

Poe’s waterfall from heaven, “limitless” and ranging across the entire horizon, yet evades materiality by emitting no sound. Pym and his companions thus journey toward a Hermetic reality, where matter has merged seamlessly with spirit. The fact that the last two entries of Pym’s journal are dated March 21 and 22, days on which the spring equinox typically falls, indicates that a rebirth has taken place, or initiation into a new realm. The “white curtain”¹¹³ covering the horizon soon engulfs Pym’s vision, a phenomenon resonant with the Hermetic idea of God’s ubiquity. That Pym constructs with his mind’s eye “a shrouded human figure,” or more familiar anthropomorphic deity out of the indistinguishable mass, points to his familiarity with the theory of mental projection.¹¹⁴ The revelation that God permeates all matter is suggested by Pym’s vision of a deity within the liminal atmosphere which pervades the novel’s conclusion.

Poe owes his success as a horror writer to his skill at blurring the distinction between states that we take for granted as clearly defined, such as sleeping and waking, sanity and mania, life and death. In his fiction, the unseating of these divisions effects the unsettling conclusion

¹¹¹ Poe, *Pym* 193.

¹¹² Poe, *Pym* 194.

¹¹³ Poe, *Pym* 195.

¹¹⁴ Irwin argues convincingly for Poe’s cognizance of David Brewster’s theory that mental images or ideas can be projected as hallucinations. Irwin 209-210.

that reality may not be as simple as we are accustomed to viewing it. For example, in Poe's most famous story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," much of the horror generated by the tale is achieved with the chilling revelation that sleep, death, and catatonia look a great deal alike. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's breezy self-presentation is belied by the actions of a psychopathic killer. In "Ligeia," death is not the end of the personality, after all, and so on. Curiously, the reversals that Poe turns to such unnerving effect in his tales become the site for ecstatic rumination in *Eureka*. *Pym* may end with a question mark, implying the erasure of the line between spirit and matter, God and man, but *Eureka* is definitive, proclaiming these erasures as the credo of a harmonial philosophy. John Irwin also notes the surprising parallels between Poe's sensational sea narrative and his impassioned cosmology: "An assumption common to cosmologies and myths of origin is that origin and end are one, that the ultimate destiny of man and the universe is a return to the undifferentiated ground from which each sprang – an assumption of which *Pym* and *Eureka* are, at least superficially, microcosmic and macrocosmic versions within Poe's work."¹¹⁵ Poe's reduction of standard metaphysical categories in his fiction appears in *Eureka* as the basis for a Hermetic worldview.

Poe proceeds by degrees in *Eureka*, methodically dismantling binary categories until arriving at the ultimate Hermetic revelation. But first he must qualify his terms. In a world split up into spirit and matter, spirit is the energy of the Universe, or the volition of God:

I have spoken of a subtle *influence* which we know to be ever in attendance upon matter, although becoming manifest only through matter's heterogeneity. To this *influence* – without daring to touch it at all in any effort at explaining its awful nature – I have referred the various phenomena of electricity, heat, light, magnetism; and more – of vitality, consciousness, and thought – in a word, of spirituality.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Irwin 223.

¹¹⁶ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 139.

Poe's first big reduction is to subsume all invisible forces, from natural phenomena to mental and physiological processes, into one large category of spirit. The urge to scoff here may be mollified by the context that electricity was so little understood in Poe's lifetime that a bill to fund an experimental telegraph line inspired a mass walk-out in Congress in 1842; the concept of a wire carrying messages from Washington to Baltimore sounded suspiciously occult to many an untrained ear. One Congressman explicitly compared electricity to the pseudo-science of mesmerism to express his disdain.¹¹⁷ Within the decade, *The Spiritual Telegraph* would become the leading organ of the Spiritualist movement, exploiting the connection between electricity and psychic force whose scientific correlation many felt was on the brink of discovery. Poe thus reflects the spirit of the times in theorizing that all animation and natural force might share a common source in "spirit."

But Poe's ultimate end is to show that matter and spirit are of a piece with each other, related by degrees and intricately interdependent. Poe's audacious declaration that "matter *exists* only as attraction and repulsion ... attraction and repulsion *are* matter [sic]"¹¹⁸ may not exactly be Einstein, yet the germ of Poe's theory does appear in the famous formulation of mass-energy equivalence. Poe had neither the background nor the inclination to pursue physics beyond the level of an amateur, preferring instead to fold mass-energy equivalence into an overarching philosophy of Oneness and an argument for the general goodness of the design of the Universe. Matter is merely the necessary medium for the expression of God's creativity, and therefore serves no purpose divorced from God's will. Thus, matter derives from God and is always subject to his dominion:

¹¹⁷ Braude 4-5.

¹¹⁸ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 35.

In this view, we are enabled to perceive Matter as a Means – not as an End. Its purposes are thus seen to have been comprehended in its diffusion; and with the return into Unity these purposes cease ... Matter, created for an end, would unquestionably, on fulfillment of that end, be Matter no longer. Let us endeavor to understand that it would disappear, and that God would remain all in all.¹¹⁹

Poe's almost casual dispensing with matter as only one facet of the divine Will can explain why debates still rage among Poe's critics as to whether the gothic writer was a materialist or an idealist. His earlier discussion of particles would give spirit a mass; in the selection quoted above, matter appears as the ephemeral whim of an inexorable God. Poe's Hermetic reductions are the culprit here, erasing paltry human estimations of the nature of the world in favor of a unified cosmic perspective.

In the eleventh book of the *Pyramander*, the queries of his pupil to Hermes regarding the nature of matter are put down with much the same logic that Poe uses to reduce the dominion of matter in *Eureka*. Hermes queries back, "The Matter, Son, what is it without God, that thou shouldst ascribe a proper place to it? Or what dost thou think it to be? Peradventure, some heap that is not actuated, or operated?"¹²⁰ The thrice-great Hermes denies the question of the inquiring Tat, because it assumes a distinction between matter and God which he is unwilling to acknowledge. The wise guide then gently reminds Tat, "Whether thou speak of Matter or Body, or Essence, know that all these are acts of God ... And in the whole, there is nothing that is not God."¹²¹ Poe's identical conclusion that the ultimate nature of matter is God confirms that he took Hermetic inspiration from somewhere before writing *Eureka*, if not from the *Pyramander* itself. Other similarities abound in the two texts which are separated by some 1,500 years. Poe applies the matter-spirit accord to the nature of the human body: "Thus the two Principles Proper

¹¹⁹ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 143-144.

¹²⁰ Everard 80.

¹²¹ Everard 80-81.

... the Material and the Spiritual – accompany each other, in the strictest fellowship, forever. Thus *The Body and The Soul walk hand in hand* [sic]¹²² Book Fourteen of the *Pyramander*, “Of Operation and Sense,” discusses the imbrications and fundamental sameness of body and soul over several pages: “This is a sacred speech Son; *the Body cannot consist without a Soul* [sic]”¹²³ Poe’s Hermetic understanding of matter places *Eureka* in a coherent (though neglected) tradition within the Western canon, one which integrates body and soul in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian dualism which divides Heaven from Earth.

Poe’s visionary text *Eureka* describes in the most general way the twentieth century conclusions of quantum physics, a field which is likewise concerned with the nature of matter at the atomic level. The phenomenon of wave-particle duality, or the fact that matter and energy behave like each other in their minutest aspects, has overturned many of the assumptions of classical physics and strengthened the idea of a single model of force pervading the entire universe. A “unified field theory,” which Einstein spent decades searching for in vain, continues to obsess contemporary physicists as a way of accounting for the uniformity of structure underlying all manifestation. The mystical implications of quantum theory have been enthusiastically adopted by present-day occultists, and yet this urge to subsume the claims of religion and science into a single system is more usefully seen as a conspicuous hallmark of the Hermetic tradition than as evidence of the spiritual character of current scientific theory. Thus, Poe’s agenda in *Eureka* is similar to that of William Arntz’s in the New Age viral film hit, *What the Bleep Do We Know?!* *What the Bleep* (2004) blends documentary interviews with scientists and spiritual gurus with colorful explanations of quantum physics in action. The much-criticized narrative arc of the film, which extrapolates pop-psychology homilies from scientific theory to the end of boosting

¹²² Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 70.

¹²³ Everard 95.

the main character's self-esteem, is perhaps not so jarring when seen in the larger context of the history of Hermeticism. Like Poe 150 years earlier, *What the Bleep* concludes that spirit is the common denominator yoking matter and energy together, and that therefore invisible forces like thought have mass or substance. From here it is a relatively short jump to the idea that thought impacts physical reality, or that self-esteem is the product of the individual's knowledge that she creates her own experience. Thus, we should almost expect that Poe turns to this self-affirming, even self-aggrandizing component of Hermeticism for his finale in *Eureka*.

Unity and Divinity

Poe's meandering through philosophy, philology, and astronomy in *Eureka* leads him finally to the primary tenet of the Hermetic school: man's equality to God. This idea is not shrouded in metaphor in the *Corpus Hermeticum* but rather made quite explicit, and its blasphemous promotion of personal power is certainly one reason Hermeticism was forced into hiding under a Christian hegemony. For example, Hermes inquires of Tat, "Dost thou not know that thou art born a God, and the Son of the One, as I am?"¹²⁴ Notice the distinct contrast to practical Christianity, which encourages the individual to prostrate himself before God's majesty instead of recognizing divinity in the self. Hermes even prods his student to emulate godlike behavior so that he may embody his birthright of divinity: "If therefore thou wilt not equal thyself to God, thou canst not understand God."¹²⁵ Passages such as these abound in the *Pymander*, and thus it is quite natural that the iconoclastic author of "Self-Reliance" would delight in their theme. Emerson reprinted the following stirring quotation in *The Dial's* "Ethnical Scriptures" of Hermes Trismegistus:

¹²⁴ Everard 46.

¹²⁵ Everard 68.

He who can be truly called man is a divine living thing, and is not to be compared to any brute man that lives upon earth, but to them that are above in heaven, that are called Gods. Rather, if we shall be bold to speak the truth, he that is a man indeed, is above them, or at least they are equal in power, one to the other . . . Wherefore we must be bold to say, that an earthly man is a mortal God, and that the heavenly God is an immortal man.¹²⁶

The Hermetic reduction of God as the potential of man in a Transcendentalist magazine invites the reader to ruminate on the seed of wisdom contained in this archaic sentiment. Poe's deployment of the ethic of personal divinity, however, concedes nothing to the romance of ancient history and appears quite in earnest.

Evidence that the ancient Hermetic idea of personal equivalence with God is still considered controversial appears in the hesitancy of Poe's contemporary critics to take *Eureka's* passionate and explicit conclusion seriously. Joan Dayan notes, "We cannot help noticing that Poe's call for our conception is a rather daring equation between our capacity to conceive (the inconceivable) and God's capacity to suppose a universe into existence."¹²⁷ Indeed. Her later comment that Poe's drift "verges on impiety" within a Christian framework is the height of understatement. Rather, Poe hefts the entire Christian worldview and dashes it to the floor, so that he may commit the ultimate sin of occultism: assuming equivalence with the Creator.

The utter impossibility of any one's soul feeling itself inferior to another; the intense, overwhelming dissatisfaction and rebellion at the thought; –these, with the omniprevalent aspirations at perfection, are but the spiritual, co-incident with the material, struggles toward the original Unity – are, to my mind at least, a species of proof far surpassing what Man terms demonstration, that no one soul *is* inferior to another – that nothing is, or can be, superior to any one soul – that each soul, is, in part, its own God – its own Creator . . .¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *The Dial* 403.

¹²⁷ Dayan, *Fables of Mind* 20.

¹²⁸ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 148.

Poe's argument here is both radically egalitarian and intensely egoistic. All men may be gods, but only those souls endowed with the prescience of their birthright ever rise to such a height. One indication of Poe's veracity is that the Hermetic belief system aligns perfectly with the writer's famous arrogance; we can easily imagine that Poe never felt himself inferior to another soul. Furthermore, Poe's emphasis on feeling and intuition as the purest roads to truth in this passage is in keeping with the challenge he poses to rational epistemology throughout *Eureka*. Dayan concludes, "He is not saying, come, think with me, and we will be as God,"¹²⁹ presumably because such a proposition seems too absurd. But after establishing the Hermetic context for Poe's audacious pronouncement, it is impossible to deduce that Poe is anything but genuine in his claim that man can be God.

The final sentences of *Eureka* augur an epoch when mankind will collectively aspire to union with the divine principle. Writes Poe, "Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah. In the mean time bear in mind that all is Life – Life – Life within Life – the less within the greater, and all within the *Spirit Divine*."¹³⁰ The end of Poe's ranging the limits of the cosmos has been to arrive at the humanistic stance of the majesty of the individual soul. If man does not discover the divinity within himself in the present moment, this ecstatic time beckons in an imminent future.

Over the last thirty or so pages of this chapter, I have drawn comparisons between religious tenets found in the Greco-Egyptian wisdom books of late antiquity and the nineteenth century writings of an American author. The difficult conceptual nature of this endeavor is not only a function of the difference in language and culture between two discrete periods in history, but

¹²⁹ Dayan, *Fables of Mind* 20.

¹³⁰ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 150.

also a testament to the challenging and controversial content which *Eureka* and the *Corpus Hermeticum* bear in common. I have asked the reader to seriously entertain Poe's theory that knowledge is unqualifiable, or unable to be divided into neat categories of reason and revelation. I have attempted to summarize his "materialist metaphysics," or his denial of the distinction between spirit and matter, and subsequent conclusion that God must be material. I have outlined his references to an ineffable fancy or vision, which transcends sense reality and yet remains "sensible" in the more subtle material realities of trance states and the afterlife. Poe's ultimate conclusion in *Eureka* that "each soul is, in part, its own God" comes almost as anticlimax, familiar as we are with Emerson's deployment of this concept as inspirational metaphor. But Poe's conclusion is boosted by a logical progression of arguments; from his initial efforts to demonstrate the limits of human perception in a materialist framework, to his theory of the spiritual nature of matter, and finally to the idea of thought as a physical substance, *Eureka* provides a rationale for believing the self to be as God. Such a conclusion and the premises on which it is based are profoundly unsettling in our current secular and materialist paradigm.

In other words, conceiving of Poe, a writer whom we know to be capable of rational thought, as part irrational occultist, is not half so difficult as conceiving of the occult at all. *Eureka* is a revealed text, one which appeals to both the writer's intuition and a higher spiritual vision for its authority, and we must follow Poe down such unsubstantiated pathways if we are to make sense of his claims. Taking Poe's materialist metaphysics seriously puts us as readers at risk of what Henry James called a want of "seriousness" or rationality, and yet not to take Poe literally is to do him a grave injustice. If I have occasionally pointed out where other critics have interpreted Poe to mean the precise opposite of what literally appears on the page, it has not been to claim myself as his ultimate translator, but rather to demonstrate the unnerving power of his

words, which prompt rational critics to search for mitigating contexts and to propose ironic readings. My own practice has been to stay as close as possible to the “words on the page” in the spirit of surface reading, without succumbing to the temptation to either endorse or dispute Poe’s truth-claims. But the content of such texts as *Eureka* and “Mesmeric Revelation” remains challenging because the topics under discussion are by nature experiential and nondiscursive. The reader who is unwilling to imagine or project herself into the altered states of consciousness or occult ontology described by Poe may at least understand that *Eureka* subscribes to a wholly other definition of truth and authority than that of the scientific positivism which reigned in Poe’s day. The context of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is especially relevant here, in that it is both analogous to *Eureka* as a revelatory text, and also the ultimate literary source of Poe’s truth-claims.

The predominant trend in critical readings of *Eureka* has been to identify Poe’s misunderstandings of scientific theories which were already well-established in his day. I have refrained from repeating these catalogues of Poe’s errors, because I interpret *Eureka* to be a work of revelation, not research. As Jeffrey Kripal has pointed out in several places, the status of an occult phenomenon cannot be decided by subjecting it to scientific investigation; rather it must be interpreted within the epistemological frameworks provided by philosophy, psychology, and religion.¹³¹ Poe’s *Eureka*, which culminates with the writer auguring that there will come a time when man “shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah,” would seem to disqualify itself from a strict scientific reading by consistently refusing to be bound by empiricist methodology. Poe’s imperfect understanding of Newtonian physics is thus not the reason that *Eureka* fails to convince. The omnipresent “Life” of the “Spirit Divine” is a matter of experience and belief,

¹³¹ Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2010) and *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2011).

and cannot be proven scientifically. Even if Poe had had scientific mastery at his disposal, *Eureka*'s ambitious project of equalizing rational and revealed knowledge would not have swayed anyone who had not already experienced some sort of revelatory assurance of Poe's intuited claims. It is *Eureka*'s very rejection of common sense and scientific positivism, in favor of revealed truth, which locates it squarely in the Western Hermetic tradition.

The various Hermetic discourses do not draw their authority from the persuasive powers of their arguments but from their appeal to a higher revelation that lies beyond mundane reason ... Hermetic discourse is revelatory discourse. It proceeds from above to below, from a higher standpoint inaccessible to that of ordinary reason, in a solemn and authoritative tone ... Truth was more a matter of antiquity and origin than of coherence and evidence, a principle that has characterized Hermetic traditions down to their contemporary, postmodern manifestations.¹³²

Like the writer(s) of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Poe believed he was conveying truths which transcended ordinary human understanding and revealed the activity of an unseen higher consciousness. Prior to the eighteenth century, Poe's cosmology *Eureka* would have been recognizable as a text written in the Hermetic style and proffering Hermetic truths.

In *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, Florian Ebeling dates the decline of Hermes Trismegistus as a sage to 1614, when Isaac Casaubon published his theory that the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* did not pre-date the time of Christ, but rather could be traced to the second and third centuries. His subsequent conclusion that the texts were therefore "forgeries" severely damaged their reputation, and as the Enlightenment progressed the *Corpus Hermeticum* found fewer and fewer defenders. Yet Hermeticism as a coherent system of belief did not disappear, but only lost its ties to its mythical sage and an explicitly Egyptian origin. Many of Goethe's eighteenth century writings are recognizably Hermetic in content though they make no attribution to the titular sage: "Hermes Trismegistus had

¹³² Jan Assmann, foreword, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, by Florian Ebeling (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007) ix.

disappeared from the consciousness of the educated public.”¹³³ In Ebeling’s estimation, the effort to unite “piety and science,” “thinking by means of analogies,” “ardent belief in revelation,” “contempt for traditional philosophy and its concept of reason,” and the “doctrine of microcosm-macrocosm” – all of which are foregrounded in Poe’s *Eureka* – signaled the continuance of Hermeticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹³⁴ Though Poe never makes reference to Hermes Trismegistus, *Eureka*’s striking call to conceive of the self as God and to transcend the limiting epistemologies of reason and science identify it as a Hermetic text. That Poe’s nineteenth century cosmology aligns so seamlessly with the Hermetic texts of antiquity argues strongly for the coherency of the Western esoteric tradition.

The stakes of placing Poe’s writings within a religio-philosophical tradition almost two millennia in scope are obviously somewhat higher than claiming merely that his stance in *Eureka* is not ironical. My purpose in performing a line-to-line comparison of *Eureka* with the ancient Hermetic books has been to demonstrate that Poe’s conclusions are incontestably Hermetic, even if his source material was something other than John Everard’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It seems likely, for example, that Poe was heavily influenced by Jung-Stilling’s *Theory of Pneumatology*, a treatise on spiritual apparitions that was published in English translation in 1834. In this rather remarkable text, Jung-Stilling denies the distinction between spirit and matter and devotes copious attention to the idea that human beings suffer a limited perception, a perception which will be both liberated and augmented following physical death. Like Poe, Jung-Stilling endorses mesmerism, and it is almost a certainty that Poe derived his sense of the “luminous ether,” the liminal medium between spirit and matter, from the German writer. Jung-Stilling’s assertion that “Light, electric, magnetic, galvanic matter, and ether, appear to be all one

¹³³ Ebeling 130.

¹³⁴ Ebeling 127-131.

and the same body”¹³⁵ also puts us in mind of *Eureka*, as does his claim that trance and the quieting of the senses facilitates greater spiritual perception. Certainly, a more detailed comparison of the two writers in a future study will yield much about the discourse of nineteenth century Hermeticism, as well as redeem somewhat Jung-Stilling’s legacy outside his native Germany. My choice to compare Poe’s *Eureka* to the morphologically related *Corpus Hermeticum*, as opposed to a more historically contiguous text like *Theory of Pneumatology*, represents both a sly nod to the occult doctrine of correspondences as well as a calculated critical move.

Earlier in this chapter I noted that comparing Poe to other prominent thinkers, ancient or contemporary, has limited capacity for locating him in the grand literary tradition of which he was a part. Displacing Poe’s occultisms onto another philosopher like Jung-Stilling would not serve my larger purpose of establishing Poe as a mouthpiece of the Hermetic tradition, but only confirm that he was well-read in esoteric and long-forgotten books like *Theory of Pneumatology*. The fact that occultism has been edited out of post-Enlightenment narratives of history means that the onus for reclaiming this tradition rests more on the legacy of major figures like Poe than that of lesser figures like Jung-Stilling. As useful as the *Corpus Hermeticum* is for contextualizing *Eureka*, Poe’s Hermetic writings may be instrumental in recuperating the pervasive cultural influence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These texts constitute the “Bible” of the Western esoteric tradition, and the comparison is not incidental; both the foundational Hermetic books and the New Testament were composed in the same region during the same era, and both purport to be the revealed wisdom of semi-divine personages.

Linking Poe with these ancient texts also performs another function relevant to this project. Unlike Charles Brockden Brown and George Lippard, Poe did not come to the occult via

¹³⁵ Dr. Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Theory of Pneumatology: In reply to the question, what ought to be believed or disbelieved concerning Presentiments, Visions, and Apparitions* (London: 1834) 372.

the rhetoric of secret societies claiming mythical roots in ancient Egypt. In the subsequent chapter, I discuss extensively the nineteenth century fascination with secret brotherhoods and their common appeal to fanciful origins, from pre-Christian Jerusalem to Druidic and Egyptian lineage. George Lippard was an innovator in this respect, inventing a creative spiritual lineage connecting seventeenth century Rosicrucians, Pietist immigrants to America, and the nation's founding fathers. Charles Brockden Brown's exposure to the occult may have been limited to inflammatory accounts of the Illuminati and dubious reports touching the enlightened magus, Cagliostro, but both the organization and the man derived their spiritual authority from the mystery of Egypt; initiation into the Illuminati was supposedly modeled on that of ancient Egyptian mystery schools, and Cagliostro promoted his own style of Masonry called Egyptian Rite. The form of occultism Poe evinced the most interest in, mesmerism, contained no such appeal to the past, but rather positioned itself within a modern narrative of scientific progress. *Eureka*, conversely, implicitly invokes the past as redemptive by imagining the current world to be a fallen version of an original perfection, one to which we may return by emulating the gods we previously felt ourselves to be: "We walk about, amid the destinies of our world-existence, encompassed by dim and ever present memories of a Destiny more vast – very distant in the by-gone time, and infinitely awful."¹³⁶ Though there is no evidence that Poe subscribed to any society making imaginative claims upon ancient Egypt, *Eureka's* impassioned projection of spiritual return is a function of the same occult privileging of a constructed past at work in the myths of secret brotherhoods. Both the explicit naming of Egypt as the source of all esoteric lore in Freemasonry and Poe's post-Casaubon Hermeticism stripped of its imaginative ties to Egypt have a common source in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

¹³⁶ Poe, *Eureka*, *Marginalia* 146.

Though it seems abundantly clear that Poe may be ranked as an occultist on the virtue of the materialist metaphysics he lays out in *Eureka* and “Mesmeric Revelation,” the fact remains that neither of these texts is very popular or has been very influential in terms of establishing Poe’s occult reputation. Rather, it has been Poe’s imaginative, non-rational fictions which have created the legend of a writer consumed with shadowy realities and aberrant states of mind. By illustrating with symbols and form what *Eureka* attempts to convey discursively, Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* succeeds where *Eureka* fails. The fact that Poe’s fictions have revealed his occult sympathies, and have even generated their own schools of occult speculation in some cases, substantiates one of the central arguments of my project. Recalling Victoria Nelson’s claim that pre-modern occultisms survive and thrive in our culture in the form of popular literature, the entrée of Poe’s horror stories into the folkloric fabric of the country is of no minor importance.¹³⁷ Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* draws on the trope of ancient Egypt which *Eureka* evades, and this appeal to the multivalent symbol of human origins was ultimately more effective in conveying the mysteries contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum* than Poe’s discursive texts. “Pym,” after all, makes up the first syllable of “Pymander,” or the mind of God in the Hermetic dialogues, and thus Poe’s novel rather daringly announces its affiliation with the ancient books of the Hermetic canon.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym

A brief look at *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* confirms that Poe’s project in this novel mirrors that of his later cosmology, *Eureka*; both texts arrive at the non-discursive unity of “Life ... within the *Spirit Divine*.” My intent is not to provide a holistic reading of *Pym*, but rather to demonstrate that *Pym*’s fantastic ending relates it morphologically to Brown’s *Ormond*

¹³⁷ Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001).

and Lippard's *Quaker City*. In all three novels, ostensibly realistic plots culminate in the central character's confrontation with a semi-divine figure whose essence he/she absorbs. Poe's is the most cryptic of the three works, with the godlike entity not making an appearance until the novel's final pages. The rather sudden onset of the fantastic in *Pym* has led to it being characterized as a bad and poorly constructed novel, and yet there is some justification for understanding *Pym*'s jarring generic shift as a formal attempt at conveying the moment of occult initiation. Recalling Emerson's claim in "Demonology" that "Nature never works like a conjuror, to surprise, rarely by shocks, but by infinite graduation," I would argue that the moment of revelation often *does* proceed from out of nowhere, and as dramatically as that which transformed Saul to Paul on the road to Damascus. For Stephen Donadio, Poe's stylistic choice to eliminate discursive elements in his narrative contains something of the "realistic" in that it accurately depicts the trans-rational logic that takes hold at the moment of revelation:

It was precisely this sort of mysterious disjunction that Poe found intriguing, and that he was concerned with maintaining. Thus, when we compare the opening and closing sections of the work, what we perceive is a radical contrast between what promises to be a rather tedious and uninspired juvenile adventure and an unstoppable imaginative journey leading us quite literally out of this world. The commonplace earlier sections do not prepare us for what is to follow any more than everyday reality prepares us for dreams.¹³⁸

While Donadio locates *Pym*'s bizarre conclusion as a function of the altered reality experienced in dreams, Poe's various hints to the reader suggest that a more profound change of consciousness has occurred than that of the transition from waking life into sleep.

Some critics have read *Pym* as an allegorical narrative of initiation, but into or by what has never been clear. The stage is set for a *Bildungsroman* when Pym and his friend Augustus take a midnight sailing adventure on Pym's boat the *Ariel* in the novel's opening escapade.

¹³⁸ Stephen Donadio, Stephen Railton, and Ormond Seavey, eds., *Emerson and His Legacy: Essays in Honor of Quentin Anderson* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986) 94.

Though the boys lose the boat to a storm, Pym's appetite for adventure is whetted, and so he stows aboard a ship commanded by Augustus's father, the *Grampus*. Augustus hides Pym in the ship's hold, and his underworld initiation begins as he endures days without water, food, or light in the coffin-like space of the hold where Augustus has apparently forgotten him. After Pym finally escapes the hold, Augustus informs him that a mutiny has taken place. Pym, Augustus, and a fierce half-Indian sailor named Dirk Peters connive to take control of the ship, which they do, sparing the life of one of the mutineers to assist them in their daily operations. But this success quickly succumbs to another turn of the wheel of fortune; the four men only survive a titanic storm by lashing themselves to the ship's hull. They soon decline under the baking sun without water or provisions, and agree to cannibalism by lots so that some of them, at least, may live. Parker the mutineer is sacrificed, and after engaging in the ancient taboo against eating human flesh, Augustus too perishes from wounds he incurred earlier. Pym and Peters, barely alive, are eventually rescued by a British ship, the *Jane Guy*. Though obviously *Pym* is a sensational tale, nothing at this point in the narrative registers as fantastic or out of keeping with the extreme sorts of scrapes fictional sailors encountered in the popular adventure novels of the nineteenth century. It is only when the *Jane Guy* directs its course toward the South Pole that Poe's high-spirited sea adventure becomes enmeshed in a dense atmosphere of impenetrable symbolism.

The *Jane Guy* arrives at the Antarctic island of Tsalal, where the captain and crew attempt to institute a scheme for exploiting its natural resources. The natural world behaves unnaturally at Tsalal; strange red-toothed creatures skirt the island, and both water and earth betray signs of sentience, the water appearing veined like blood, and the stones themselves revealing messages in their formation. The native population resembles nineteenth century caricatures of Africans but far exceeds even these exaggerated portraits. With jet-black skins and lips so large

they obscure their teeth, the inhabitants of Tsalal are, in Pym's estimation, something lower than even "the lowest of the savage races with which mankind are acquainted."¹³⁹ Yet that Poe's (or Pym's) description is not derived solely from contemporary racist typology is shown by the fact that the islanders' very teeth are black like the "very black and shining granite" hills of Tsalal which bear enormous graven characters.¹⁴⁰ The islanders also enact a whiteness taboo, refusing to approach objects like flour, eggs, and paper when on board the *Jane Guy*. Tsalal's warriors stage an ambush, and all of the white men on the island are killed except for Pym and Peters, who manage to evade the attackers. They escape the island in a canoe with a hostage from Tsalal, Nu-Nu, who expires as they press further to the southward in their little craft. Pym's journal breaks off immediately after witnessing the godlike figure in the ashy mist, which envelops the two travelers as they near the South Pole. An editor's note follows which refers to the recent death of Mr. Pym, whom we know returned to the states following his Antarctic adventure because he details his literary collaboration with "Mr. Poe" in the novel's preface. Neither the final chapters of Pym's account nor the whereabouts of Dirk Peters can be located at present, according to the editor. Only the ghost of a denouement is given in the editor's terse translation of the granite characters of Tsalal which Pym had sketched in his journals.

Much critical ink has been spilled in attempts to determine what, precisely, happens to Arthur Gordon Pym as the narrative breaks off, attempts spurred by the suggestive clues that Poe weaves into the novel's dense final section. But perhaps the most overlooked clues are those with which Poe brackets his story, which imply that to demand a verbal description of Pym's spiritual encounter with God and the limits of the known world is to miss the point. Pym prefaces his story with an explanation of his reluctance in making it available for public consump-

¹³⁹ Poe, *Pym* 152.

¹⁴⁰ Poe, *Pym* 179.

tion. The first of these reasons is “altogether private, and concern[s] no person but myself.” The second and third are closely related, and hinge on Pym’s conviction that his marvelous tale would not be believed except by those who had known him for years and who could therefore “put faith in my veracity.”¹⁴¹ The editor’s note which closes the text reveals that Mr. Poe declined the task of penning an ending to the adventure based on his communications with Mr. Pym, on account of “his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration.”¹⁴² Poe’s clever (and humorous, considering that all of the text was written by him) positioning of himself as scientific rationalist in doubt of Pym’s fabrications at first points to a reading of the novel as hoax, a trick perpetrated on the public with the intent to create a mystery instead of solving one. But this conclusion is too facile, and discounts Poe’s deliberate withholding of Pym’s confrontation with the “Spirit Divine” because the content of the narrative cannot be believed by anyone excepting the man who experienced it, Pym himself. *Pym*’s parallels with Brown’s novel *Ormond* are palpable here; just as in *Ormond*, *Pym* breaks off at the moment of revelation into summary and unsatisfactory conclusion, because an occult transformation necessarily defies description in language.

Perhaps no better proof that the methodical and discursive unfolding of personal revelation fails to convey transcendent truth can be found than in the difficulty we have in taking Poe in earnest in *Eureka*. Man’s equivalency to God is too grand and daunting a concept to be elaborated scientifically, critics reason, and perhaps they are right. *Pym*, by contrast, stimulates both critical and imaginative exegesis by intimating with imagery what *Eureka* makes all too literal. Stephen Donadio theorizes that *Pym* is something of a masonic novel, with the outline of a story provided by the writer, but containing enough discursive gaps that the tale’s deeper significance

¹⁴¹ Poe, *Pym* 1.

¹⁴² Poe, *Pym* 196.

lies solely with the interpretive ability of the reader: “[Poe uses] fragments and incomplete utterances in [*Pym*] as a means of evoking nameless possibilities, the precise details of which are to be supplied by the feverish imagination of the reader.”¹⁴³ Kathleen Sands reached a like conclusion in 1974 in “The Mythic Initiation of Arthur Gordon Pym,” a short study which reads the tale as an allegory of the rites of passage prevalent in tribal cultures. Pym’s break from the known world of his home, his “live burial” in the hold of the *Grampus*, his extremes of physical suffering, his engaging in the taboo rite of cannibalism, even his training by the violent “priest-guide” of Dirk Peters, all lead him finally to the moment of spiritual initiation which closes the text: “Poe makes Pym’s experience forever uncertain, for the reader (who is not one of the chosen) is excluded from the ultimate experience with the gods.” By displacing the connective work of meaning-making onto the imagination of the reader, Poe, Sands claims, “has drawn us into the rite itself.”¹⁴⁴

Because of its gaps in continuity, suggestive imagery, and the “editor’s” tantalizing note which encourages the reader to search for deeper meaning in the absence of the missing final section, *Pym* is perfectly situated to invite the deconstructive work of contemporary criticism. This text is more open to a range of interpretations than linear narratives which guide the reader’s impressions and conclusions. One of the reasons I have chosen to direct more attention to *Eureka* than to *Pym* is because *Eureka*’s expository defense of a Hermetic worldview is more useful in establishing Poe as an occultist. All readings of *Pym* tend to register as just that, readings, dependent on the ingenuity and predilections of the individual critic for their authority. The rather excessive imagery and lack of internal logic which characterizes the Tsalal portion of the novel means that any definitive reading of the text is forced to make some daring interpretive

¹⁴³ Donadio 93.

¹⁴⁴ Kathleen Sands, “The Mythic Initiation of Arthur Gordon Pym,” *Poe Studies* 7.1 (Jun. 1974): 14-16.

leaps and assumptions. For example, the primary problem with reading *Pym* as a *Bildungsroman* or allegory of initiation is that Pym as a character is something of a cipher, remaining largely passive throughout the text and exhibiting no apparent wisdom, maturity, or development. While the tropes of tribal initiation in *Pym* listed by Sands are indeed highly suggestive, the surface connotations of *Pym*'s symbols are rarely consistent with one another, and taken together fail to yield the sense of inherent order or cohesion which could lead to a definitive reading of *Pym*. I turn now to *Pym*'s deployment of Egypt as chief in Poe's cache of superficial symbols which suggest much but reveal nothing; his use of language owes much to occultism, which holds that the literal meanings of words and symbols are only a gateway to the deeper meanings provided by direct revelation. Fittingly, Egypt as signifier appears exactly once in *Pym*, as a descriptor of a hieroglyph in the editor's note on the novel's final page.

Egypt as the Sign of the Occult

Egypt as a sign is overloaded, multivalent, and contradictory, and this was more the case in the nineteenth century than it is now. Two towering works of academic criticism read Poe's *Pym* as the fictional rendering of the sign of Egypt, and yet Egypt's symbolic capacity is so wide that these two lengthy studies barely overlap. John Irwin's book, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (1980), is structured around the legacy of Jean-Francois Champollion, who deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphic writing with the aid of the Rosetta Stone in the 1820s. This momentous event not only marked the beginning of modern Egyptology, but also closed down on centuries of speculation about Egyptian hieroglyphs as symbolic access points to revealed knowledge. According to Irwin, "the tension between these two kinds of interpretation," the literal and the metaphysical, exerted a profound in-

fluence on American Renaissance writers.¹⁴⁵ *Pym* not only demands the interpretive work of the reader to fill in the text's gaps in continuity, it is also "about" interpretation, in that Pym is often engaged in attempts to read the world around him, a tendency crystallized in his conversion of the strange landscape at Tsalal into hieroglyphic characters in his journal. Yet today's readers are often more struck by Pym's unselfconscious colonialism and intensely racist depiction of black islanders than they are by the text's symbolic renderings of writing and interpretation. The question of blackness and human origins is also the sign of Egypt, Scott Trafton tells us in his remarkable study, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (2004). Distinguishing itself from those works of criticism which conflate Poe's racial attitudes with *Pym*'s racist caricatures, Trafton's book outlines the history of the American school of Egyptology, which was founded upon deterministic theories of the race of the ancient Egyptians.

I devote some attention to Irwin's and Trafton's arguments in this section, to the end of demonstrating that both men's studies link the sign of Egypt to humankind's ultimate origins; for Irwin these are conceptual and for Trafton they are biological. But neither study addresses the fact that Egypt in the nineteenth century also stood as a sort of shorthand for the occult philosophy contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. My own reading of *Pym* bridges the work of these earlier critics to an understanding of Egypt as the sign of the Hermetic tradition. In this formulation, Pym's confrontation with a "shrouded human figure ... of the perfect whiteness of the snow" can mean more than the post-modern, semiotic meditation that Irwin suggests, and also transcend the racial signification it has gained from cultural studies. Pym's merging into divinity at the end of the text is corroborated by the context of the Hermetic tradition and its central tenet that man should strive to know himself as God. Though Egypt as the sign of Hermetic mysteries predates the term's specifically nineteenth century usage, and the survival of Egypt as a meto-

¹⁴⁵ Irwin 6.

nym for the occult into the twenty-first century suggests the dominance of this connotation, this Hermetic context is not intended to disprove the fine forays into the significations of Egypt performed by either Irwin or Trafton. Rather, the introduction of the occult as context can provide the missing link between these two far-flung studies which examine Poe's deployment of Egypt in *Pym*. In the broadest of assessments, *American Hieroglyphics* invokes Egypt as a means of figuring the origin of human consciousness, which for Irwin begins with language. *Egypt Land*, on the other hand, documents the nineteenth century obsession with anthropological typology in order to demonstrate that the study of race was once thought to provide an answer to the pressing question of humankind's relationship to the cosmos. The occult encompasses both these concerns, reaching backward to the unspeakable time before writing was, and to the unknowable origin of humankind. Yet whereas Egypt as the sign of both the roots of human consciousness and the roots of civilization ultimately comes up against the limits of human knowledge, Egypt as the sign of the occult transcends these limits, traversing the point where merely human knowledge ends into direct knowing and immediate descent from the gods themselves.

Egypt's relevance to Pym's Antarctic adventure merits some explanation. Both Irwin and Trafton go to some esoteric lengths to demonstrate that a thread of Western speculation about an ancient race in a hollow earth is analogous to the construction of Egypt as the source of civilization and the fount of human wisdom. Pym's purported discovery of a lost race at the ends of the earth thus participates in a nineteenth century discourse of speculation about ancient races. But it is doubtful that Egypt as an originary site would have entered *Pym's* criticism were it not for the text's closing note, which holds up an Egyptian hieroglyph as the possible key to making sense of Pym's aborted narrative. The "editor" reads the massive indentures in the chasms which Pym has sketched as spelling out, first, the "Ethiopian verbal root ... 'To be shady'"; second, the

“Arabic verbal root ... ‘To be white’”; and finally, “the full Egyptian word [for] ‘The region of the south.’”¹⁴⁶ The note creates more questions than it answers, providing a multiplicity of enigmatic origins instead of a coherent clue. Modern critics have probed these suggestive references in the hopes of solving *Pym*’s riddles and, more recently, deciphering Poe’s racial attitudes. But the possible ways that these ambiguous phrases can be interpreted, combined, and applied, far exceeds the text’s ability to confirm them. One must wonder if Poe penned the note as an afterthought, or a joke on the human obsession with plumbing mysteries beyond our comprehension, buried as they are “in the by-gone time, and infinitely awful.”¹⁴⁷ Mat Johnson’s 2010 book, *Pym: A Novel*, thematizes the power Poe’s text has to inspire a mania for definitive interpretation with its suggestive clues. The story of an African American college professor who becomes so obsessed with Poe’s *Pym* that it ruins his academic career, *Pym: A Novel* culminates in the protagonist’s chartering of a boat to the South Pole so that he may explore the mystery of Tsalal for himself.¹⁴⁸

But although explicit references to Egypt in *Pym* are slim and insubstantial, *Pym*’s theme of the quest for human origins evokes the nineteenth century discourse of Egypt. *American Hieroglyphics* relates, “the image of the hieroglyphics to the larger reciprocal questions of the origin and limits of symbolization and the symbolization of origins and ends.”¹⁴⁹ Put more plainly, Irwin’s semiotic meditation constructs the origin of writing as the origin of man’s consciousness and hence, of man himself. In the almost two hundred pages he dedicates to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Irwin focuses on scenes in which Pym is engaged in reading and interpreta-

¹⁴⁶ Poe, *Pym* 197-198.

¹⁴⁷ Poe, *Eureka, Marginalia* 146.

¹⁴⁸ Mat Johnson, *Pym: A Novel* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010).

¹⁴⁹ Irwin, preface, xi.

tion. Whether it's the urgent note Pym struggles to read in the dark of the ship's hold, or a strange landscape resembling written characters, Poe's attention to the narrator's attempts to reap meaning from signs describes, for Irwin, both the means and origin of all human knowing: consciousness is interpretation as opposed to revelation. Thus, the search for knowledge is necessarily cyclical, leading ever back to the oblivion, or freedom from consciousness, which Pym falls into when his narrative breaks off. Pym's quest for the South Pole, as yet unattained in Poe's day, functions as metaphor for the epistemological journey which must terminate when the site of direct knowing is reached. For Irwin, America's Egyptian moment is always centered in the figure of civilization's first written sign, the hieroglyph:

The attempt to discover the origin of man through language inevitably leads to the hieroglyphics, to that basic form of signification in which the physical shape of the sign is taken directly from – indeed, is like the shadow of – the physical shape of the object that it stands for. For the writers of the American Renaissance, the hieroglyphics and the question of man's origin are implicit in one another.¹⁵⁰

While undoubtedly hieroglyphic speculation contributed to the texture of Egypt as a sign in the nineteenth century, Scott Trafton's elucidation of Egypt as the ultimate symbol of racial grandeur provides a more plausible explanation for *Pym's* multivalent suggestive power. *Egypt Land* details the contradictory construction of a racialized Egypt by both blacks and whites for competing ends, and addresses the still vexed question of the race of the ancient Egyptians. The controversy unleashed by Martin Bernal's 1987 book *Black Athena*, which attributes the advancements of modern civilization to black Egyptians instead of Aryan Greeks, has hardly been laid to rest, rather inspiring a series of ongoing attacks and counter-responses. Like Bernal, Trafton boldly claims that it was the colonizing mindset of nineteenth century Westerners which crystallized the ideology of distinct races, the same bias which rewrote history to redound upon the glory of the white race. The study of ancient history was elevated to a "science" in order to

¹⁵⁰ Irwin 61.

mask the pseudo-science of racist ethnology: “In America, the scientific construction of race *begins* with the question of ancient Egypt and vice versa: the question of the race of the ancient Egyptians inaugurates the field of American Egyptology [sic].”¹⁵¹ Trafton’s study highlights the fact that America’s leading Egyptologist, George Gliddon, also stood at the forefront of the American school of racist typology; Gliddon was a contributing author to the now notorious *Types of Mankind*.¹⁵²

Trafton deftly reveals the instability of Egypt as a sign in American life and letters. Both blacks and whites claimed spiritual kinship with God’s chosen tribe of Israel, oppressed by Egyptian tyrants, yet both races also desired to be placed in blood relation to the grandeur of the ancient Pharaohs. If whites acknowledged black accomplishment in the form of the technological advancements of ancient Egypt, they would also have to acknowledge that slavery’s justification on the grounds of the racial inferiority of blacks was a fiction. Therefore, Egypt had to be cleansed of its blackness in order to support the idea of the natural superiority of the white race. The following long passage from Trafton’s introduction only begins to unpack the complications stemming from the always doubled construction of Egypt in nineteenth century America:

At times Egypt was a symbol split by the politics of power and oppression: half secular greatness, pure and progenitive, half religious oppression, despotic and destructive. At times it was divided along the lines of liberation: operating at once as a sign of righteous insurrection, yet also as a sign of freedoms freely squandered. At times it was a figure of strict and serious rationalism, early parent to mathematics and the sciences, yet also one of the antirational, a signifier of magic, mystery, and the unknown, a figure of esoteric secrets encouraging unrestrained speculation. At times it was half classical patriarch, part of the grand triumvirate of grand ancient civilizations, a third of the holy trinity of Greece,

¹⁵¹ Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 49.

¹⁵² Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1854). This best-selling book went through several editions and attempted to prove the inferiority of the black race through the “scientific” study of skull shape. Trafton refers to it as “the highwater mark of American scientific racism.”

Rome, and Egypt, and yet also half Orientalist fantastic, an interracialized hallucination of sex, decadence, and degeneration, home to the most extreme projections of overwrought Otherness nineteenth-century American culture could imagine.¹⁵³

This dizzying catalogue of Egypt's multiplicitous referents is what allows for the fluidity of interpretations of *Pym* along racial lines. For Trafton, Egypt is the sign of "epistemological miscegenation," a clever phrase which yet aptly describes Egypt as the symbol of origins in knowledge systems which are mutually exclusive (e.g. science and religion), using the alarmist nineteenth century coinage for cross-racial couplings.¹⁵⁴ He reads *Pym* as Poe's illustration of the folly of erecting racial determinism on the unstable sign of Egypt: "Poe is deconstructing the attempt to stabilize white racial identity through colonial quests in, and archaeological quests on, ancient Egypt."¹⁵⁵

Though both Irwin and Trafton anatomize the sign of Egypt from the perspective of different disciplines, both arrive at virtually the same conclusion: Egypt is the sign of the unknowable, the incommunicable, of mystery and of the misty point when human history yields to the void, whether that void is imagined as the physical origin of man or a pre-linguistic consciousness which cannot be rendered in words. This unmediated, pre-historical condition is the ontological goal of occult practice as put forth in the *Corpus Hermeticum*; occultists are typically resistant to describing this indescribable state in an expository way, which is one of the reasons why Hermeticism is so difficult to discuss discursively. The similarity of these theorists' conclusions relative to Egypt suggests that they are aware of the Egyptian signification of Hermetic secrets, though neither one gives this occult context more than glancing attention in his study.

¹⁵³ Trafton 5.

¹⁵⁴ Trafton 95.

¹⁵⁵ Trafton 108.

Egypt as the sign of an ahistorical moment, of that ineffable point when the knowable yields to the void, can also explain why it has been invoked so often as context for *Pym* on the basis of one very slim textual marker. For *Pym* plunges the reader into this void, enacting a theatrical, imaginative rite in its final pages which culminates with the protagonist's confrontation with unspeakable mystery. The appearance of hieroglyphs and black-skinned savages at the site of human origins in *Pym* has prompted critical inquiries into the sign of Egypt; I argue simply that the equally dramatic appearance of a god "very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men" at the same site confirms the Hermetic cast of Poe's deployment of Egypt as sign.¹⁵⁶

"Origin and end are one," John Irwin writes in *American Hieroglyphics*, in reference to the similar progressions of *Eureka* and *Pym* to the ends of knowledge as an access point to the regenerative state symbolized by Egypt. Occultists reach to the ancient past for information about origins predating recorded history, a movement that paradoxically assures them of a future state. Though today in the West, India and Tibet are often invoked as timeless gateways to unmediated knowledge, in the nineteenth century Egypt was the primary sign for revealed knowledge and occult mysteries, a status it had held for countless centuries. Christopher Lehrich's masterful book *The Occult Mind*, which reads the discourse of early modern magic as a type of post-structuralism, thus performs the customary invocation of Egypt in his introduction, a formal trope it bears in common with almost every other work of occult history. "The time was *illud tempus*; the place *Ægypt*," he asserts, in reference to a non-temporal, purely imaginary place which he clarifies over the course of several pages:

In the history of magic, the *Hermetica* do not come from Egypt – if by Egypt we mean the historical time and place known to Egyptologists – but from *Ægypt*. In *Ægypt*, man and gods had constant communication, divinity and truth were always present, and magic worked. It was a land of wonders, and nearly every ma-

¹⁵⁶ Poe, *Pym* 195.

gician since entry to that land was barred has looked back on it with reverence, awe, and nostalgia.¹⁵⁷

Lehrich's distinction between "Egypt" and "Ægypt" is also a necessary convention of histories of the occult, one prompted by the fact that imaginative appeals to Egypt have developed traditions unrelated to the recorded history of the country and its culture. Egyptologist Erik Hornung points out that this occult Egypt is not merely the effect of Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the Renaissance, but in fact stretches back to the era when these foundational texts were written: "Already in antiquity, there was an opinion that the land of the Nile was the fount of all wisdom and the stronghold of hermetic lore. Thus began a tradition that is still alive today, and which I venture to designate 'Egyptosophy.'"¹⁵⁸ The nineteenth century oversaw the widening rift between Egyptology and Egyptosophy; the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 and its decipherment by Champollion in 1822 not only helped lift Egypt's veil of secrecy, but also provoked a revival of interest in the land that was thought to be both the ancient seat of civilization and the master key to human origins.

My argument for Egyptosophy as relevant context for *Pym* does not supplant the valuable context of Egyptology laid out by previous critics, but rather fosters a more holistic reading of the text by modulating the tone of the discussion, particularly when it comes to the vexed issue of race. Since Toni Morrison's damning assertion that "no early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe"¹⁵⁹ on the basis of the racial binary at work in *Pym*, it has been exceedingly difficult to discuss the text without reference to the racial divide of Poe's antebellum milieu. Poe's general silence on the political hot potato of slavery has sent

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Lehrich, *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007) 4.

¹⁵⁸ Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 1.

¹⁵⁹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 38.

his biographers to *Pym* for information on his racial views, and indeed the evidence that he viewed the black race as inferior is compelling here; the islanders at Tsalal are “the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe.”¹⁶⁰ While the text exhibits plenteous counterevidence to the argument that Poe subscribed to a simplistic racial hierarchy, to examine *Pym* for a coherent stance on race is to plunge headlong into a morass of fruitless speculation. The strongest evidence for any particular position is quickly undermined by equally cogent evidence for its opposite, leading Scott Trafton to conclude, “Poe choreographs the end of *Pym* through a meditation on the cultural politics of American Egyptomania that in its symbolism is almost operatic: by placing set pieces of black and white binaries around a protracted drama of impossible interpretation.”¹⁶¹ Just as night and day become indistinguishable in the Antarctic landscape, black and white are increasingly insupportable distinctions in the world of mist and shadows. Yet the fact that *Pym* invites racial readings with its conspicuous imagery, while revealing nothing more than a mystery, should put us in mind of the occult.

The stakes of Poe’s imaginative journey to the ends of the earth are far greater than the discovery of whether black and white are distinct species, and which race erected the pyramids. Pym’s arrival at the symbolic site of human origins, read in the context of Egyptosophy and the Hermetic tradition, allows him ontological access to direct descent from the gods themselves. Strange as it may seem, Helena Blavatsky’s “root races” provide the most helpful context here.¹⁶² The influential esotericist of the latter nineteenth century popularized an idea of race

¹⁶⁰ Poe, *Pym* 162.

¹⁶¹ Trafton 106.

¹⁶² H.P. Blavatsky develops the idea of spiritual root races in *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (New York: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1888).

quite counter to the fiercely deterministic debates then raging in America. In Blavatsky's formulation, the first race was entirely spiritual, and this root race gradually descended into lower orders of matter until arriving at the woefully materialistic state of humankind in the nineteenth century. Blavatsky theorized the genesis of modern man as a fall from spirit into matter. She derived this idea from both Hindu and Hermetic cosmologies, and undoubtedly shared some sources with Poe; Antoine Fabre d'Olivet's *Philosophical History of the Human Race* (1824) was one of the first to place the origin of the "White or Borean race" at the poles.¹⁶³ Yet it is a mistake to read too closely into the rather arbitrary color coding of Theosophy and its antecedents, whose theorized racial periods were epochs which obtained for thousands of years. Ultimately, the occult discourse of race to which both Poe and Blavatsky appealed was not centered on the nationalistic concerns of their contemporaries, and reached back instead to ancient ideas which placed humans in a direct line of descent from divine beings.

The enigmatic figure of Dirk Peters, whom Pym identifies in his introduction as a "half-breed Indian,"¹⁶⁴ points to the nineteenth century concern with racial "amalgamation," and his conspicuous presence in this narrative of origins argues for a type of Theosophical genesis of man in which humans have interbred with gods. *Pym* presents a racial spectrum in its symbolic finale, one which resembles the set-up for a bad joke: "a white man, a black man, and a half-breed Indian set out in a canoe ..." But only the bi-racial character survives; Nu-Nu the black islander quickly expires, and Pym the white American lives just long enough to deliver his narrative to the public. That Poe may have laden his racial portraits with the ideology of his contem-

¹⁶³ For d'Olivet's contribution to the occult theory of spiritual root races, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism, and Nazi Survival* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) 186-188, and James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974) 270-274.

¹⁶⁴ Poe, *Pym* 1. "Amalgamation," a term borrowed from metallurgy, was the prevailing ante-bellum term for cross-racial couplings. "Miscegenation" was not coined until the last years of the Civil War.

poraries, seeing the white man as the pinnacle of human development and the black man as primitive, cannot be denied, yet Peters's apparent resistance to the polar revelation suggests that racial origins are not a case of either/or, but of *both* intermingled. The deconstructive work of multiculturalism has rightly challenged the application of terms of color as terms of value unrelated to race, making it no longer possible to innocently conclude that Pym's black islanders and white god are purely symbolic figures stripped of their socio-historical register. Kathleen Sands's reading of Tsalal as the "underworld," even "Hades," a land of "evil creatures" whose "actions are as black as their bodies" perfectly illustrates the problems this type of criticism presents.¹⁶⁵ Yet if we alter our mode of inquiry from twentieth century concerns about exposing nineteenth century prejudice, and view *Pym* instead through the lens of the occult, we see not so much the physical spectrum between black and white races, but the metaphysical spectrum between beasts and angels at work in the text's finale. *Pym*'s portrayal of an occult taxonomy of sub-human, human, and super-human invokes a discourse about origins older by many centuries than the nineteenth century determination of distinct races, one which allows us to read the bi-racialism of Dirk Peters as the symbol of the mingling of the human and the divine. Epistemological miscegenation, indeed.

Pym's final note which ties the roots of culture to both the unequivocally black Ethiopia and the contested space of Egypt, combined with Pym's confrontation with both angels and human beasts at the ends of the earth, and the conspicuous presence of the "half-breed" Dirk Peters, all point to origins unknowable for being hopelessly intermingled. My argument, that this amalgamation represents the descent of the divine into the human, reflects the Hermetic view of the cosmos, in which the fall from a golden age of human divinity initiated a decline resulting in the limited spiritual power of the present species; it wasn't until the publication of Darwin's theories,

¹⁶⁵ Sands 15.

more than twenty years after *Pym*, that human intelligence was thought to have arisen from the lower order of animals. In other words, the “top down” theory of racial descent was more available to Poe as an origin narrative than the blasphemous proposition that humans had developed from beasts. Matthew Taylor, cited earlier, finds the “post-human” susceptibility of Poe’s characters to morph into the subjectivity of the radically other to be a particular preoccupation of Poe’s corpus, as does Joan Dayan, who invokes the taxonomy of the “great chain of being” in her assessment of Poe’s dehumanizations: “Perhaps all of Poe’s work is finally about radical dehumanization: one can dematerialize – idealize – by turning humans into animals or by turning them into angels. As Poe proves throughout *Eureka* and his angelic colloquies, matter and non-matter are convertible.”¹⁶⁶ Dayan’s reminder of Poe’s denial of the distinction between spirit and matter can help us to make sense of the racial occult. Our difficulty with the idea that humans are descended from gods is a result of the fact that the two categories are, by definition, mutually exclusive, and so again the idea of “epistemological miscegenation” applies here. Yet in Poe’s formulation the difference between spirit and matter is one of degree, not kind, just like that which pertains to the difference between human races, allowing for couplings and cross-breedings ineluctably occult in their implications.

The same confusion between human and divine lineage appears in Poe’s most explicit treatment of Egypt, his 1845 story “Some Words With a Mummy.” No doubt a spoof of Jane Loudon’s wild novel of 1827, *The Mummy*, in which a reanimated mummy flies by hot air balloon from Cairo to London and meddles in state affairs, “Some Words With a Mummy” likewise features a corpse which has been brought back to life. Egyptologist George Gliddon and another contemporary expert, Mr. Silk Buckingham, galvanize a 5,000-year-old Egyptian mummy into a

¹⁶⁶ Joan Dayan, “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves,” *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995)183.

speaking state in this humorous tale. The mummy's cold disdain for the current degraded state of embalming, electricity, magic, architecture, astronomy, mechanics, and metallurgy, makes a mockery out of the popular idea that the nineteenth century had attained the *ne plus ultra* of knowledge, science, and culture. Despairing of impressing the ancient being with nineteenth century technology, the story's ignorant narrator and his cohort deem it, "advisable to vary the attack to Metaphysics. We sent for a copy of a book called 'The Dial,' and read out of it a chapter or two about something which is not very clear, but which the Bostonians call the Great Movement of Progress."¹⁶⁷ Needless to say, the mummy is underwhelmed by Emersonian metaphysics. When the gang think to exalt the glory of American democracy, the amused mummy recalls that the Egyptians once made an experiment with that sort of government; it ended in the despotism of the tyrannical ruler, "*Mob*."¹⁶⁸ The history "Allamistakeo" the mummy reveals is thus one of decline. For every innovation put forward by Gliddon and his associates, the mummy tops them with a superior analogue from the ancient world. The fact that the human race has fallen from the height of the godlike power of the ancient Egyptians, into a state in which "Ponnonner's lozenges and Brandreth's pills" might represent the noblest of their accomplishments, signals Poe's subscription to a Hermetic origin myth of fall from a golden age.

Not only does Allamistakeo represent the height of human capacity with his superior knowledge, Poe also implies that he is descended from a line of beings which we would identify as gods. His nineteenth century inquisitors persist in seeking information from him about the Creation, a question which mystifies him, although he admits to once having heard a theory of co-Adamism in the "spontaneous germination" of "five vast hordes of men."¹⁶⁹ The theory put

¹⁶⁷ Poe, *Complete Tales* 423.

¹⁶⁸ Poe, *Complete Tales* 424.

forth by the mummy refutes both the biblical account of racial difference first arising among the sons of Noah, as well as the nineteenth century racist hypothesis that there was a separate and earlier genesis for the black race (“pre-Adamism”). The narrow range of the questioners’ interests causes them to ignore the mummy’s far more controversial claim about race: his descent from “the Scarabæus ... a very distinguished and very rare patrician family.”¹⁷⁰ Mr. Gliddon is forced to confess his belief that “the Scarabæus was one of the Egyptian gods,” familiar to us today as Khepri or the beetle-headed god of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. Humorously, this assertion earns Gliddon the increased ire of the mummy, but Allamistakeo’s claim remains unnerving and suggestive. Presumably the new field of Egyptology identified the Scarabæus as a god because of the magical and superhuman feats he was said to perform. But the fact that the human-appearing Allamistakeo explicitly claims *blood* descent from this divine being throws the dividing line between human and god into hopeless confusion. Just as he does in *Eureka* and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe subverts the line between spirit and matter in “Some Words with a Mummy,” invoking an alternate reality in which man may claim kinship with divine beings.

Epilogue

Edgar Allan Poe’s visionary cosmology *Eureka* may provide a coherent statement of the writer’s occult beliefs, but Poe’s fictions have more effectively conveyed his occult sympathies to the public. One indication of this is the fact that *Eureka* has wielded virtually no cultural influence, while Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* launched a franchise of occult

¹⁶⁹ Poe, *Complete Tales* 422.

¹⁷⁰ Poe, *Complete Tales* 420.

speculation about dwellers in a hollow earth which continues to this day.¹⁷¹ While such extra-literary developments cannot be said to have been intended or predicted by Poe, *Pym*'s success as an occult text, when juxtaposed with *Eureka*'s failure, evocatively demonstrates the power of fiction to generate occult beliefs that fall flat when they are elaborated discursively. According to Scott Trafton, "too much importance cannot be attributed to Poe in the history of the lost race novel."¹⁷² The statement is surprising, not because we doubt Poe's power to influence, but because the tradition to which Trafton refers is the largely non-canonical one of pulp novels, comic books, and science fiction serials. Yet it is this popular literary underground of wild speculation which both furthers the occult traditions of days past and invents new occult myths, as both Jeffrey Kripal and Victoria Nelson have argued. *Pym* may not have been the first lost race/hollow earth novel, but it was certainly the best, inspiring both Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and his later novel which purported to be the sequel to *Pym*, 1897's *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*.¹⁷³ Edward Bulwer Lytton also penned a speculative text about dwellers in a hollow earth, entitled *VRIL: The Power of the Coming Race* (1871). The occultist widely credited with inaugurating the "New Age" of Hermetic belief, Helena Blavatsky, borrowed heavily

¹⁷¹ This fascinating history is recounted best by Joscelyn Godwin (see note 163); see also David Standish, *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, and Marvelous Machines Below the Earth's Surface* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), and Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (NY: Palgrave, 2003). From ancient myths to the scientific writings of Edmund Halley and Cotton Mather, speculation about a hollow earth and a subterranean race predates Poe's *Pym* by several centuries.

¹⁷² Trafton 91.

¹⁷³ Poe's only important predecessor in this respect is John Cleves Symmes, a former army captain. In 1820 Symmes published one of America's first science fiction novels, *Symzonia*, a fantasy about polar holes at the ends of the earth and the "internals" who dwell therein. But it was Poe's superior craftsmanship and unnerving suggestive power which inspired both legions of imitators in the "hollow earth" genre and the occult conviction that there was, in fact, a secret race at the ends of the earth.

from Lytton's novel in creating Theosophy's famous "root races," spiritually advanced beings of the ancient past of which we are but dim reflections.¹⁷⁴

That Blavatsky mined Lytton's novels for Theosophy's cosmology has been well-documented, but the novel *VRIL* in particular had other, unlooked-for progeny: proto-Nazi organizations and "Vril Societies" in Europe which "connected the myth of polar origins and Aryan supremacy with that of the German race."¹⁷⁵ This intricate and disturbing history is told by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke in *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, and offers an infamous example of how the occult can function to shape world history.¹⁷⁶ Theosophy may have been exploited for some dark purposes, but it is also the tradition which underwrites practically every New Age practice in the West today. Theosophy not only redeemed the Western Hermetic tradition, it also exposed Westerners to similar practices extant in the Eastern world. Blavatsky's plagiarisms are legendary, and it is certainly noteworthy that many of the philosophy's most enduring claims are entirely *fictional* in origin. Edgar Allan Poe was an imaginative contributor to this influential tradition, whether Blavatsky drew from him directly or was only inspired by the hollow earth genre of speculative fiction of which *Pym* stands at the forefront. Joscelyn Godwin's concise explanation of how Theosophy mobilized speculation about lost races into a compelling belief system puts us in mind of themes Poe explored in *Eureka*, *Pym*, and "Some Words With a Mummy":

The originality of the Theosophists was to administer a snub to Western complacency by pointing out that civilizations in the distant past had achieved as much, and more, in technology, while being infinitely superior to ours in wisdom. But those ancient races were out of reach: one could learn about them only from Mas-

¹⁷⁴ S.B. Liljegren, *Bulwer-Lytton's Novels and Isis Unveiled* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957).

¹⁷⁵ Godwin 48.

¹⁷⁶ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (1985; New York: New York UP, 2004).

ters and their pupils, who either possessed secret histories given in initiation, or else were able to penetrate the veils of the past through clairvoyance.¹⁷⁷

Not simply a “writer who used the occult,” Poe may be fairly termed an occultist because of his consistent appeal to the Hermetic idea that humanity has fallen from a godlike state of personal potency, one to which we may return via altered states of consciousness like the mesmeric trance. But Poe was not only a carrier of the Western occult tradition, he was also an innovator, linking ancient ideas about the divinity of humanity to the hysteria over racial lineage which pre-occupied his milieu.

Helena Blavatsky was the most influential occultist of the nineteenth century, and British occultist Aleister Crowley may claim this title for the twentieth. Therefore it is not surprising, and perhaps appropriate, to find Crowley invoking Poe as a source for his Thelemic philosophy. Crowley attracted the outrage of governments across the world with his permissive system, whose central credo was, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” He taught that the mastery of the human will was both the ultimate goal of the initiate, as well as the secret to obtaining occult superpowers. In the preface to his rollicking, semi-autobiographical novel *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922), Crowley quotes Joseph Glanvill: “Man is not subjected to the angels, nor even unto death utterly, save through the weakness of his own feeble will.”¹⁷⁸ Barring a few minor word substitutions, the quotation is the same as that which opens and then recurs throughout Edgar Allan Poe’s most developed tale of metempsychosis, “Ligeia”(1838), in which a woman exercises the power of her “giant will” to defy mortality and return from the dead in a new body. It’s hardly possible that Crowley took Glanvill as his source instead of Poe’s “Li-

¹⁷⁷ Godwin 42.

¹⁷⁸ Aleister Crowley, preface, *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (San Francisco: Weiser, 2008).

geia,” since Glanvill never wrote these lines – Poe did.¹⁷⁹ Crowley’s tacit appropriation of Poe in a novel intended to illustrate his Thelemic philosophy may not prove that Poe was an occultist, and yet the similarity of “Ligeia’s” theme to the philosophy which defined Crowley’s occult career is certainly a justification for placing Poe within a tradition of occult literature. Just as Poe drew from the *Corpus Hermeticum* and/or the more modern permutations of these ancient texts available to him in the nineteenth century, so occultists like Crowley and Blavatsky were inspired in turn by imaginative works of occult fiction (such as those by Poe) in devising their respective philosophies.

Crowley and Blavatsky share in common a disdain for discursive prose, preferring instead to lean heavily on neologisms, archaisms, and foreign words, and to favor images over explication. Joshua Gunn explores Blavatsky’s many abuses of the English language in *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, and attempts to explain why her turgid and impenetrable prose captured the imagination of so many followers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though other occultists wrote compendiums on similar topics, Blavatsky’s strange, soporific style in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) allowed for a “better approximation of the ineffable than ... accuracy or precision.”¹⁸⁰ Both Blavatsky and Crowley emphasized the existence of translinguistic truth and stressed that occult realities could not be rendered in language: “esoteric language is used to remind aspirants of the limits of language and to thrust them into higher states of awareness beyond language.”¹⁸¹ Perhaps the strangest thing about Poe’s *Eureka*, then, is not its ambitious attempt to impart occult truths discursively, but the fact that Poe already understood that too much explication ruins the *effect* of the uncanny. In revealing his process when writing “The Raven,”

¹⁷⁹ Kennedy, *Portable Poe*, note on 613.

¹⁸⁰ Gunn 72.

¹⁸¹ Gunn 77.

Poe asserts that readers prefer a fictional gloss on their philosophical fare, “some amount of suggestiveness – some under current, however indefinite of meaning,” to the “hardness or nakedness” of unadorned didacticism.¹⁸² As to why Poe abandoned the subtlety of effect for the “nakedness” of affect in *Eureka*, we can only speculate – but it certainly seems likely that only a deeply felt personal revelation could prompt such a total abdication of rational awareness of the reader’s needs.

¹⁸² Edgar Allan Poe, from “The Philosophy of Composition” in Kennedy, *Portable Poe* 553.

***Masonry, Anti-Masonry, and the Brotherhood of the Union:
George Lippard's Fraternal Dialectic***

Antebellum American Literature

In the decade before his untimely death at age thirty-one, Philadelphia journalist George Lippard (1822-1854) became the most popular writer in America. His lurid exposé of urban crime in the serial novel, *The Quaker City*, made him an overnight celebrity in 1844, and he remained a leading light of the antebellum literary world until Harriet Beecher Stowe's monumental success, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), turned the tide of American literature and politics.¹ While Stowe awakened the nation's slumbering morality around the issue of race, Lippard's political feeling had always been stoked by the problem of class, and his several novels are quick to sketch the lamentable gap between rich and poor Americans. The author of over twenty books as well as a prolific magazinist, George Lippard was also a good friend to Edgar Allan Poe,² and himself the possessor of a fiery, outspoken personality. Yet it is only in recent decades that literary critics are coming to reclaim the importance of this largely forgotten figure of antebellum literature.³

¹ David S. Reynolds, introduction, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, by George Lippard (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1995) vii.

² On Lippard and Poe's friendship, see Reynolds, *The Quaker City* xii and xvii.

³ David S. Reynolds has been at the forefront of this critical recovery of Lippard, although in recent years important archival work has been performed by Christopher Looby and Samuel Otter. See David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1957); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966); Emilio DeGrazia, "The Life and Works of George Lippard," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1969; David S. Reynolds, *George Lippard* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982); David S. Reynolds, introduction, *George Lippard, Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical, 1822-1854* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986); David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988); Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (Oxford UP, 2010); Christopher Looby, ed. and comp., "The Early Writings of George Lippard, 1842-43," *UCLA Center for Digital Humanities*. Web, 2 June 2011. <<http://lippardarchive.cdih.ucla.edu/>>.

Antebellum literature as a classification has yet to cohere around easily assimilable themes, a problem that points to the necessity of broadening the critical imagination surrounding early American literature. It's hard to imagine a figure more opposed to the tepid Transcendentalism of the thirties and forties, in both taste and temperament, than George Lippard. Lippard was no philosopher, nor did he appreciate the mystical verbosity of Bronson Alcott, whom he lampooned as A. Brownson Smallcut.⁴ Other prominent writers of the antebellum era, such as Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, were Lippard's seniors by three or four decades and thus not properly of his generation. By age alone, we might be tempted to class Lippard with the American Renaissance writers; he was born a few years *later* than Melville and Whitman, and yet found his voice (and fame) much earlier than these men. By the time Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Lippard had been dead for a year. Lippard's style was as mawkish and heavy-handed as that of the "mob of scribbling women" or predominantly female writers of sentimental fiction whom Hawthorne complained were glutting the literary marketplace.⁵ Yet in spite of his frequent appeal to sentiment, especially concerning indigent laborers and fallen women, Lippard's titillating discussions of illicit sex and regular recourse to graphic violence cast grave doubts on his polemical purposes.⁶ The labyrinthine streets and cast of criminal characters featured in *The Quaker City* argue that Lippard invented the American city as

⁴ Lippard wrote as "Smallcut" in "An Eastern Apologue," *Spirit of the Times*, April 5, 1842, and "The Wickedest Thing Alive," *Spirit of the Times*, April 9, 1842. See Series [J] in Looby.

⁵ In January of 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a complaining letter to his publisher, William D. Ticknor, about the popularity of sentimental fiction by women. His curt dismissal of this genre and its writers has since become critical shorthand for referring to the movement: "Besides, America is now wholly given over to a d---d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed." Quoted in Caroline Ticknor, *Hawthorne and his Publisher* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 1913)141.

⁶ On Lippard and sexuality, see J. V. Ridgely, "George Lippard's *The Quaker City*: The World of the American Porno-Gothic," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 7.1 (1974): 77-94; Mary Unger, "'Dens of Iniquity and Holes of Wickedness': George Lippard and the Queer City," *Journal of American Studies* 43.2 (Aug. 2009): 319-339.

gothic set-piece, just as Cooper invented the frontier as a forum for the working out of American destiny.⁷

If Lippard lacked Whitman's grace and Melville's erudition, he was yet as mightily invested in enduing his country with epic meaning as these Renaissance writers. In *Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution* (1847) and *Paul Ardenheim* (1848), Lippard exploits the genre of historical romance, creating entertaining and still-extant myths about the founding of America.⁸ In his gothicism he is the cognate of his friend Poe; both men thematize the supernatural, and Lippard often turns to the gloomy medieval era for inspiration, delighting in the sensationalism provided by underground chambers, fiendish tortures, maniacal wizards, and secret societies.⁹ Yet Lippard did not share Poe's disdain for politics. Lippard was Northern socialist to Poe's Southern aristocrat.

⁷ On Lippard and the origins of the "city mysteries" novel, the precursor to the modern crime novel, see Heyward Ehrlich, "The 'Mysteries' of Philadelphia: Lippard's *Quaker City* and 'Urban' Gothic," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 18 (1972): 50-65; Gary Ashwill, "The Mysteries of Capitalism in George Lippard's City Novels," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 40 (1994): 293-317.

⁸ Lippard is famously responsible for inventing the legend that Philadelphia's Liberty Bell rang on the day that Independence was declared: July 4, 1776. In fact, the steeple of the State House was in poor repair, and so the Liberty Bell most likely did not ring at all that year. See Reynolds, *George Lippard* 64-72, for Lippard's several versions of this story, and a discussion of the pertinacity of his American myths. A lesser-known myth which has survived primarily in occult circles concerns the materialization of an "Unknown Orator" who inspired the signing of the Declaration of Independence, only to disappear without a trace after changing the course of world history. Twentieth century occultist Manly Palmer Hall appropriated Lippard's myth from *Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber, 1847) 394, without attribution for his own *The Secret Destiny of America*, (1944; New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008) 118-123. Ronald Reagan quoted Hall's version of Lippard's myth as true history at a college commencement ceremony in 1957.

⁹ One of Lippard's first novels, *The Ladye Annabel, or the Doom of the Poisoner, A Romance* (Philadelphia: R.G. Berford, 1844), contains all of this stock gothic machinery, in addition to wicked monks, horses possessed by the devil (67), a Knights Templar-type brotherhood called the Order of the Holy Steel, and a torturer inspired by the Spanish Inquisition who fantasizes about pouring hot lead onto the eyeballs of his victims (23). In *Paul Ardenheim, The Monk of Wissahikon* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1848), a novel about the American Revolution hinges surprisingly on "a deed which took place in the Sixteenth Century"(425). This lengthy sub-plot imagines feudal England as a den of alchemy, betrayal, secret brotherhoods (the "gallant Twenty-Four"), unnatural life extension, and reincarnation. In *The Nazarene; or, The Last of the Washingtons* (Philadelphia: G. Lippard, 1846), a novel that was to detail riots in contemporary Philadelphia ends startlingly with the medieval adventures of a Wandering Jewess and a mysterious White Brotherhood (208-239).

Lippard is at once a writer who participated in the literary preoccupations of his milieu, as well as an original voice who resists standard classification. In other words, he is a figure ideally situated for recuperation by contemporary criticism. Part of the job of reclaiming Lippard and of penetrating the reasons for his popularity with nineteenth century readers is to expand our own sense of the scope of antebellum taste, and to this end much of the present chapter will be dedicated. The intellectual and philosophical movement of Transcendentalism may represent one of the most impressive meeting of minds in American life and letters, and yet it was by no means the only mode of literary culture. Lippard's fiery democratic sentiments reached an enthusiastic readership, and furthermore his passion for the everyman as underdog brands him a true son of the Jacksonian era. In fact, much of Lippard's literary corpus reflects the legacy of Jackson's presidency: an emphasis on the rights of the disenfranchised white man (combined with a certain blindness toward the rights of women and slaves),¹⁰ a quasi-religious belief in American destiny and expansionism, a special hatred for the corruption of banks,¹¹ as well as the idea that democracy marches forward under charismatic, iconoclastic leadership. Lippard, who often donned a cape and carried pistols during the height of the controversy over *The Quaker City's* sensational content, cut rather a swashbuckling figure, and the dashing heroes of his novels and romances defend democracy at the point of a gun.¹² The influence of "Old Hickory's"

¹⁰ Though Lippard frequently touted his belief in the equality of all men, he was suspicious of the abolitionist movement, and his black characters are, for the most part, stock caricatures. See Otter 165-202, for more on Lippard's racial attitudes. Lippard does not seem to have ever seriously entertained the idea of women's civic equality to men, choosing instead to champion the rights of the lower classes. His most sustained discussion of women's plight in the nineteenth century appears in a short story, "The Sisterhood of the Green Veil," *The Nineteenth Century: A Quarterly Miscellany (Vol. II)*, ed. Charles Chauncy Burr (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber, 1848) 746-752. In this sentimental sketch, Lippard decries the living conditions of female factory-workers, and attempts to generate sympathy for poor women who are forced into prostitution.

¹¹ On Lippard's mistrust of banks and bankers, see Reynolds, *The Quaker City* xxxiv-xxxv.

¹² Reynolds, *The Quaker City* xiii, xvi.

legendary violence is probable, and the colorful populist leader was at the least a familiar archetype in the American imagination.¹³

Lippard the Masonic Writer

Lippard's literary fascination with secret brotherhoods such as Masonry is the subject of this chapter, and this predilection also finds a correlate in Jackson's presidency: Jackson was not only a Mason but also publicly endorsed the order. Furthermore, it was during Jackson's second run for the presidency (and first successful campaign) in 1828 that the Anti-Masonic Party was born, though this faction did not originate solely as a response to his Masonic membership. Jackson's high-profile Masonry highlights a facet of antebellum culture which, though largely lost to us now, was an exceedingly important influence on George Lippard's literary themes, personal life, and narrative style. Masonry offered men like Jackson, the first American president born to the working class, affiliation in a democratic, merit-based organization which paradoxically granted its members a measure of social prestige and access to classified knowledge. Masonry suffered the worst scandal in its history a few years after Lippard was born, but in the decades to follow the organization completely recovered its losses in membership and witnessed an unprecedented popularity beginning in the 1840s.¹⁴ While obviously Masonry still exists as an institution in the twenty-first century, the rise of both nationalism and Romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century gave fraternal mysteries and fellowship a particular appeal that is difficult to

¹³ Jackson appears several times in Lippard's 1846 novel *The Nazarene*, even bizarrely performing an act of reparation for a displaced Native American (109-113). Lippard made a habit of correcting the faults of his heroes in his fiction; clearly he lauded Jackson's veto of the second Bank of the United States, but took issue with Jackson's aggressive Indian policy. Lippard speaks glowingly of Jackson in the novel's introduction: "In his immortal war against the Despotism of Banks, which he carried on without flinching one inch from his course, [Jackson] accomplished a New Revolution for the People"(8).

¹⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, "Biography of a Nation of Joiners," *The American Historical Review* 50.1 (Oct. 1944) 15.

translate into contemporary terms. George Lippard was reared amidst this fraternal fervor, and is easily named America's most Masonically-minded writer. As such, his narratives often lead us down speculative paths and into unfamiliar histories – nebulous areas waiting to be reclaimed by antebellum literary studies. The fact that Jackson, the president whose name has come to be synonymous with the thirty-year period spanning Lippard's short life, endorsed the institution which fueled Lippard's literary imagination, provides a useful check on any sense that Lippard's passion for Masonic mysteries could have been anomalous or extreme.¹⁵ Rather, Lippard the populist writer can guide us into the terrain of a popular antebellum pursuit.

My own entrée into Lippard's fraternal mysteries began with a question about his most notorious novel, *The Quaker City*. I wondered why, in a novel described by its subtitle as “A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime,” there should appear some two-thirds through its six-hundred page length an immortal wizard who claims to have inspired the American Revolution?¹⁶ The characters in *The Quaker City* are cartoonish and its plots improbable, yet Lippard does not stray from the *possible* in his ostensibly realistic expose – that is, until the wizard Ravoni appears close to page 400, exhibiting supernatural powers and collecting the city's finest young men into a ritual brotherhood. Toward answering the question of Lippard's personal and literary investment in secret societies and occult practice, I was led down many strange and unforeseen paths, including an audience with an enigmatic Pennsylvania group which claims Lippard as a high-ranking master.¹⁷ More illuminating was viewing the ritual book and key to

¹⁵ See Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1996). He argues that Jackson invested Masonry with quasi-religious meaning (179), and notes that more than half of Jackson's cabinet members were fellow Masons (232).

¹⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 423.

¹⁷ “The Fraternalitas Rosæ Crucis: The Authentic Rosicrucian Fraternity in the Americas and the Isles of the Sea,” which operates out of Quakertown, PA, originated with an occultist named R. Swinburne Clymer (1878-

the brotherhood that Lippard founded in the late 1840s, a Masonic-style organization that remained active for almost 150 years.¹⁸ In this key to the mysteries of the Brotherhood of the Union, written out in manuscript by Lippard, I learned that Lippard viewed his order as a branch of the fabled Rosicrucian Society, ironically the most famous secret society of all time.¹⁹ Portions of other texts presented as “fiction” by Lippard, such as *Paul Ardenheim* and *Adonai: The Pilgrim of Eternity*, appear in the bound handbook of the Brotherhood of the Union (known henceforth as the *BGC*) as foundational and sacred texts of the order. The overlap between Lippard’s fictional output and fraternal liturgy argues that there is a proselytizing tenor to his novels, and perhaps an even more covert, occult narrative strategy at work. My project in this chapter is to recuperate the Rosicrucian and Masonic cultures which influenced Lippard, and then to elucidate the profound effect this Masonic perspective exerted on his published literature in both content and narrative style.

Lippard makes reference to this “occult” species of narration in the preface to *The Nazarene*, a disjointed novel of 1846: “There are certain truths that cannot be told, unless linked with

1966). Clymer cobbled together Lippard’s American myths and invented a few of his own in order to represent Lippard as an important emissary of Rosicrucianism in this country. See R. Swinburne Clymer, *The Book of Rosicruciae*, Vol. 2 (Quakertown, PA: Philosophical Publishing Company, 1947). The current group maintains a website: <www.soul.org>.

¹⁸ Roger Butterfield, “George Lippard and His Secret Brotherhood,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 79.3 (Jul. 1955): 285-301.

¹⁹ Some of the regalia, sacred texts, and other paraphernalia of the Brotherhood of the Union were donated to the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1994. The group’s handbook of rituals, laws, and protocol runs about 200 pages, was bound in 1850 or 1851, and was offered for purchase to members of Lippard’s group (Butterfield 299). This book, *BGC of the Circles of the Order*, is written partially in numeric code and will be referred to in this article as the *BGC*. The meaning of this acronym is unknown. The Library Company’s “Brotherhood of the Union Collection” contains two keys which offer some solution to the code at work in the *BGC*. Both of these keys were written out in manuscript by Lippard and signed by him, and are respectively titled “Key to figure [216] of the B.G.C.” and “Key to figure [231] of the BGC.” In “Key [216],” Lippard reveals that the “degree of the Rosy Cross” is “the supreme degree of the Order”(1). In “Key [231],” Lippard explicates this exalted degree: “You are now, my Brother, a member of the Supreme Power of our Order – a Grand Exalted Washington – a Brother of the Rosy Cross, – or, in a briefer and more significant phrase – a Nazarene”(17).

the charm of fiction.”²⁰ This apparently conventional statement, a fair defense of polemical novels in general, yields far greater insight into Lippard’s narrative agenda when considered with the writer’s deep investment in occult belief and practice. Specifically, the initiation rituals and ancient lore associated with fraternal orders obsessed Lippard and appear with regularity in his fictional output. Secret orders rely heavily on the symbolic multiplicity opened up by ritual staging, ritual objects, ritual drama, and ceremonial language. The fluidity and capaciousness of ritual symbols create a field of meaning, wherein multiple, conflicting perspectives may be resolved and collapsed into a single, coherent understanding.²¹ Perhaps the most convenient example of this principle in action is Masonic deployment of the letter “G” as fraternal symbol. The “G” denotes adherence to both “God” and “Geometry,” the one an intuitive conviction arrived at by personal experience, the other a set of mathematical laws arrived at and provable by deductive reasoning.²² Masonry unites the wisdom gained from both revelatory and empirical sources, forging a synthesis of disparate epistemes (religion and rationality) which in turn creates group cohesion. But just as Lippard’s truth cannot be “told” or delivered expositoryly, neither can Masonic loyalty or reverence be generated with this flat reduction of fraternal mysteries into a “G” with several meanings. Rather, emotional manipulation facilitated by ritual staging and drama, enigmatic images, lore, and allegory prepares the ground for initiation into occult mysteries and affiliation.

An analogue to Lippard’s occult narrative agenda is provided by the writer who replaced him as America’s most popular novelist, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe’s oft-maligned sense

²⁰ Lippard, *The Nazarene* vii.

²¹ See Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), for more on the use of symbolic ambiguity and multiplicity within the rituals of fraternal orders: “Fraternal ritualists and scholars acknowledged the multivocalic nature of their symbols”(63).

²² William Morgan, *Illustrations of Masonry: by one of the Fraternity ...* (Chicago: E.A. Cook, 1827) 41.

that if her readers could only “feel right” they would be affected with compassion for the plight of the Southern slave, has become a hallmark of the didactic fiction which *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* exemplifies.²³ Just as Stowe wrote with the express intent of producing a fundamentally irrational or emotional response in her audience, a small but impassioned group of American writers crafted fiction intended to engender enthusiasm for occult mysteries. My use of the term *irrational* is in no sense pejorative; Stowe successfully employed melodrama to circumvent popular, rational defenses of slavery on legal and economic grounds, just as occult writers skillfully orchestrated obfuscation to inspire curiosity about the occult, thus bypassing rational aversion to mysteries too nakedly drawn. The most salient difference between these two styles of didactic fiction is the nature of the audience each hoped to reach: Stowe’s polemic was an open call to all Christian Americans, while occult fiction of the sort penned by Lippard sought to appeal to the worthy elect who might qualify for initiation into his secret order.²⁴

Occult revelation through meditation on symbols was a familiar idea to nineteenth century Americans, one fueled not only by popular speculation on the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics, but also by the glut of Masonic and Anti-Masonic texts that appeared following the

²³ “There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*.” Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; New York: Norton, 1994) 385.

²⁴ Lippard does not overtly invite his fictional audience to join a group called the Brotherhood of the Union, presumably because Rosicrucian and Masonic-style societies discouraged proselytizing. Public advertisement would also certainly detract from the secret and mysterious nature of the organization, and hence neutralize some of its chief attractions. Yet Lippard is often suggestive in his fiction, alluding to knowledge of secret orders which the reader does not share. The following passage from *The Nazarene*, though not completely forthcoming, demonstrates that Lippard used his novels to generate interest in the Brotherhood of the Union. This preface does not appear in the 1854 version of *The Nazarene*.

“It will be my object to illustrate this principle: *The immense good which may be accomplished, by a Brotherhood, who, rejecting all sectarian dogmas, take for their rule of action, those great truths of Christ our Saviour, on which all sects agree* [sic].

“Such an order, properly combined, with its branches scattered in every hamlet and town of our land, would sweep Fanaticism from the American Continent”(vi).

In the prologue to *Paul Ardenheim*, Lippard distinguishes between two types of readers: “gentlemen of a critical turn” and “readers of a different kind – readers who are willing to read a book in something of the spirit in which it was written.” To these latter who are sympathetic to his vision, Lippard offers his novel of ritual brotherhood as “A Dream I have attempted to put on paper”(10).

Morgan affair of 1826.²⁵ Failing to understand this nineteenth century association of the occult with the mystic power of symbols can lead to misreadings of the role played by dramatic regalia and ritual objects in occult novels and occult practice. For example, when Lippard justifies the use of ritual paraphernalia within his brotherhood, explaining that, “Many persons, who cannot receive ideas through the means of Books, or oral lessons, may be instructed by means of rites and symbols [sic],” twentieth-century historian Roger Butterfield assumes that “Lippard expected many of his members would not be able to read or understand spoken words.”²⁶ In fact, Lippard did not doubt the intelligence of his audience so much as he understood that a ritual is more persuasive than a lecture.²⁷ Words impact the intellect but fail to touch the heart; images, symbols, and staged dramas, conversely, evoke religious feeling by appealing to the emotions. Scholars of Masonry assert that there was a distinct rise of theatrical rites sanctioned by the order in the mid-nineteenth century, created with the express purpose of unleashing the emotions that lead to group cohesion and loyalty.²⁸ Lippard’s novelistic career is expressive of antebellum

²⁵ Kent Logan Walgren, *Freemasonry, Anti-Masonry and Illuminism in the United States, 1734-1850: A Bibliography* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2003). Of the 5,560 entries recorded by Walgren, many of which do not appear in either of the Early American Imprints series, 1,430 entries belong to the decade 1840-1850 alone (xxxvii). “In 1827, with the Morgan affair, Masonic and anti-Masonic publishing exploded, peaking in 1832,” and increasing again “in the years just before mid-century”(xliii).

²⁶ Butterfield 299.

²⁷ Lippard frequently describes the ritual element of his brotherhood as “speaking to the heart through the eye.” The emotional or heart-emphasis of ritual spectacle fosters the community feeling and loyalty necessary for group cohesion. In “Key [231],” Lippard explains that “[this book] contains a series of ceremonies which embody ... principles, and presents them perpetually to the heart through the eye, thus keeping them alive in the hearts of all true brothers and perpetually exciting them to action”(9). In *Paul Ardenheim*, the ritual use of symbol transcends the language barrier which would otherwise keep brothers apart. A mysterious stranger speaks of “the rites, symbols, and customs of the Order – which spoke to the heart through the eye, and formed a universal language, intelligible to brothers of every race and clime” (312). In the *BGC*, fraternal ceremonies are “pictured words” with the power to transcend the past and connect brothers separated by history: “Learn also, that the holiest things are most easily ridiculed – that the Ideas shrouded in our ceremonies have been taught through similar symbols, by great men – the anointed Patriarchs of human rights whose bones this hour are dust and nothingness, while their spirits still live and shine, within our Holy Circle [sic].” George Lippard, *BGC of the Circles of the Order* (Philadelphia, 1850-51)10. The book was printed piecemeal by several different printers, and then bound by the order to preserve privacy.

Masonic culture in its fascination with symbolic ritual. His imagistic, frequently impenetrable novels evoke a mood of mystery and hidden meaning, often without making literal sense. The incredible popularity of Lippard's books suggests that his colorful, adrenaline-infused fantasies served a powerful cultural hunger for the irrational, one that was also being met behind the closed doors of lodge halls.

The idea that fraternal orders exploited the symbolic potential of mundane objects appears in a casual reference to Masonry made by Herman Melville in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne. "The Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children," wrote Melville in 1851; "It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron – nothing more [sic]!"²⁹ Melville's reaction to the holy regalia of Freemasonry is telling in more ways than one. It is not surprising that the man whom Hawthorne described as resting uneasily between belief and unbelief would be both curious about Masonry's mysteries and disappointed by their outward form.³⁰ Melville's failure to grasp the ultimate mystery of Masonry also points to the fact that fraternal revelations derive from ritual staging, and not from any implicit quality in the ritual objects themselves. A ritual is a production of meaning, and so participation in a theatrical, evocative rite which stages both the death and resurrection of the initiate is an entirely different experience from reading an exposé of Masonry in a book or magazine, as

²⁸ See Bullock on the rise of emotional rites in nineteenth century Masonry: "Excited feelings provided not only a means of reaching the true self but of revealing it more directly than sober rationality" (272). See Carnes on the rewriting of the degrees for greater theatrical effect in the nineteenth century: "The revisions of ritual in the 1840s and 1850s were the culmination of a 'glorious reformation' that had transformed the lodges into temples and had conferred upon lodge masters the title 'Most Worshipful.' The lodge historians commonly attributed the success of their orders to the new ritualism of the mid-nineteenth century"(29).

²⁹ Quoted in James Emmett Ryan, "Melville in the Brotherhood: Freemasonry, Fraternalism, and the Artisanal Ideal," *Melville "Among the Nations": Proceedings of an International Conference, Volos, Greece, July 2-6, 1997*, ed. Sanford E. Marovit and A.C. Christodoulou (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 2001) 71.

³⁰ Hawthorne neatly summed up Melville's chronic epistemological struggle following a visit with him in 1856: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in is unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." Quoted in Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Melville: A Biography* (1996; Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1998) 377.

Melville may have done.³¹ The fact that revelation remains an inward experience, though facilitated by participation in a group, offers a measure of protection for “the Freemason’s mighty secret.” Ritual forms and objects might be exposed to the general public, but their noetic meaning remains opaque to the uninitiated.

Nineteenth century familiarity with ritual brotherhoods (which Melville’s reference demonstrates) is the focus of the first half of this chapter, and the second half is concerned with the Rosicrucian and Masonic tropes that George Lippard employs in his novels. His occult narrative strategy incorporates ritual symbols and myths into the plots of novels which are not openly identified with ritual brotherhoods as their subject matter. In this way, Lippard can deliver secret, occulted information via the medium of a popular novel, thereby reaching a wider audience than he could with a text which announces that it will initiate its reader into the taboo topic of ancient mysteries. Lippard’s *Nazarene*, quoted earlier, offers a striking example of this narrative technique.

An Introduction to Occult Narration: The Nazarene

The bulk of my analysis in this chapter will revolve around two novels, *The Quaker City* (1845) and *Paul Ardenheim* (1848), though the rather unaccountable (and unfinished) novel *The Nazarene* (1846) serves here as introduction to Lippard’s occult style of narration. *The Nazarene* and Lippard’s secret order, the Brotherhood of the Union, came into being at roughly the same

³¹ It does not appear that Melville ever belonged to a secret society, and yet recent scholarship has revealed that Masonic culture left an indelible imprint on his literary imagination: “Apart from the literature of freemasonry itself, which seems not to have been assessed in a thorough manner by modern literary and religious historians, there are consistent indications that Melville was writing with an acute awareness of the phenomenon of lodge-joining that marked the nineteenth century”(Ryan, 81). See also Hennig Cohen, “Melville’s Masonic Secrets,” *Melville Society Extracts* 108 (Mar. 1997): 3-17, for an index of Melville’s family members who were heavily involved in the order. One of these, Simon Greenleaf, even penned a book about the order: *A Brief Inquiry into the Origin and Principles of Freemasonry* (Portland, Maine, 1820). Cohen also gives a detailed anatomy of Masonic references throughout Melville’s corpus.

time. Lippard began publishing *The Nazarene* in installments in 1846, and by 1847 he had held the first meeting of the Brotherhood at his home on Sixth Street, below Poplar, in Philadelphia.³² *The Nazarene* is thus uniquely situated in Lippard's corpus as a median text, not only contemporaneous with the birth of his brotherhood, but also marking the transition between the writer's early ideas of secret societies as atheistical and inflammatory (*The Quaker City*), and his mature vision of brotherhood as a democratic, Christian institution with the power to transform the world (*Paul Ardenheim*). The arc between *The Quaker City* and *Paul Ardenheim* also demonstrates Lippard's growing comfort with beliefs that were to take on a religious intensity in his worldview. There is some indication that the wizard Ravoni and his mysterious order offer the only hope of redemption in a corrupt society in *The Quaker City*, but this potential resolution is submerged. A similar plot is only semi-submerged in *The Nazarene*, and in *Paul Ardenheim* Lippard performs a full-fledged "assault on the rational," to borrow a phrase of David Reynolds.³³ In *Paul Ardenheim*, warring Masonic-style brotherhoods compete for control of the Revolutionary-era United States, George Washington is consecrated by a secret Rosicrucian society, a diabolical wizard practices life extension and eventually morphs into the devil himself, an ancient blood-feud is played out by its reincarnated actors, and the original Rosicrucian wisdom from Europe is transferred to a secret chamber on American soil. All the while, Lippard asserts that truth is a relative term, and that the initiated reader will be able to discern the relevant message though it be clothed in a veil of fiction.³⁴ *The Nazarene*, therefore, with its more

³² Butterfield 297.

³³ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 41.

³⁴ "But for the present, I will not attempt any explanation of these mysteries; in a future work I may lift the veil from all that now appears incredible in the history of Paul Ardenheim. 'But this work is Improbable – its events are wild – unnatural – the very machinery of the story is based upon supernatural agency!' To objections like these, I might answer, in a frank and confidential way, my friend:

oblique references to the power of brotherhood, provides a better example of an occulted trajectory within Lippard's fiction than *Paul Ardenheim's* open endorsement of Masonic mystery.

Lippard never finished writing *The Nazarene's* installments, though David Reynolds reports the surprising information that the bound copy of the unfinished novel was actually quite popular.³⁵ It is the very uneven, conflicted, and unfinished nature of *The Nazarene* that interests me, because it reveals a writer in struggle over his own narrative agenda. In *The Nazarene*, Lippard attempts to negotiate the relative importance of two narrative arcs, and ultimately fails to deliver on either. The problem first appears in the novel's very title. Will this be a novel about "The Nazarene; or, The Last of the Washingtons," or "A Revelation of Philadelphia, New York, and Washington in the Year 1844"? Lippard did, in fact, view George Washington as an avatar of Christ as the main title suggests, and about this I will have more to say shortly. But the ostensible plot of the text is social upheaval in Philadelphia in 1844, as the subtitle indicates. Lippard elaborates on this intention in the novel's preface:

My task is an iron one; somewhat stern, somewhat terrible, somewhat difficult. To portray the scenes of two successive riots, when all that is barbarous in religious war, all that is horrible in arson or murder, all that is terrible in the spectacle of graves torn open, living men shot down like dogs, churches laid in ashes, was enacted in Philadelphia.³⁶

Lippard refers here to the Southwark and Kensington riots, two clashes which erupted between Protestants and Irish Catholics in the summer of 1844. Irish homes were attacked, churches were burned, and several civilians lost their lives; in the end, troops had to be called in to quell the

"Truth is stranger than Fiction. Wherefore? Because Fiction only revels and glows in the Probable, while Truth in her noblest form, dares and conquers the Impossible ... The truest of true histories never look at first sight, like Truth [sic]." Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 533.

³⁵ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 14.

³⁶ Lippard, *The Nazarene* vi.

violence of the mobs.³⁷ The stage is set for a Lippard-style barn-burner with the promise of urban violence and ethnic caricature, but then almost in the same breath Lippard discloses another (or the real?) trajectory of *The Nazarene*: “It will be my object to illustrate this principle: *The immense good which may be accomplished, by a Brotherhood, who, rejecting all sectarian dogmas, take for their rule of action, those great truths of Christ our Saviour, on which all sects agree* [sic].”³⁸ Not surprisingly, Lippard struggles to follow through on portraying a non-sectarian brotherhood at work amid scenes of violence which, historically, have already occurred.

It is possible to read *The Nazarene* as a “finished” novel if we imagine that the brotherhood referred to above quells the riots before they are allowed to happen, and some textual evidence supports this reading. If *The Nazarene* is known for anything, it is Lippard’s “inability” to get to the riots,³⁹ and yet perhaps this renunciation of the riot plot enacts “the immense good” which may be accomplished by the brotherhood named in the novel’s preface. Like most of Lippard’s novels, *The Nazarene* resists easy summation. We are introduced to satanic bank president Calvin Wolfe, taken on a graphic tour of the murderous exploits of a ritual brotherhood, presented with the marriage plot of the noble Paul Mount-Laurel, wrenched to the neighborhood of the riots and a crew of carousing medical students, and, finally, subjected to the adventures of a Wandering Jewess who has survived since the time of Christ. Recovering Lippard’s Masonic sympathies is a task further complicated by the fact that he often depicts good and evil secret societies in the same text. *The Quaker City* shows us the corruption of “The

³⁷ Otter 182-183.

³⁸ Lippard, *The Nazarene* vi.

³⁹ See Otter, 183, and Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987) 112-114.

Monks of Monk Hall,” but also the democratic dignity of Ravoni’s “sacred twenty-four.” In *Paul Ardenheim*, an imposing Illuminati is contrasted with the simple piety of the Rosicrucians. In *The Nazarene*, the diabolical activity of the L.P.O. is condemned, while a “White Brotherhood” (named only in the ending vignette about the Wandering Jewess) is credited with maintaining peace and social order through the centuries.⁴⁰ The key to comprehending the arc of brotherhood in this rather postmodern collage rests in the character of Paul Mount-Laurel, avatar of George Washington.

When we first meet the enigmatic Paul Mount-Laurel, who appears at scenes of domestic injustice with superhero-like celerity, his “broad chest and manly form” and “magnificent countenance” are immediately associated with one of Lippard’s personal heroes: “Yes, by a strange coincidence this face marked by striking outlines, displayed all the chivalry, enthusiasm and genius which stamped the countenance of George Washington.”⁴¹ Paul Mount-Laurel is a precursor of Lippard’s character Paul Ardenheim, who likewise brings superhuman prowess to the project of fighting crime. *The Nazarene*’s Paul appears to represent Lippard’s fantasy of what brotherhood could offer to Philadelphia’s urban poor. “I am very poor,” Paul Mount-Laurel admits, “Poor in money, but rich in the affection of generous hearts, strong in the possession of a Power, which might shake this city to its foundations.”⁴² The “Power” Paul speaks of refers to a legendary status among the disenfranchised citizens of Philadelphia, and the ability to mobilize or suppress their violent activity. The riots of 1844 were attributed to religious controversy among

⁴⁰ Lippard intimates familiarity with a diabolical secret order, in contrast to the noble brotherhood he proposes in the novel’s preface: “Here let us at once confess, that we are in no way responsible for the loathsome rites of this secret band [the L.P.O.]. It is with no desire to satisfy the craving of a morbid curiosity, that we lay bare their revolting ceremonies, or picture their blasphemous orgies. It is with the express intention of showing how man may be influenced by a secret association, whose rites are as loathsome as detestable, whose symbols are a blasphemy on God, a libel on his creatures, that we follow this scene to the end.” Lippard, *The Nazarene* 22.

⁴¹ Lippard, *The Nazarene* 41.

⁴² Lippard, *The Nazarene* 187.

poor whites, but previous riots in the city's history had broken out over racial conflicts and were often blamed on Philadelphia's African American population.⁴³ In *The Nazarene*, blacks who are tempted to riot because of a fear of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South are pacified by secret signs from Paul:

Mount-Laurel ... turning to the enraged negroes, while his form swelled proudly erect, and his eyes flashed with anger: "Now, look on me, one and all! Do you not know me!"

He muttered a word, which only reached the negroes' ears; with the fingers of his right hand, he traced a sign on his uncovered forehead, which was seen by their eyes alone.

As though some supernatural hand had changed them in that instant, from enraged beasts into men, the negroes gave utterance to a wild murmur of joy, and one old man whose white wool was contrasted with his coal-black face, rushed forward and knelt at Mount-Laurel's feet, pressing his lips to the shoes of this singular man.⁴⁴

At another word from Paul, the "enraged negroes" subsequently exit the tavern that was threatening to explode into violence; clearly, brotherhood has quelled a potential riot.

The 1844 riots which *The Nazarene* stops short of depicting were largely blamed on Irish Catholics, though they were as much the riots' victims as their cause. Once again, with this beleaguered demographic, Paul Mount-Laurel stays the outbreak of violence. Gerald O'Brien tears from his impoverished home with "the divil at my heart, and the knife in my hand," full of murderous intent for the wealthy classes. Fortunately he runs into Paul Mount-Laurel, who not only listens to his tale of poverty and woe, but offers him silver and calms him with Masonic-style signs, "the password and the grip."⁴⁵ O'Brien is thus rescued from "death, and worse than

⁴³ See the chapter, "Riot," in Otter 131-209, for several different contemporary interpretations of the race riots that erupted in 1829, 1834, 1835, and 1842 in Philadelphia.

⁴⁴ Lippard, *The Nazarene* 162.

⁴⁵ Lippard, *The Nazarene* 194.

death” by this “generous Stranger, the good Angel of the Poor.”⁴⁶ Though O’Brien goes on to organize with other Irishmen in rebellion against their wage slavery, his education by Paul allows him to discover that it is the wealthy who have incited riotous feeling among his countrymen as a means of continuing to oppress them. It is at this point, with both the cause and threat of riot starkly portrayed, and the solution – brotherhood – providing a temporary check on the violence, that Lippard’s riot narrative breaks off, and turns suddenly to the gothic tale of the Wandering Jewess.

Lippard is so prone to pulling out all the stops in his florid prose that his literary craft and subtlety often get overlooked. Yet respecting one of the dominant themes in his fiction, secret societies, Lippard is typically cagey and complex, and requires the discerning eye of the careful critic. In *The Nazarene*, after painting a picture of the “immense good” a benefic brotherhood could provide to the riot-prone city of Philadelphia, Lippard subjects us to a bizarre change of scene involving an anti-Christian immortal who foments evil wherever she travels. In a humorous example of understatement, Samuel Otter jokes that *The Nazarene*’s closing vignette bears “uncertain relevance” to the novel’s main plot: “historically speaking, the Wandering Jewess probably did not play a significant part in the Kensington riots.”⁴⁷ What the Wandering Jewess vignette does reveal, however, is that a secret benevolent society has existed for centuries to combat evil forces such as herself. The brotherhood she describes is identical in its altruism to the noble activity of Paul Mount-Laurel. Renaissance Florence may be far removed in time from nineteenth century Philadelphia, and yet some transcendent “truth” about the world can be told in this setting, via the “charm of fiction”:

⁴⁶ Lippard, *The Nazarene* 195.

⁴⁷ Otter 183.

One Brotherhood alone, a noble and self-sacrificing band ... combatted the Panic and the Plague. It was the WHITE BROTHERHOOD. Their vow was not so much to swell solemn ceremonies of the mass ... as to go boldly forth into the darkest avenues of the city, searching for misery to relieve, sickness to heal, starvation to feed, or nakedness to clothe [sic].⁴⁸

As much as the tale of the Wandering Jewess causes the reader to wonder if *The Nazarene's* printer has mistakenly inserted a chapter from another novel, there is a certain coherence to Lippard ending his novel of class war with a blatant parable of enduring evil and organized charity. The writer does, after all, punctuate this vignette with the words "The End." Lippard's nineteenth century readers, who were following *The Nazarene* in serial installments, might have found the novel "unfinished," and yet Lippard stopped writing the piece because, arguably, one or both of the novel's projected narrative arcs had been resolved: fictionally, "brotherhood" proved so effective at forestalling "riot" as to neutralize *The Nazarene's* plot of social upheaval.

The Nazarene thus delivers its message of brotherhood in an occulted fashion. Lippard announces in the preface that the novel's object is to illustrate the immense good that may be accomplished by a non-sectarian brotherhood, but this "illustrating" does not amount to much more than a few scant references and the telling figure of Paul Mount-Laurel. An ethic of secrecy has always forbidden open discussion of fraternal mysteries by initiated members to the uninitiated, and hence Lippard's references to brotherhood are both impassioned and coy. My project in this chapter is to recover the Masonic culture that made Lippard's secret society tropes more recognizable to his nineteenth century audience than to modern readers. I will also incorporate elements of Lippard's personal mythology, revealed in the ritual book and key he wrote for the Brotherhood of the Union, into this argument, because without consideration of these formerly secret materials, much of Lippard's literary symbolism would remain opaque. For example, "Key [231]" of the Brotherhood of the Union explicitly describes the highest degree in the order

⁴⁸ Lippard, *The Nazarene* 233.

as the “Degree of Grand Exalted Washington, a Rosy Cross, Nazarene Degree”(see Fig. 7). Lippard’s conflation of Christ, George Washington, and the fabled Rosicrucian Society would be almost unbelievable without recourse to these occult documents, which have only been available for public viewing since 1994, when they were donated to the Library Company of Philadelphia. These ritual books or *BGC* (Lippard’s unsolved acronym for the Brotherhood of the Union) also confirm what so much of Lippard’s fiction implies: the writer’s own identification with the occult society of Rosicrucians. Lippard’s known sympathy with the occult claims of the Rosicrucians, Masons, Odd Fellows, and perhaps yet other groups must certainly change the way we read his secret society fiction.⁴⁹ The extremely thin line between “fiction” and “ritual” in his body of writing suggests that his novels were conceived, in part, as occult texts, and endowed with the power to perform occult work.

Arguments and Stakes

Lippard’s use of the novel as a vehicle for occult transmission is exemplary of one of the larger arcs of this dissertation: my argument that the Hermetic tradition survived the nineteenth century through the medium of fiction. By revealing that popular American fiction thematized the practical application of Hermeticism in ritual brotherhoods, we gain new perspective into the religious texture of the country, as well as new insight into the suprarational needs of the nation’s readership that were served by novels such as Lippard’s. Identifying Lippard’s literary Rosicrucianism allows us to complicate reductive narratives of the spiritual mood of the nation, which generalize about a rational Enlightenment at the time of America’s founding and a series of evangelical Great Awakenings in the nineteenth century. Lippard’s embracing of the Enlight-

⁴⁹ The *Public Ledger* of February 13, 1854, reported that Lippard was both a Mason and an Odd Fellow when he died. Cited in Butterfield 298, note 32.

enment's irrational shadow, occultism, provides evidence for an alternative spiritual history, one which does not assume that either eighteenth century rationalism or nineteenth century Christianity was obligatory and monolithic. Lippard's hero Thomas Paine wrote a ruthlessly rational evisceration of Christian belief in the 1790s, *The Age of Reason*, and yet wrote sympathetically of Masonic mysteries and mythology as being both reasonable and good.⁵⁰ The founding fathers Lippard deified, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, were both active Masons.⁵¹ Thus, the irrationalism with which we might be tempted to brand Lippard's enthusiasm for ritual fraternities has a distinguished pedigree in the very minds that have come to represent American Enlightenment.

This more nuanced understanding of the occult in American history views it as a consistent presence as opposed to the anomalous and periodic expression of disconnected movements. Recently, Catherine Albanese has concluded that metaphysical religion is a distinct mode of American religious life: "My study of American religion and culture ... convinces me that metaphysics is a normal, recurring, and pervasive feature of the American spiritual landscape."⁵² The

⁵⁰ Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* in two sections in 1793 and 1794. The Deist sentiments he expressed in this text permanently damaged his reputation. "Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more *derogatory to the Almighty*, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself, than this thing called Christianity," Paine proclaimed. See Philip S. Foner, introduction, *The Age of Reason*, by Thomas Paine (New York: Citadel Press, 1948). Ironically, in a posthumous essay Paine shows a remarkable willingness to believe the exaggerated claims of Masons concerning the ancient lineage of the order; he connects the group's history to a lost tribe of Druids. His outright rejection of divine revelation in *The Age of Reason* is revoked relative to Masonic history in "An Essay on the Origin of Free Masonry": "We see that Masonry, without publicly declaring so, lays claim to some divine communication from the Creator, in a manner different from, and unconnected with, the book which the Christians call the Bible; and the natural result from this is, that Masonry is derived from some very ancient religion, wholly independent of, and unconnected with that book." See Thomas Paine, *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (London: R. Carlile, 1824) 283. George Lippard, true to form, invented a death-bed conversion to Christianity for Paine in one of his American legends. Though critics immediately castigated Lippard for this fiction (Paine waved clergymen away in his dying days), other contemporaries lauded Lippard for reclaiming Paine's importance to the American Revolution in spite of his controversial beliefs. See Reynolds, *George Lippard* 14, 68-70.

⁵¹ Bullock 1.

⁵² Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007) 16.

fiction of George Lippard corroborates this fresh take on the presence of occultism in American life, by serving as a link between the eighteenth century craze for mystical societies and the “New Age” of Theosophy which blossomed in the late nineteenth century. Increasingly, it appears that the rise of the novel bore directly upon the dissemination of occult ideas in the nineteenth century. Several historians have pointed out that Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, took British novelist and Rosicrucian, Edward Bulwer Lytton, as her primary inspiration and source.⁵³ Lippard was likewise influenced by Lytton, and in turn originated occult tropes which were taken up not only by Blavatsky, but also by the prolific occultists R. Swinburne Clymer and Manly Palmer Hall.⁵⁴ In addition to altering our perception of the religious tenor of American life, Lippard’s occult texts open up a new role for the novel as the conduit of a secret tradition.

A literary study of Lippard’s Rosicrucianism complements religious and historical approaches to this famed and fabled group, because the Rosicrucian phenomenon was first and foremost a literary movement. All that can be confirmed about the original enigmatic order is the publication of three seventeenth century tracts. Furthermore, the spread of esotericism in the West has proceeded text by text, as opposed to being a transmission from master to student as in Eastern spiritual traditions.⁵⁵ To demonstrate Lippard’s debt to the Rosicrucian tradition, I pro-

⁵³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (1985; New York: New York UP, 2004): “[Blavatsky’s] fascination with Egypt as the fount of all wisdom arose from her enthusiastic reading of the English author Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton ... It is ironical that early theosophy should have been principally inspired by English occult fiction”(19). See also S.B. Liljegren, *Bulwer-Lytton’s Novels and Isis Unveiled* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957).

⁵⁴ Given Blavatsky’s penchant for plagiarizing, it is probable that she derived the idea of a “White Brotherhood” from Lippard’s popular text *The Nazarene*, and her idea of early American Rosicrucianism from *Paul Ardenheim*. Blavatsky founded Theosophy on belief in the existence of a society of benevolent, mystical teachers which she called a “Great White Brotherhood.” See Peter Washington, *Madam Blavatsky’s Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America* (New York: Schocken, 1993) 34-36. For Lippard’s respective influence on Hall and Clymer, see notes 8, 17, 140, and 287 in this chapter.

vide an overview of the literature of Rosicrucianism through the nineteenth century, as well as consider the contemporary permutations that were available to Lippard: namely, a seventeenth century mystical order that flourished near Lippard's childhood home, and nineteenth century Masonry.

After establishing Lippard's influences, I dedicate the remainder of the chapter to how Lippard reveals his obsession with secret societies through his fiction. As Lippard's most overt endorsement of Rosicrucianism, *Paul Ardenheim* is a fertile field for investigating the writer's investment in the occult, which increased as he aged. My analysis of *Paul Ardenheim* discloses that this "fiction" actually doubles as the ritual mythology underlying Lippard's secret brotherhood. My turn to Lippard's earlier novel *The Quaker City* may seem surprising, given that this text manifests a more conflicted attitude toward ritual brotherhoods than *Paul Ardenheim*. Yet it is the very clandestine nature of Lippard's sanctioning of the occult in *The Quaker City* which gives the novel such richness, depth, and ambiguity. Lippard's typically broad characterizations find a counterpoint in an ambiguous member of *The Quaker City's* cast, the wizard Ravoni, who voices the occult ethos that the writer subscribes to but cannot openly endorse. Lippard's growing comfort with occult belief led him to write such imaginative but impenetrable narratives as *Paul Ardenheim*, *The Nazarene*, and *Adonai*, each a tangle of vignettes ranging widely in time and steeped in a mass of incoherent symbolism and secret identities. The occult material in *The Quaker City*, by contrast, is handled with restraint, reflecting the writer's sense of having to dodge the scrutiny of a critical and rational readership. Thus, this novel provides an excellent example of how a covert occult trajectory can subsist in a novel whose plot is driven by worldly events. Easily Lippard's most popular novel and widely considered his best, *The Quaker City*

⁵⁵ Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (Albany: New York State UP, 2004) 12.

draws heavily on the Rosicrucian themes that we see augmented in Lippard's later career. The revelation of occult forces in George Lippard's best-known work offers us a new perspective on this neglected writer of the 1840s.

Rosicrucianism through the Nineteenth Century

In attempting to establish Lippard's debt to Rosicrucianism, I must recount the history of an elusive mystical order whose actuality has been contested from its earliest known origins. The common tropes of secret society literature have been described as "Rosicrucian" by critic Marie Roberts in her book, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*. Lippard's corpus bears much in common with the literature discussed by Roberts, who looks at novels by William Godwin, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Edward Bulwer Lytton.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, the Rosicrucian elements of these novels are centered not so much around an organization as they are around an iconic character: the magus or Rosicrucian, who is imbued with magical powers like life extension and invisibility. Lippard's novels are peopled with these enigmatic immortals, and his interest in occult revelation and ritual betrays an inclination for the mystical aspects of fraternity.

Rosicrucianism takes pride of place chronologically to Masonry. Fanciful histories of each group notwithstanding, the first evidence for a Rosicrucian Order appears in the early years of the seventeenth century; no evidence exists for Masonic activity prior to the 1640s, and the group did not officially organize until 1717.⁵⁷ English writer Thomas DeQuincey asserts his thesis as to the relationship between the two orders in a long article which first appeared in *London*

⁵⁶ Marie Roberts, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁵⁷ Albanese 124.

Magazine in 1824, entitled “Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origins of the Rosicrucians and Free-masons.” “FREE-MASONRY IS NEITHER MORE NOR LESS THAN ROSICRUCIANISM AS MODIFIED BY THOSE WHO TRANSPLANTED IT INTO ENGLAND [sic],” DeQuincey declaims, and though this statement is an over-simplification of the facts, it serves to establish a line of descent acknowledged by historians of both groups to differing extents.⁵⁸

Rosicrucianism was born in Cassel, Germany, with the publication of three tracts over the years 1614 to 1616. These include the *Fama Fraternitatis* and the *Confessio Fraternitatis*, which were published together in English in 1652 and given the following respective titles by their translator, Thomas Vaughan: *Discovery of the Fraternity of the Most Noble Order of the Rosy Cross*, and *The Confession of the Laudable Fraternity of the Most Honorable Order of the Rosy Cross, Written to All the Learned of Europe*. The third seminal Rosicrucian title, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, differs qualitatively from the first two, in that it employs the language of Hermetic allegory as opposed to pressing a message of political and cultural reformation. *The Chemical Wedding* is also distinguished from the *Fama* and *Confessio* by the fact that we know who authored it. In his autobiography, Lutheran theologian Johann Valentin Andreae claimed to have written *The Chemical Wedding* as a youthful joke.⁵⁹ This admission has led some scholars to assume that Andreae, working in isolation, penned all three tracts as a hoax. Other scholars, who believe that an international order actually did lie behind the manifestoes, are reluctant to accept Andreae’s involvement with *any* of the tracts. Frances Yates, perhaps the most widely recognized authority on Rosicrucianism, argues for the deep imbrications of a revolutionary Protestantism with early Rosicrucianism in her book, *The Rosicrucian*

⁵⁸ Thomas DeQuincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas DeQuincey* vol. XIII, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890) 420.

⁵⁹ Adam McLean, introduction, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin (Boston: Phanes Press, 1991) 10.

Enlightenment, and in this context the idea that the society originated with a Lutheran pastor becomes plausible. Yates also describes the ferment of occult activity in Western Europe in the early seventeenth century to account for Hermetic elements in the Rosicrucian tracts.⁶⁰

Confusion and controversy over the authorship of these three short works and doubt as to the existence of a society of Rosicrucians have been features of the movement from the time of its unveiling in the early seventeenth century. The fact that no evidence of Rosicrucian activity has been discovered that is contemporaneous with these initial publications means that the tracts represent either a successful hoax, or truly the most secret society of all time. The *Fama* tantalized the intelligentsia of Europe by extending the prospect of enlightenment to learned and worthy men, but failing to provide a means of getting in touch with a Rosicrucian. Interested parties should openly declare their interest in the group, and they would be discovered by hidden means; publication was an acceptable forum for making your intentions known, and to that end many printed appeals to the secret order appeared in the wake of the *Fama* and *Confessio*.⁶¹ Elias Ashmole, a founding member of the Royal Society and one of the earliest recorded initiates into Freemasonry (his lodge acceptance is dated October 16, 1646), drafted a formal petition to the Rosicrucian Fraternity in which he asked to be admitted.⁶² Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes also inquired after the group but was disappointed in his search.⁶³ The failure of many high-profile and earnest intellectuals to penetrate the fraternity's enigma eventually led to wide-

⁶⁰ Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972; London and New York: Routledge, 2004). In recent years, some of Yates's scholarly methods have come under attack. However, I use her as my primary source because she is by far the most rigorous and intellectually critical of all of Rosicrucianism's various historians. The impact of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* was such that all subsequent historians of the movement draw from Yates as a starting point, seeking to improve upon and develop the initial historical inquiry she first performed in the 1970s.

⁶¹ Yates 126-127.

⁶² Yates 249.

⁶³ Yates 154.

spread doubt as to its actuality. However, the Rosicrucian manifestoes emphasized that only a small number of worthy men would be selected for membership, men who sought wisdom and the good of mankind as opposed to wealth and worldly power. The rhetoric of the merit and exclusivity of its members fueled continued belief and hope in a Rosicrucian Society.

The Rosicrucian manifestoes as texts perform a curious species of occult work, publicly announcing the secret activities of a private order which by their own account only a tiny number of individuals will ever discover. If we assume that the writers of the first two tracts are both sincere and literal in the program they propose, then their endeavor constitutes the first modern attempt to cull occult initiates through the means of a publicly circulated text. The *Fama* contains a concise description of how an occult text performs this function: “What we here publish is done for the help of those that are worthy, but to the unworthy (God willing) it will be small profit.”⁶⁴ Again, granting that these early Rosicrucians were genuine, we might speculate that their unvarnished appeal to the general populace backfired by making the movement the target of intense scrutiny and ridicule. The retreat of the occult into imaginative literature in subsequent eras represents a measure of improvement in the means of disseminating controversial occult ideas, by providing occult writers with a fictional apology for their claims. We will probably never know if the Rosicrucians accomplished their stated mission of collecting a coterie of enlightened minds, but their tracts have endowed Western culture with a persistent legend about a secret society hidden in plain sight. The closing lines of the *Confessio* allude to this power of personal invisibility which would soon become synonymous with the term, “Rosicrucian”:

Although we might enrich the whole world, and endue them with learning, and might release it from innumerable miseries, yet shall we never be manifested and made known unto any man, without the especial pleasure of God; yea, it shall be so far from him whosoever thinks to get the benefit and be partaker of our riches

⁶⁴ Yates reprints Thomas Vaughan’s 1652 translations of the *Fama* and the *Confessio* in full in the appendix to *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. Yates, *Fama* 306.

and knowledge, without and against the will of God, that he shall sooner lose his life in seeking and searching for us, than to find us, and attain to come to the wished happiness of the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross.⁶⁵

If the Rosicrucian Society described by the *Fama* and *Confessio* ever existed, the Rosicrucian tracts offer an explanation for why there is no historical evidence for this secret order. Not only were the group's members bidden to keep silent and adopt modest dress and manners, the Rosicrucian wisdom also included some supernatural ability for escaping detection. The surest sign of a false Rosicrucian was a self-identified one: an individual who exploited the title for personal gain, in explicit violation of one of the order's primary tenets. It is easy to see why serious historians from the seventeenth century onward have written off the Rosicrucian prodigy as a hoax, because the movement's genesis involves much speculation and little concrete evidence. However, Frances Yates finds that the seventeenth century enthusiasm for a learned occult society, even one that may have been mythical, registers a unique moment in the history of ideas, marking the transition between the magico-Hermetic worldview of the Renaissance and the dawning of the scientific revolution. Yates provides a way of discussing Rosicrucianism as an important intellectual and cultural movement which circumvents the knotty issue of whether the claims made in the Rosicrucian tracts are authentic:

I should like to persuade sensible people and sensible historians to use the word "Rosicrucian." This word has bad associations owing to the uncritical assertions of occultists concerning the existence of a sect or secret society calling themselves Rosicrucians the history and membership of which they claim to establish ... The word could, I suggest, be used of a certain style of thinking which is historically recognizable without raising the question of whether a Rosicrucian style of thinker belonged to a secret society.⁶⁶

Yates's suggestion is cogent and underlies my election of the term "Rosicrucian" to describe the persistent appearance of occult fraternities in Western society.

⁶⁵ Yates, *Confessio* 321-322.

⁶⁶ Yates 278.

Rosicrucianism is uniquely pertinent to any literary study of the occult, because it was the *literature* of Rosicrucianism, far more than the activities of a small cabal which very well may have been fictional, that gave birth to what may rightly be called a craze for secret societies in subsequent centuries. It is the foundational nature of these early texts and their vast influence which makes “Rosicrucian” the proper term to describe the tropes of all the secret society literature that appeared in their wake. Hermetic scholar Antoine Faivre notes that “the belief that a society actually did lie behind these manifestoes caused real societies to spring up. The explosion of initiatory societies in the Western world from the seventeenth century onward was a direct result of this.”⁶⁷ Marie Roberts views this literary promotion of secret esoteric societies in the seventeenth century as of a piece with the fictional exploration of Rosicrucianism by nineteenth century British novelists. In her formulation, Rosicrucianism as a spiritual program cannot be severed from the literature on which it is dependent for dissemination: “Literature did much to create and then perpetuate the myths surrounding the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Novelists in particular exploited such Rosicrucian legends as the existence of a spirit-world, the elixir of life, and the perpetual burning lamp. To a great extent, the Rosicrucians became the property of the creative writer.”⁶⁸ As a movement both born out of and sustained by literature, Rosicrucianism occupies a special place in occult history, one that highlights the ties between imaginative writing and occult liturgy.

As Roberts indicates above, one of the primary esoteric streams informing Rosicrucianism was the ancient art of alchemy, and thus the movement has come to be associated with the elixir of life and immortality. However, the *Fama* and *Confessio* contain only glancing references to occult powers and magical science, focusing instead on the pressing need for spiritual

⁶⁷ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: New York State UP, 1994) 65.

⁶⁸ Roberts 6.

reform in a corrupt world. Yates voices the provocative thesis that the enlightened movement of Rosicrucianism was a result of the seventeenth century crisis within science, an attempt to heal the rift between a mechanistic, morally meaningless view of the world, and the organic, animistic model which had held sway for centuries. The establishment of a learned society of morally upright men would allow scientific advancement to proceed in step with Christian virtue: “Rosicrucian thinkers were aware of the dangers of the new science, of its diabolical as well as its angelical possibilities, and they saw that its arrival should be accompanied by a general reformation of the whole wide world.”⁶⁹ The discourse of radical Protestantism exerted a pronounced influence on the Rosicrucian tracts and informs both their religious zeal and political agenda. The utopian vision of the original tracts, entrenched in the democratizing fervor of early Protestantism, has often been ignored by scholars more interested in the group’s controversial claims of secrecy and occult knowledge. Not until the mid-nineteenth century would the socialist and Protestant facets of the Rosicrucian manifestoes be revived and exploited, most notably by American novelist George Lippard. While the *Fama*, *Confessio*, and *Chemical Wedding* surely constitute the syncretism of multiple seventeenth century discourses within politics and religion, the context of a radically democratic Protestantism cannot be over-emphasized. Catherine Albanese, while arguing that Rosicrucianism should on the whole be thought of as an Enlightenment expression of Hermeticism, yet terms it “a Protestant Christian wisdom tradition.”⁷⁰

In spite of the fact that the *Confessio* describes the Rosicrucian mission in explicitly Protestant terms – “we acknowledge ourselves truly and sincerely to profess Christ, condemn the Pope, ... [and] lead a Christian life”⁷¹ – the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirit communication would

⁶⁹ Yates 292.

⁷⁰ Albanese 39.

come to define the order. Though references to theurgy (spirit or demon raising) are scant in the Rosicrucian tracts, by the end of the seventeenth century “Rosicrucian” had become synonymous with wizard, and the pious protagonist of the *Fama* had been pushed into the background. Theurgy is a distinct aspect of the Western esoteric tradition; rituals for conjuring appear in both the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Neoplatonic writings of the fourth century philosopher, Iamblichus. The attempt to gain communication with incorporeal beings through magical ritual, theurgy places a strong emphasis on manipulating the spirits to do the conjurer’s bidding. Though still a controversial branch of the Hermetic tradition, one that not all scholars (or adherents) would claim, theurgy remains the practical, ceremonial arm of the Hermetic philosophy. The *Fama*, which tells the story of German seeker, Christian Rosencreutz, touches lightly on a particular species of theurgy that “brother C.R.” learned in the Arabian city of Fez: “At Fez he did get acquaintance with those which are commonly called the Elementary Inhabitants, who revealed unto him many of their secrets.”⁷² This paltry reference to communication with “elementals” or nature spirits was the primary source for subsequent definitions of Rosicrucians as occult adepts and theurgists. In an equally unlikely turn of literary history, Rosicrucian elementals would inspire one of the most celebrated poems in English literature.

In the dedication to his poem *The Rape of the Lock*, Alexander Pope explains to Mrs. Arabella Fermor (on whom his heroine, Belinda, is based) the source of the fanciful machinery of sylphs and gnomes which people his mock-epic.⁷³

⁷¹ Yates, *Confessio* 321.

⁷² Yates, *Fama* 299-300.

⁷³ First published in 1712, “The Rape of the Lock” was inspired by a minor dust-up among the English aristocracy. Lord Petre snipped off a lock of the lovely Arabella’s hair, and the young lady was so incensed that a rift developed between the respective families of the pair. Hoping to heal the discord by making light of it, Pope penned this mock-epic, transforming Arabella into the fictional Belinda, and Lord Petre into an adventurous Baron.

The *Rosicrucians* are a People I must bring You acquainted with. The best Account I know of them is in a French Book called *Le Comte de Gabalis*, which both in its Title and Size is so like a Novel, that many of the Fair Sex have read it for one by Mistake. According to these Gentleman the four Elements are inhabited by Spirits, which they call *Sylphs*, *Gnomes*, *Nymphs*, and *Salamanders*. The *Gnomes*, or Daemons of Earth, delight in Mischief: but the *Sylphs*, whose Habitation is Air, are the best-conditioned Creatures imaginable. For they say, any Mortals may enjoy the most intimate Familiarities with these gentle Spirits, upon a Condition very easy to all true *Adepts*, an inviolate Preservation of Chastity [sic].⁷⁴

The appearance of this whimsical take on Rosicrucianism in a popular and influential text conveys much about how the order was envisioned some hundred years after the Rosicrucian tracts first mystified Europe. Pope hints that *Le Comte de Gabalis* was already much in demand as an engaging novella, but the fame of his charming poem prompted an English translation of the French text in 1714.⁷⁵ Interested seekers now had a handy reference for researching the elusive order, and indeed *Le Comte de Gabalis* has been at least as influential as the *Fama* and *Confessio* in shaping later versions of Rosicrucianism. Pope's brief gloss of the Rosicrucians reduces them to magicians of the elemental world, as well as chaste seekers. But just as bawdy puns proliferate in *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope's dedication contains a sexual innuendo that any reader of *The Comte de Gabalis* would recognize. The Comte spends much of the story encouraging his pupil to engage in conjugal "Familiarities" with a Sylph, as they are far preferable to human women. Belinda's intimate contact with her male Sylph Ariel is thus sexually charged, without casting doubt on the "inviolable Preservation" of her virginity.

Le Comte de Gabalis was first published in 1670 by the obscure Abbé de Villars, a French clergyman. Its tone is uneven, as it alternately ridicules the Rosicrucians and endorses

⁷⁴ Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock: An Heroi-Comical Poem in Five Cantos* (New York: Dover, 1968) xii.

⁷⁵ Earlier English translations had appeared in 1680. See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1997) 108.

the existence of a multiplicitous spirit world; the subtitle for the English edition is, *Being a Diverging History of the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits, viz. Sylphs, Salamanders, Gnomes, and Daemons: Shewing their Various Influence upon Human Bodies*.⁷⁶ The work's introduction provides a punchy redaction of the *Fama* and *Confessio*, with a few embellishments. Yet this same introduction also dismisses the order as a "Sect of Mountebanks."⁷⁷ It's not clear if the vacillating attitude of the novella's speaker is intended to demonstrate the crises of confidence undergone by a seeker down the occult path. In any case, the narrator attempts to bolster the authenticity of his occult information by calling attention to the fact that he is violating the Rosicrucian code in printing these secrets. His tale begins with a report of the Count's disappearance, and the implication is that the secret order has silenced the Count for his imprudent disclosures to our wavering narrator. The apocrypha surrounding *Le Comte de Gabalis* has absorbed the death of Abbé de Villars, who was killed a few years after penning this story, into this same superstition of Rosicrucian vengeance.⁷⁸ The narrator offers an alternative explanation for the Count's disappearance, however, and this terse allusion to metempsychosis would prove fruitful to the imaginations of future Rosicrucian novelists: "Peradventure, [the Comte] is only dead in Appearance, according to the Custom of Philosophers, who make as if they die in one Place, and transplant themselves to another."⁷⁹ *Le Comte de Gabalis* may contain the first fictional reference to the "transmigration of souls" as a specifically Rosicrucian talent, and this association would be replicated in the occult fiction that was printed in its wake. Both the Rosicrucian figure

⁷⁶ Villars, Abbé de (Nicolas-Pierre-Henri), *The Count de Gabalis* (London: B. Lintott and E. Curll, 1714).

⁷⁷ Villars, from the introduction, "Some Account of the Rosicrucians," by Monsieur Bayle.

⁷⁸ "The fact is that [Villars] was assassinated, the inference is that it was by or at the instance of those whose secrets he was supposed to have betrayed. The murderers, also by inference, were said to be Brethren of the Rosy Cross." Éliphas Lévi, *The History of Magic: Including a Clear and Precise Exposition of Its Procedure, Its Rites and Its Mysteries*, trans. Arthur Edward Waite (1860; London: William Rider, 1922) Waite's note on 110.

⁷⁹ Villars 3.

in Brown's *Ormond* and the magus in Lippard's *The Quaker City* only appear to die, and the implication is that each has transferred his soul to a more convenient body.

The version of Rosicrucianism given by *Le Comte de Gabalis* determined popular notions of the movement into the nineteenth century. The learned William Godwin, a writer admired by Brown, Poe, and Lippard, dedicates only a few short pages to the Rosicrucians in his lengthy treatise on occult history, *The Lives of the Necromancers* (1834). Godwin's account is taken entirely from *Le Comte de Gabalis* and utterly ignores the story of Christian Rosencreutz laid out in the *Fama* and *Confessio*. This is particularly surprising, considering that Godwin had thematized Rosicrucian immortality in a novel written some thirty years prior, *St. Leon* (1799).⁸⁰ But in his official history of the sect, Rosicrucians are defined by their intercourse with nature spirits, and Godwin follows the Abbé de Villars by emphasizing spiritual marriage to a Sylph.⁸¹ Godwin, with his scientific bias, assumes that access to the spirit world is a result of physically preparing the eyes with chemicals and lighting techniques, as opposed to gaining "spiritual sight" with practice and dedication. He makes oblique reference to the "thrice-sacred collyrium," or eye-salve, and to "concave mirrors in a globe of glass," details describing a material occult practice which are culled from *Le Comte de Gabalis*:⁸²

To be admitted to [the Sylphs'] acquaintance it was previously necessary that the organs of human sight should be purged by the universal medicine, and that certain glass globes should be chemically prepared with one or the other of the four elements, and for one month exposed to the beams of the sun. These preliminary steps being taken, the initiated immediately had a sight of innumerable beings of a

⁸⁰ For a complete discussion of this novel, see Marie Roberts' chapter, "William Godwin's Darkness of Enlightenment" in *Gothic Immortals* 25-56.

⁸¹ William Godwin, *Lives of the Necromancers: Or, An account of the most eminent persons in successive ages, who have claimed for themselves, or to whom has been imputed by others, the exercise of magical power* (London: Frederick J. Mason, 1834) 37.

⁸² Villars 13 and 22.

luminous substance, but of thin and evanescent structure, that people the elements on all sides of us.⁸³

One might expect that the rationalist Godwin would offer a dry account of the literary tracts which conjured Rosicrucianism into being, and that the considerably more fanciful author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* would interest himself in Sylphs and Gnomes, but in fact just the opposite is true. DeQuincey's magazine installments on Rosicrucianism when taken together run in excess of sixty pages, and provide not only the publication history of the *Fama* and *Confessio*, but also a catalogue of printed responses to these initial tracts in the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ Thomas DeQuincey's "Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origins of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons" and Godwin's *Lives of the Necromancers* thus offer a spectrum of the information available on Rosicrucians in the early nineteenth century, when George Lippard was coming of age. Both writers were respected literary lights, and both texts could lead the interested reader, ultimately, to the foundational Rosicrucian tracts. The quest of the worthy Christian Rosencreutz, which I have neglected in this section, will be covered in greater detail in relation to Lippard's novels, because it is the compassionate, Protestant hero of the *Fama* and *Confessio* which piqued Lippard's fascination with the Rosicrucian Order. Christian Rosencreutz may be imbued with powerful occult knowledge, but this esoteric learning is tempered, its diabolical potential checked, by a Christian love for all humanity.

My review of Rosicrucian origins has not probed prior to the seventeenth century, because I have examined the evolution of the Hermetic tradition elsewhere in this project. The same occult streams which nourished eighteenth century initiatory societies, detailed in my first chapter, prepared the ground for the Rosicrucian Enlightenment. The Hermetic philosophy,

⁸³ Godwin 36.

⁸⁴ DeQuincey 410-420.

which appears so strikingly in Edgar Allan Poe's cosmology *Eureka*, underlies the Rosicrucian wisdom. Beyond the sensational thrill of occult power and the exotic excitement of contact with nature spirits, Rosicrucianism promised the perfection of the self through the emulation of god-like beings. Though nominally Christian, Rosicrucianism reveals its Hermetic roots in its emphasis on the attainment of godlike powers. The Hermetic connection was not lost on the author of *Le Comte de Gabalis*, who makes his Rosicrucian an agent for Hermes Trismegistus: "*Adore the thrice-good and thrice-great God of the Sages, and be not puff'd up with pride because he sends you one of the Children of Wisdom, to associate you into their Society, and to make you Partaker of the Wonders of his Allmightiness [sic].*"⁸⁵ The demi-god of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, thrice-majestic Hermes, thus lurks behind the ostensibly Christian order.

Confusion around the mingling of Protestant and occult influences within Rosicrucianism may be resolved by viewing the order as the successful synthesis of Christian regeneration with the Hermetic philosophy of man's equivalence to God. Catherine Albanese understands this syncretism as one to which early Americans were particularly sympathetic:

Whereas the *Corpus Hermeticum* of Renaissance celebrity was cast in dialogue form on the ancient philosophical model of a school – where students sought wisdom through the question-answer modality in a community of inquiry and action, Rosencreutz emerged as a solitary pilgrim, performing in geographical space the inner journey that the spiritual seeker took. Even with the Rosicrucian 'brotherhood' in the background, there was something strikingly individualizing about Rosencreutz and his journey ... In sum, in Christian Rosencreutz the Hermetic legacy, become a metaphysical spirituality, was taking a turn that would shape it for an American Protestant world.⁸⁶

Though Christian Rosencreutz was not a popular export from the original Rosicrucian tracts, whose first commentators tended to focus on the sensational aspects of a secret occult society,

⁸⁵ Villars 6.

⁸⁶ Albanese 39.

latter-day occultists such as Lippard were particularly attracted to this figure's harmonious embodiment of Christian virtue and occult power. Rosicrucianism's original utopian vision of social transformation in the seventeenth century aligns rather uncannily with the socialist aims of Lippard's brotherhood in the nineteenth.

Nineteenth Century Ritual Brotherhoods

Lippard demonstrates familiarity with the literature of seventeenth century Rosicrucianism, and the craze for fraternal ritual in the nineteenth century accounts for his exposure to this obscure material. As Mark C. Carnes reveals in his book, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, innovative ritualists across the country were busy mining the history of the world's great civilizations in search of dramatic tableaux for their rites, which would then be enacted like stage plays by lodge members.⁸⁷ Masonry at this time was not a well organized body, and hence ritual content varied widely between individual lodges.⁸⁸ Since the rituals were comprised of revealed material, the innovations could always be cast as more authentic, more pure, or more arcane than the rites previously in use. Many roving occultists made a living by peddling exotic degrees, and thus there were financial incentives for itinerant occultists who could compose compelling rites with grandiose pedigrees stretching back to the ancient world.⁸⁹ Brotherhoods competed with one another for members on whom they were dependent for survival, and the uniqueness of the secrets for sale was a primary factor in attracting and keeping

⁸⁷ "Self-styled ritualists combed the Bible, ancient mythology, and even contemporary fiction for materials." Carnes 5.

⁸⁸ "Itinerant Masonic lecturers organized new lodges, conferred their own variants of rituals and lectures, and pocketed the charter fees." Carnes 49. See also Brent Morris, "The Early Development of the High Degrees," on the problem of innovations by itinerant Masons in Walgren lxxxiv-lxxxv, and Bullock's chapter, "Into the Secret Place: Organization and Sacralization, 1790-1826" for more on ritual diversity within Masonry.

⁸⁹ "Because such large sums were involved, the writing of rituals was a major growth industry." Carnes 5.

members. Masonry reached back to biblical times for its mythology, as did Odd Fellowship;⁹⁰ Lippard's innovation was to combine the Protestant aims of Rosicrucianism with early American history in creating the mythos for his order, the Brotherhood of the Union.

The overlap between Masonry and other brotherhoods in the United States leads me to deploy the term "Masonic" somewhat broadly, although I make distinctions where distinctions exist. Freemasons were "the most frequent victims of ritual piracy,"⁹¹ and many of the brotherhoods were so similar in terms of their outward forms and internal goals that, though their specific ritual content may have varied, together they are expressive of a larger cultural trend of Masonic enthusiasm. This approach is further justified by the fact that many men belonged to more than one brotherhood, such as Lippard who was both a Mason and an Odd Fellow at the time of his death, as well as the Supreme Washington of the Brotherhood of the Union. Masonry contains a Rosicrucian degree, the "Rose Croix," and Tobias Churton reports that a specific strain of Masonry considers the Rosicrucian wisdom the *ne plus ultra* of its activity, or that Rosicrucianism is the secret inner body to Masonry's more conventional outward form.⁹² From DeQuincey's nineteenth century assertion that Masonry was Rosicrucianism's natural child, to Churton's recent insistence upon the separate genesis of each group, the exact relationship between the two orders has been a bugbear for occult historians for at least two hundred years.

Rosicrucianism, with its connotations of invisible beings endowed with the power to control worldly events, implies a political agenda that goes far beyond the simple religious needs

⁹⁰ The setting for the central allegory acted out in Masonic ritual is Solomon's temple. Bullock 19-25. The Patriarchal degree of Odd Fellowship enacted the Old Testament story of God's injunction to Abraham to kill his son Isaac. Carnes 121-123.

⁹¹ Carnes 6.

⁹² Tobias Churton, *The Invisible History of the Rosicrucians: The World's Most Mysterious Secret Society* (Rochester, VT and Toronto: Inner Traditions, 2009) 401-403.

served by Masonic rituals.⁹³ Whether Lippard sought out the revolutionary Rosicrucians for their stated goal of “Universal and General Reformation of the whole wide world,”⁹⁴ or happened upon the society’s history unwittingly, I cannot say. It is certainly possible that George Lippard was initiated into an order whose lineage descended from the writer or writers of the first Rosicrucian tracts in the seventeenth century, and that this order survives uninterrupted to this day, perhaps in one of the organizations which have taken Lippard as their authority on the Rosicrucian transmission to America. This is not impossible, nor is it very likely. A greater probability is that Lippard, in casting about for a suitably grand pedigree for the order he had dreamed of founding since he was a little boy, stumbled upon the Rosicrucian legacy via the folklore surrounding an early American religious group, the Chapter of Perfection, whose own beliefs overlapped with those of the Rosicrucians. Lippard exploits the Rosicrucian features of this group in his novel, *Paul Ardenheim*.⁹⁵ To flesh out the rather slim quest narrative of Christian Rosencreutz for use in the Brotherhood of the Union, Lippard appended what was close at hand: lionizing depictions of the founding fathers that were much in vogue in the Jacksonian era, not to mention easily accessible in his native city of Philadelphia.

However shocking or ludicrous it may seem to us today for an individual to cobble together a mythology out of American history and Rosicrucian lore, it should be remembered that Lippard was not alone in innovating rituals of brotherhood in the nineteenth century. Joseph Smith combined Masonic ritual, biblical lore, and a visionary history of the American continent

⁹³ In Chapter III of *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Mark Carnes argues for the essentially religious quality of Masonic ritual. He further theorizes that the rise of women’s role in evangelical Christianity led men to pursue gender-specific rites in Masonic groups, in keeping with the era of “separate spheres” which determined social relationships in the nineteenth century.

⁹⁴ From Yates’s translation of the original German title of the *Fama Fraternitatis*. Yates 59.

⁹⁵ Carsten Seecamp, “The Chapter of Perfection: A Neglected Influence on George Lippard,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94 (1970): 192-212. Seecamp’s primary argument is Lippard’s literary inspiration by the Chapter of Perfection, a claim which I consider at length later in this chapter.

in creating the extremely successful, and patriarchal, religion of Mormonism.⁹⁶ Mark C. Carnes describes the research of a New York lawyer named Lewis Henry Morgan who, two years before Lippard's order was founded, visited the Iroquois nation for the purpose of adapting their rituals to a brotherhood of his own invention. He penned a ritual book out of the material he gathered, *League of the Iroquois* (1845), which was eventually put to use by the Improved Order of Red Men, a popular brotherhood which did not admit any actual Native Americans.⁹⁷ What Lewis Henry Morgan, George Lippard, and Joseph Smith all bear in common is an attempt to sacralize the creation of America as nation, Smith and Morgan through imaginative contact with its native peoples, and Lippard through imaginative contact with its first settlers and Revolutionary heroes. The ethos of "manifest destiny" and westward expansion promulgated by Jackson was experienced by many nineteenth century Americans as a religious dispensation promising a special relationship of the continent to its newest inhabitants. Perhaps no better symbolic demonstration of this belief can be found than that which appears in the final, Rosicrucian rite of Lippard's BGC: "You are confronted by this significant symbol – the Sword of Washington resting on the Map of the New World."⁹⁸

Lippard's Mystical Life

George Lippard was especially receptive to the *Zeitgeist* for ritual brotherhood because of his strong religious nature and keen political feeling. Born in Chester County, Pennsylvania in 1822, Lippard was released to the care of two maiden aunts when his parents became too ill to

⁹⁶ See Carnes 6-7, and John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996). Brooke provides a near book-length discussion of the influence of Rosicrucian-Masonic culture on Joseph Smith. "Smith's announcement of the temple rituals carrying the Mormon promise of divinity came in the wake of his renewed interest in Freemasonry." Brooke 4.

⁹⁷ Carnes 94-104.

⁹⁸ Lippard, "Key [231]" 7.

care for him and his siblings. Raised in the Philadelphia suburb of Germantown, Lippard moved to the city upon his mother's death in 1831, and by the time of his father's death six years later, nothing remained of the paternal farm in Germantown, nor was George remembered in his father's small estate. The indigent boy worked for a time as a lawyer's assistant, but quickly became disillusioned and pursued a bohemian life among Philadelphia's colorful urban population. David Reynolds theorizes that it was the depressed economy of 1837-1844, and its visible effects on the city's poor, that motivated Lippard's passion for writing; he joined the staff of the radical Democratic paper, *Spirit of the Times* in 1842, and wrote for the *Citizen Soldier* in the following year.⁹⁹ For Christopher Looby these early writing jobs help account for Lippard's breakout success in 1844 with *The Quaker City*, "providing the best evidence for understanding the fast and dramatic development of Lippard's talent and the remarkably quick growth of his ambition."¹⁰⁰

The standard version of Lippard's early life as told by literary critics emphasizes the poverty of his youth, his early indoctrination into democratic sentiment, and his salvation by the pen. Yet biographical sketches by his friends and contemporaries are more quick to note Lippard's emotional nature and mystical character. For Charles Chauncey Burr, who was likewise a friend to Poe and did much to salvage Poe's posthumous reputation,¹⁰¹ Lippard was "a man in whose deep soul is a power and a spell."¹⁰² Burr, who twice compares Lippard's delicate frame to that of a woman's, also stresses the writer's "restless, heaving, fiery heart," and "wild, earnest, truth-

⁹⁹ For a concise biography of Lippard, see Reynolds, introduction, *The Quaker City* ix-xii.

¹⁰⁰ Looby "A Brief Introduction and a Note on the Texts."

¹⁰¹ Following the character assassination of Poe performed by Rufus W. Griswold, one of America's most notorious literary villains, Burr jumped to Poe's defense in corrective articles appearing in publications under his own editorship, *Nineteenth Century* (1852) and *Old Guard* (1866). See Jay B. Hubbell, "Charles Chauncey Burr: Friend to Poe," *PMLA* 69.4 (Sept. 1954): 833-840.

¹⁰² Charles Chauncey Burr, "Introductory Essay," in Lippard, *Washington and His Generals* xv.

ful sincerity.”¹⁰³ John Bell Bouton, Lippard’s friend and a fellow member of the Brotherhood of the Union, repeats the notion that Lippard possessed a “waist as small as a woman’s” in his biography of the writer, and attributes Lippard’s inherent wildness to his early abandonment by his parents.¹⁰⁴ For Bouton, religion is the “leading trait in [Lippard’s] character.”¹⁰⁵ Even if we make concessions for the sentimental prose style of these Victorian-era tributes, Lippard still emerges as a passionate, dramatic, and emotional man, one who almost threw himself over Niagara Falls following the death of his beloved wife.¹⁰⁶ Add to this already volatile nature a receptivity to mystical belief, and Lippard’s enthusiasm for the theatrical bonding rites of fraternal orders seems less like an anomaly in his character. In fact, when we envision Lippard’s womanly waist, “unfashionably long hair which fell in curls to his shoulders,”¹⁰⁷ and a head that was so large that Bouton feels compelled to give its circumference (a fact no doubt rife with phrenological import), we may take Bouton at his word that Lippard stood out in a crowd. “This is a different person from the thousands of people swarming past me,” Bouton recalls thinking on first meeting Lippard.¹⁰⁸

Lippard may have been an eccentric – he married his bride under moonlight on a high rock overlooking the Wissahickon River – but Bouton’s biography reveals the profile of a born seeker or mystic, and not just a wantonly contrary individual.¹⁰⁹ Lippard’s multifarious spiritual

¹⁰³ Burr in Lippard, *Washington and His Generals* iv and xxiv.

¹⁰⁴ John Bell Bouton, *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (New York: H.H. Randall, 1855) 45, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Bouton 90.

¹⁰⁶ Bouton 73.

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds, introduction, *The Quaker City* xvi.

¹⁰⁸ Bouton 44.

vision, encompassing non-denominational Christianity as well as Hermetic remnants like astrology and mesmerism, reflects the writer's efforts to "fashion an eclectic faith that stood outside of church and creed,"¹¹⁰ and this spiritual curiosity and receptivity were apparent from his earliest childhood. In *The Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard* (1855), Bouton describes Lippard's sense of having been "tutored" by Philadelphia's Wissahickon River in the practice of "self-communion."¹¹¹ Lippard's Christian fervor was fueled by a fascination with the ancient Hebrew of the Bible and the concept of an unmediated communication from the divine: "He loved to sit and trace, with patient, backward-moving finger the meaning of those strange, mystic characters in which the revelation of a God was first made to man."¹¹² By his teen years Lippard was leading church services in the woods for his friends, but he would leave off his later training in the Methodist ministry because of the corruption he perceived in one of his teachers. Bouton describes the mystical aura of Germantown where Lippard was reared, and hints that the Rosicrucian novel *Paul Ardenheim* was inspired by Lippard's own experiences there.¹¹³ In casting about for a source for Lippard's mystical education, twentieth century Lippard scholar Emilio DeGrazia follows up on Bouton's suggestion and turns to the depiction of Paul Ardenheim's education for information about Lippard's:¹¹⁴

[In his father's library] were the works of the Astrologers and Alchemists of the past ages, mingled with the writings of the spiritual dreamers and religious mys-

¹⁰⁹ Lippard married Rose Newman in May of 1847; Charles Chauncey Burr, a "Reverend" of dubious derivation, performed the ceremony. Reynolds, introduction, *The Quaker City* xvi.

¹¹⁰ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 85, 80.

¹¹¹ Bouton 10.

¹¹² Bouton 13.

¹¹³ "In the character of Paul Ardenheim the author seems to have drawn from his own personal experience. The work is of itself attractive, but with this hint to accompany the reader, its interest is exceedingly heightened." Bouton 55.

¹¹⁴ DeGrazia 26.

tics of Germany, in the sixteenth century. From boyhood, nay, from very childhood, Paul had dwelt upon their pages, and as his mind – gifted by the Almighty with a power as strange as it was peculiar – grew into form, it had been moulded and colored by these written Thoughts of Astrology, Alchemy, and Mysticism [sic].¹¹⁵

While it is unlikely that Lippard's indigent father possessed such a library, it is reasonable to assume that Lippard encountered mystical texts as his mind "grew into form." Perhaps the most telling autobiographical feature we can extrapolate from the passage concerns Lippard's own sense of having been "gifted by the Almighty with a power as strange as it was peculiar," i.e. marked out with a spiritual curiosity and enthusiasm that would lead him to seek out such quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore.

While Bouton's biography may have some investment in highlighting Lippard's mystical temperament, as a way to bolster his authority as the head of a quasi-religious fraternity, claims about Lippard's innate religious sensibility are born out by the writer's fascination with supernatural themes as well as his increasing turn to the occult in the latter half of his life. Though the Brotherhood of the Union existed in some inchoate form as early as 1847, it was publicly announced in 1849, and Lippard would dedicate the lion's share of his energy and time to promoting the order in the years before his death in 1854.¹¹⁶ Bouton refrains from representing Lippard's Brotherhood as a divine transmission to a preordained individual (à la *Paul Ardenheim*), instead emphasizing the writer's youthful passion for fraternity: "The idea of a 'Brotherhood of the Union' was an early one with Lippard. He grew up with it. It was one of the cherished dreams of his youth. He nurtured it with the affection bestowed upon a pet child. It was the off-

¹¹⁵ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 181.

¹¹⁶ Reynolds, *George Lippard*, "Chronology": "1851-1854: Lectures widely on behalf of the Brotherhood throughout eastern states and as far away as Ohio, Maryland, and Virginia." For a frail man in the grips of tuberculosis, this was no small feat of stamina and dedication.

spring of patriotism and poetic zeal ... the subject of his reveries, the dream of his nights.”¹¹⁷

Lippard himself acknowledges the constructed nature of his “ancient” brotherhood by describing it as the combination of “all that is beautiful in the ritual of the Rosicrucians with all that is good in Masonry.”¹¹⁸ Drawing on esoteric sources as well as invoking the groundswell of enthusiasm for the country’s burgeoning labor movement, Lippard’s Brotherhood spread quickly; in its first year it issued charters to “circles,” or chapters, in six states. But the maintenance of the organization “ruined [Lippard] financially and almost killed him physically.”¹¹⁹ Lippard would accept no more than a pittance for his considerable fraternal efforts, and the business of the Brotherhood caused him to neglect the newspaper he had established in 1848, *The Quaker City Weekly*, so that it was forced to suspend in 1850.¹²⁰ The fact that Lippard sacrificed his health, his resources, and his livelihood to his dream of brotherhood argues that a suprarational or religious conviction lay beneath his fraternal fervor. “I only live for the Order now,” he wrote in 1851, following a series of personal tragedies.¹²¹

John Bell Bouton sounds one further note in Lippard’s biography which characterizes him as a religious experimenter who was susceptible to spiritual fads, and this is Lippard’s involvement with Spiritualism. The ad hoc and loosely organized religion, particularly popular with women, sprang up unaccountably after two pre-teen girls reported communications with a disembodied spirit at their upstate New York home in 1848.¹²² From this unlikely beginning a

¹¹⁷ Bouton 58.

¹¹⁸ Reynolds, *Prophet of Protest* 205.

¹¹⁹ Butterfield 297-299.

¹²⁰ Butterfield 297, note 30.

¹²¹ George Lippard, Letter to William McFarlane, 3 March 1851. The Brotherhood of the Union Collection, The Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

culture of séances and spirit mediums was born, and by some estimates Spiritualism had eleven million adherents in the nineteenth century.¹²³ Bouton reports the interesting information that Lippard made a visit to the Fox sisters, the two girls who served as the movement's ambassadors, and that he "had long entertained the belief that spirits have a power of communicating with the tenants of the flesh ... According to his own account, the physical manifestations were peculiarly striking. He used to say that he received three sharp blows, from an unseen hand, upon his shoulder."¹²⁴ Lippard became so enamored of Spiritualism that he lectured in defense of the controversial religion in Philadelphia in the early 1850s, and Bouton claimed that he held regular intercourse with deceased family members.¹²⁵ Spiritualism may have been particularly attractive to Lippard because of its crossover with Rosicrucianism; by the nineteenth century, one of Rosicrucianism's chief associations in the popular mind was its occult doctrine of spirit communication. Equally likely, however, is that Lippard simply sought to alleviate his crushing grief over the deaths of several family members in quick succession, via the religion's promise that death was only a transition to another state and not a final end. In the space of two-and-a-half years, Lippard suffered the loss of a beloved sister, his two children, and his wife, and in the three years then left to him on earth, he was constantly haunted by either their memories or their ghosts.¹²⁶ Lippard himself succumbed to tuberculosis one month shy of his thirty-second birthday.

¹²² Howard Kerr details the media circus that ensued following the Fox sisters' revelation, as well as Spiritualism's treatment in American literature in *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1972).

¹²³ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon, 1989) 25.

¹²⁴ Bouton 72.

¹²⁵ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 85.

¹²⁶ Bouton suggests that Lippard hovered close to madness with the frequency of spiritual visitations at the end of his life, at one point interrupting a conversation with the exclamation, "There is a figure in a shroud there! It is always behind me." Bouton 84.

Rosicrucianism in America

Metaphysical ideas preoccupied Lippard from the beginning to the end of his brief span on earth, and his attraction to the culture of Masonry and the mysteries of Rosicrucianism are in keeping with his inborn mystical curiosity. Lore about a specifically Rosicrucian lineage on this continent has developed separately from the history of Masonry in the United States, and so I discuss the two orders independently here. The question of Rosicrucianism's entrée into America is a vexed one, as are all genealogies of this group, and the task of historical recovery is rendered especially tricky by the fact that all latter-day histories lead us back to a familiar source: George Lippard. Numerous twentieth century enthusiasts and promoters of Rosicrucianism look to a late seventeenth century Pietist cult, the Chapter of Perfection which flourished briefly in the Germantown area of Lippard's upbringing, as the basis of Rosicrucianism's transmission to America. Led by a Transylvanian mystic named Kelpius, the "Hermits on the Ridge" or the "Society of the Woman in the Wilderness" as they were variously known lived an ascetic lifestyle, practiced Hermetic arts such as astrology, and dabbled with alchemy in search of the elixir of life. They were active from their arrival in the colonies in 1694 to Kelpius's death in 1708, and some of their spiritual heirs went on to join the Ephrata Cloister of Lancaster County, whose membership peaked in the mid-eighteenth century.¹²⁷ The group's blending of Christian devotion and millennialism with Hermetic practice is characteristic of Pietism, which originated in part with the alchemically-inspired writings of the early seventeenth century Christian mystic, Jacob Boehme. The activities of the Chapter of Perfection were considered odd by their neighbors, but not diabolical, and they were generally tolerated in their community because of their good works. The Pietists were, after all, "but a few degrees farther advanced on the way of strange worship than the members of other sects that arose in such numbers in Europe [and] rap-

¹²⁷ Brooke 40-42; Albanese 79-81; Seecamp 195-198.

idly [sent] their representatives to the shores of America.”¹²⁸ It was not until 140 years after Kelpius’s death that the term “Rosicrucian” was applied to the Chapter of Perfection, in a visionary novel called *Paul Ardenheim*.

Lippard does not name Kelpius or the Chapter of Perfection in his Rosicrucian novel, yet that he means to incorporate this Pietist group into his own fantasy of Rosicrucian activity at the nation’s founding there can be no doubt, as we shall soon see. The first person to explicitly name Kelpius a Rosicrucian is the enigmatic Philadelphian Julius F. Sachse (1842-1919), who wrote copiously on the history of the Pennsylvania Pietists and American Freemasonry. Sachse also served as the librarian to Philadelphia’s Grand Masonic Lodge from 1906-1919. In *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* (1895), appearing almost fifty years after Lippard’s *Paul Ardenheim*, Sachse announces that he is the sole possessor of a Rosicrucian manuscript once belonging to Kelpius. It is remarkable how many elaborate histories of American Rosicrucianism have been built on Sachse’s unsubstantiated claims, derived from unnamed “original sources, manuscripts, and books ... now either in possession of the writer or to which he has had access,” as well as “trustworthy traditions ... some of which were related to the writer in his boyhood days.”¹²⁹ One must inevitably wonder if these “trustworthy traditions” included Lippard’s own Brotherhood of the Union, which was still a “vigorous organization” at the time of Sachse’s writing, with branches in twenty-three states.¹³⁰

Sachse also hints that his Rosicrucian source material derives from Lippard in his description of the Chapter of Perfection’s tabernacle. Noting the cell-like rooms of the monastery

¹²⁸ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *The Literary History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1906) 22.

¹²⁹ Julius Friedrich Sachse, *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Sachse, 1895) 8.

¹³⁰ Oberholtzer 259.

along the Wissahickon, Sachse then appends a cagey note which implies that Lippard's "informant" belonged to the same secret tradition to which he, Sachse, is also heir: "An old legend descriptive of this tabernacle in the forest was incorporated by George Lippard, a novelist of half a century ago, in one of his publications. The writer [Sachse] has heard it stated upon good authority that Lippard's informant had in his youth frequently seen and been about the ruins of the old structure."¹³¹ The "old legend" in question must be *Paul Ardenheim*, which describes a century-old monastery on the banks of the Wissahickon where Paul lives with his father, and where the Rosicrucian lineage is handed down in the form of a secret manuscript.¹³² Yet *The Rose of Wissahikon* (1847) is another possibility; in this earlier text, Lippard tells of "a mound-like hill covered with a strange edifice, built of stone, with steep roofs and many windows and a garden blooming far down into the glen. This is the monastery in which the monks of Wissahikon, long ago, worshipped their God, without a creed."¹³³ In either case, George Lippard has transformed the Chapter of Perfection's Protestant hermits into "monks," and Sachse, building on Lippard's hints, makes them full-fledged Rosicrucians. Carsten Seecamp, writing in 1970, wondered whether Sachse's ideas were based on a credulous reading of *Paul Ardenheim*;¹³⁴ the donation of the Brotherhood of the Union's formerly secret documents to a public library in the 1990s has made its Rosicrucian identification available to interested scholars, and so it now seems equally possible that Sachse derived his information from contact with Lippard's Brotherhood.

¹³¹ Sachse 71, note 105.

¹³² Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 65-66.

¹³³ George Lippard, *The Rose of Wissahikon; or, The Fourth of July, 1776, Embracing the Secret History of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber, 1847) 9. Lippard consistently dropped the "C" from Wissahickon in his numerous writings about the creek.

¹³⁴ Seecamp 202.

Sachse's appropriation of Lippard's fictional Rosicrucians would not concern us but for the fact that Sachse's *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* has been used as a primary text of Rosicrucian history for the claims of high-profile occultists over the course of the twentieth century. Since Lippard is the only other nineteenth century writer to connect the hermits of the Wissahickon to the original German Rosicrucians of the seventeenth century, he is almost certainly Sachse's source.¹³⁵ It is surprising that so few occultists and scholars of the occult have happened upon Lippard, given his former popularity and Sachse's bold hint in *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania*. Interested historians have probed deeply into Kelpius's continental associations to ascertain whether his group was of Rosicrucian origin, all the while ignoring the imaginative work performed by homegrown mythmaker George Lippard. In the end Lippard's neglect by occultists probably has much to do with petty jealousies among competing groups over disputed lineage, and is furthermore attributable to the fact that Lippard's known status as a pulp novelist makes him a problematic source for a venerable Rosicrucian history. Yet I think that as the earliest purveyor of the popular notion that America's founding was the culmination of the plot of a secret society, Lippard deserves credit where credit is due.

It is doubtful that Kelpius and his hermits would today be debated as potential Rosicrucians if it was not for Lippard's visionary novel, *Paul Ardenheim*. Other religious groups and individuals emigrated from Europe and practiced Hermetic rites on American soil, and they have not been made the subject of Rosicrucian conspiracies. The early American alchemist George

¹³⁵ Seecamp notes one possible exception. In *Annals of Philadelphia, Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants From the Days of the Pilgrim Founders* (Philadelphia: E.L. Carey and A. Hart; New York: G.,C., and H. Carvill, 1830), John F. Watson describes a latecomer to the Chapter of Perfection, the astrologer and botanist Christopher Witt: "Doctor Christopher Witt, born in England in 1675, came to this country in 1704, and died at Germantown in 1765 at the age of 90. He was a skillful physician and a learned religious man. He was reputed a magus or diviner, or in grosser terms, a conjurer. He was a student and believer in all the learned absurdities and marvelous pretensions of the Rosie Crucian philosophy." Watson 229. Sachse, and Lippard for that matter, might have been inspired by this slim reference to paint all of the Wissahickon's hermits with the Rosicrucian brush. But Lippard's developed Rosicrucian narratives are a much more likely source for Sachse.

Starkey (1628-1665) might serve as useful counterpoint here; not only did he steadfastly endeavor to discover the Philosopher's Stone, he was connected to utopianists in London, the "Harlib Circle," and through them the authors of the Rosicrucian manifestoes.¹³⁶ An even more potent example is found in John Winthrop, Jr., son of the founding governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and himself a governor of Connecticut. Winthrop traveled to England in search of the Rosicrucian Order, adopted the wizard John Dee's magic symbol *monas hieroglyphica* as his own personal marker, and set up a sort of Rosicrucian hospital in New London in accordance with a tenet from the original *Fama*: the Rosicrucian's only profession should be "to cure the sick, and that *gratis*."¹³⁷ No comparable mythology has sprung up around either of these men and their Hermetic activities. But then of course neither of them resided along the Wissahickon or piqued the overheated imagination of George Lippard.

Following Sachse's disclosures about the Rosicrucian affiliation of the Chapter of Perfection in 1895, occult scholar Arthur Edward Waite debated his assertions in an updated history of the order, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (1924). Waite concluded that the Chapter of Perfection may have contained some individual Rosicrucians, but that their collective endeavor did not amount to a dispensation from the original order.¹³⁸ Undaunted, American occultist and advertising professional H. Spencer Lewis, who founded the Ancient & Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC for short) in 1915, interpreted this to mean that "Mr. Sachse and Mr. Waite have examined many of these manuscripts and books and find in them the undoubted connections with

¹³⁶ William R. Newman, *Gehennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, An American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 55.

¹³⁷ Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2010) 46, 35, 160-209. Yates, *Fama* 303.

¹³⁸ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, Being Records of the House of the Holy Spirit in its Inward and Outward History* (London: W. Rider, 1924) 601-610. Frances Yates finds Waite to be the most scholarly of Rosicrucianism's various historians. Yates xiv.

the Rosicrucian Order, and the presentation of the true Rosicrucian teachings.”¹³⁹ Lewis’s arch nemesis R. Swinburne Clymer, who desired to be the only head of the Rosicrucians in America, a group of his design which he called the *Fraternitas Rosae Crucis* or FRC, affirmed that the “sectarians” had brought the Rosicrucian legacy with them from Europe in 1694, but claimed that this wisdom was passed down in secret until such time as its prophet appeared. This long-awaited event did not occur until the 1840s, and the born “Councilor” was George Lippard.¹⁴⁰ In this way Clymer positioned himself as a more authentic “Imperator” than Lewis, who maintained that the Rosicrucian tradition had gone dormant after Kelpius and that he, Lewis, had been chosen to single-handedly revive it. Lewis and Clymer fought bitterly and publicly throughout the 1930s, and their battles sometimes involved the British occultist Aleister Crowley, who likewise claimed to be the worldwide leader of Blavatsky’s Great White Brotherhood, otherwise known as the Rosicrucian Order.¹⁴¹ In the end, it might be said that Lewis won the war; “the AMORC is still the biggest neo-Rosicrucian organization in the world, with hundreds of thousands of members.”¹⁴² In the 1960s they erected a monument at the site of Kelpius’s cave outside Philadelphia which reads, “Magister of the first Rosicrucian AMORC Colony in America which arrived in Philadelphia, June 24, 1694.”

¹³⁹ H. Spencer Lewis, *Rosicrucian Questions and Answers with Complete History of the Rosicrucian Order* (San Jose, CA: Rosicrucian Press, 1929) 161.

¹⁴⁰ R. Swinburne Clymer, *The Rosicrucian Fraternity in America* (Quakertown, PA: Rosicrucian Foundation, 1935) 7-10. This text contains another publication of 1935, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, in which Clymer reprints the selections from *Paul Ardenheim* that also appear in Lippard’s *BGC* or secret ritual book. Clymer consistently dates his “authentic” Rosicrucian Order in America to 1847, the same year that Lippard’s Brotherhood of the Union came into existence. According to Clymer, in Lippard’s fraternity, “members of this secret patriotic organization were instructed in the true principles of Brotherhood, but were not required to subscribe to the training of self-denial and personal effort necessary to become actually members of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross.” Clymer, *Rosicrucian Fraternity in America* 9.

¹⁴¹ For a brief history of warring Rosicrucian Orders in America, see Churton 501-509.

¹⁴² Churton 509.

As to the question of whether Lippard had access to a secret tradition, as yet to be definitively uncovered, the trail seems to have gone cold, although the Rosicrucian myth around Kelpius prevails. Manly P. Hall, a twentieth century occult scholar and promoter of the idea of secret brotherhoods, burst the bubble around Sachse's Rosicrucian manuscript in a 1938 text called *Codex Rosae Crucis*. Claiming to have examined the manuscript in question as well as Sachse's other Rosicrucian effects at the home of Sachse's daughter, Hall finds it rather startling that Kelpius and his pious hermits were "dragged into" the Rosicrucian controversy.¹⁴³ He furthermore dismisses the manuscript as unoriginal, of uncertain date, and not even exclusively Rosicrucian. Nevertheless, Hall reprints a document in his own possession of similar content to the "Sachse codex" for the reader's consideration.¹⁴⁴ As to the original, it most likely belongs to the Library of Congress now as part of the Marian S. Carson Collection of Americana. Called "the most significant acquisition of Americana in [the twentieth] century," Carson's holdings of 10,000 items devolved to her in part from her grandfather, Julius F. Sachse.¹⁴⁵ Though Sachse had long since disposed of much of his Pietist collection, "a small number of some of the rarest and perhaps most treasured items" remained in his family after his death.¹⁴⁶ Presumably his Rosicrucian relics were among these, and now await the appraisal of contemporary scholars of the occult in the Library of Congress. Dedicated enthusiasts of the Kelpius-as-Rosicrucian school could also make much of the fact that Lippard's forefathers arrived from the Palatinate after the demise of the Chapter of Perfection, but in time to potentially mingle with the still-

¹⁴³ Manly Palmer Hall, *Codex Rosae Crucis: A Rare and Curious Manuscript of Rosicrucian Interest* (Los Angeles: Philosopher's Press, 1938) 33.

¹⁴⁴ Hall 38.

¹⁴⁵ Sara Day, ed., *Gathering History: The Marian S. Carson Collection of Americana* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1999) vi.

¹⁴⁶ Day 51. Sachse gave the bulk of his Pietist collection to the Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society in Janesville, Wisconsin in 1916.

living “Hermits on the Ridge.”¹⁴⁷ Lippard’s German ancestors are buried in the same Germantown cemetery as many of the original members of the Chapter of Perfection, among them the wizard Christopher Witt.¹⁴⁸

This seems the appropriate time to recall Francis Yates’s admonition against using the term “Rosicrucian” to denote a precise, person-to-person transmission of a real-life secret order. Rather, a culture of Rosicrucianism flourished in the seventeenth century, and its utopian promise continued to inspire progressive thinkers in the West long after the authors of the original manifestoes had disappeared. In this sense we might very well term the Chapter of Perfection’s members “Rosicrucian,” although it is more exact to say that Kelpius practiced Hermetic arts within the context of mystical Christianity, and lacked as far as we know the Rosicrucian’s political agenda of social reform of the “whole wide world.” In his book, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata*, a history of the Ephrata sect which grew out of the Chapter of Perfection, Jeff Bach notes the Hermetic and alchemical imagery employed by the influential Pietist, Jacob Boehme, and reviews the various claims for Kelpius’s Rosicrucianism.¹⁴⁹ While there is some suggestive evidence, such as the Chapter of Perfection’s contact with the radical Behmenists (the British contraction of “Boehme”) of the Philadelphian Society during their stay in London,¹⁵⁰ Bach prudently concludes that Rosicrucianism was not the only conduit for the

¹⁴⁷ Seecamp 199. Johann Libbert arrived in Pennsylvania in 1736, twenty-eight years after Kelpius’s death and the dissolution of the original group.

¹⁴⁸ Seecamp 211.

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2003), 99-100, 173-174. “Jacob Boehme incorporated magic (*Magia*) into his writings, along with concepts from alchemy, astrology, and cabala.” Bach 173.

¹⁵⁰ “The Germantown hermit Johannes Kelpius merged Sabbatarian metaphors with chiliastic eschatology from German Philadelphians such as Johann Wilhelm Petersen and his wife, Eleanora von Merlau Petersen. They helped to spread the apocalyptic hopes of the English Philadelphian Society in the 1690s.” Bach 32. The suggestive exchanges between German and English Philadelphians has led to some speculation that Rosicrucianism was exported to England via this channel. Kelpius and his small group of hermits were held over in London during the

numerous occult streams running through Europe during Kelpius's lifetime: "[Kelpius's] thought reflects the eclectic range of esoteric literature simmering in Radical Pietism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries."¹⁵¹ The spiritual head of Ephrata, Conrad Beissel, was likewise identified as a Rosicrucian by Sachse's uncritical texts, and Bach likewise believes that the mere fact of Beissel's alchemically-infused mysticism does not a Rosicrucian make.¹⁵²

Having exhausted the possibilities that George Lippard made contact with authentic Rosicrucians in the Philadelphia area, in terms of evidence currently available in the historical record, we are left to conclude that Lippard's most likely source for *Paul Ardenheim* (and his own secret brotherhood) was a text. Lippard's novel led to a franchise of speculative American history, just as the original Rosicrucian tracts led to the creation of actual secret societies in emulation of the Rosicrucians' goals. There is one further piece of evidence which argues that Lippard was casting about for a suitable lineage with which to endow his Brotherhood of the Union in the 1840s, before finally settling on the Rosicrucian Order. In the year following *The Nazarene*, in which Lippard considers the "immense good" which may be accomplished by a secret brotherhood, he published the novella *The Rose of Wissahikon*. In this text, Lippard makes strange references to a pagan society which flourished "a thousand years ago" on American soil, one which was clearly not of Native American derivation, since the fantasy includes "mansions of marble" and "Priests and . . . white-robed maidens."¹⁵³ This little bit of Americana, which imagined that a superior (and fallen) race had inhabited the continent previous to the Indians,

winter of 1693-1694, and made contact with the English Philadelphians, then under the leadership of the visionary Jane Leade. Waite 604, note 1. For a speculative history of Rosicrucian activity among the English Philadelphians, see Dorothy Pinkett, *Coming to America: A Brief History of Johannes Kelpius and his Wissahickon Colony of Mystics* (Philadelphia: Kelpius Society, 2006).

¹⁵¹ Bach 186.

¹⁵² Bach 13.

¹⁵³ Lippard, *The Rose of Wissahikon* 25.

was not invented by Lippard but rather prompted by archaeological discoveries of a sophisticated civilization in present-day Illinois and Ohio. William Cullen Bryant indulged in a Golden Age fantasy of these superior beings in his poem, “The Prairies,” and the Mormons gave this myth of an American “lost race” its fullest religious expression.¹⁵⁴ Lippard apparently lost interest in dating his Brotherhood to the activities of this shadowy race, because the tale does not recur in his corpus as do so many of his pet legends relevant to secret societies. His next innovation was to place the long-defunct Chapter of Perfection at the hub of Revolutionary history in *Paul Ardenheim*, which appeared the year following *The Rose of Wissahikon* in 1848, a move which suggests that Kelpius’s society provided a richer symbolic field for fraternal contemplation than speculation about the Illinois mound-builders. This time, the mythology proved tenacious and would be incorporated into the sacred books of the Brotherhood of the Union. Thus was Rosicrucianism born in America.

Lippard’s Rosicrucians: Paul Ardenheim

Paul Ardenheim, The Monk of Wissahikon is America’s first Rosicrucian novel, and the first in the English language to explicitly invoke the story of Christian Rosencreutz from the *Fama Fraternitatis* of 1614. In his article “The Chapter of Perfection: A Neglected Influence on George Lippard,” Carsten Seecamp lists several details about the occult activity in *Paul Ardenheim* which he believes were inspired by the Kelpius group. The Monastery where Paul, the

¹⁵⁴ The phenomenon of anthropological speculation about a non-Indian civilization in North America was apparently quite common in the antebellum era, and present from the 1780s through the Civil War. Serious archaeologists debated whether these early peoples were Aztec, Mayan, Chinese, Polynesian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Israelite, Scandinavian, Welsh, or Scotch, and the prevailing conclusion was that they were white. See Curtis Dahl, “Mound-Builders, Mormons, and William Cullen Bryant,” *The New England Quarterly* 34.2 (Jun. 1961): 181-182. Gordon M. Sayre remarks that, “The colorful history of Mound Builder archaeology and speculation in the nineteenth century could fill a large book.” See Gordon M. Sayre, “The Mound Builders and the Imagination of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand,” *Early American Literature* 33.3 (1998): 228. See also Robert Silverberg, *Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968).

“Monk,” lives with his father, the “Priest,” exactly conforms to the Wissahickon locale of the Chapter of Perfection’s original buildings. Paul must take a vow of celibacy in order to effect his Great Work, as did the members of the late seventeenth century German sect. Kelpius was apparently high-born enough to merit the appellation “Baron,” a title which he rejected, just as Paul’s father forsakes his noble name and inheritance upon moving to the American colonies.¹⁵⁵ *Paul Ardenheim*’s central villain, Isaac van Behme, along with his deformed servant Black David, were modeled on a magus-like member of the Chapter of Perfection, Dr. Christopher Witt, whose alchemical pursuits and mysterious mulatto slave figured prominently in Germantown lore.¹⁵⁶ Finally, Seecamp notes Lippard’s telling claim in the introduction to *Paul Ardenheim*: this novel “covers ground hitherto untrodden – the influence which the *German mind* manifested in the case of the early settlers [and] exerted upon the history of Pennsylvania, and the cause of human progress [my italics].”¹⁵⁷ This compelling evidence suggests that Lippard had the Chapter of Perfection partially in mind when laying the imaginative framework for *Paul Ardenheim*. Yet as to the *Rosicrucian* implications of the above details, Seecamp does not comment. My task is to bring this previously unknown perspective to bear on *Paul Ardenheim*.

Interestingly, Lippard himself distances his Rosicrucian hero, Paul, from the lineage of the Chapter of Perfection. He notes that the Block-House and Monastery where Paul lives with his father and sister were once used by the Kelpius group, but then clarifies: “But it was not with *this* Brotherhood that the stranger of the Block-House held communion [my italics].”¹⁵⁸ As we learn later in the plot, Paul’s father is the carrier of the European lineage of the “brotherhood of

¹⁵⁵ Seecamp 205-206.

¹⁵⁶ Seecamp 201.

¹⁵⁷ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 10.

¹⁵⁸ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 69.

the R.C.” (Rosy Cross), and has only been in the colonies for seventeen years, since 1758 – fifty years after the dissolution of the Chapter of Perfection.¹⁵⁹ While such distancing serves to highlight the Rosicrucian lineage which Lippard promulgates in *Paul Ardenheim*, it doesn’t preclude the implication that the Chapter of Perfection was, for Lippard, somehow connected to the Rosicrucian dispensation which Paul and his father enact. The seventeenth century Monastery with its series of secret chambers and labyrinthine halls turns out to play a crucial role in the housing, and then exposing, of the Rosicrucian texts which are revealed to Paul.

Rosicrucian scholar Tobias Churton offers seven points which characterize the aims and identifications of latter-day Rosicrucian groups. Churton’s list provides a framing device for Lippard’s Rosicrucian agenda in *Paul Ardenheim*:

1. the Invisible House
2. social idealism
3. practical and spiritual alchemy
4. a Gnostic pedigree
5. secret chiefs and unknown superiors
6. the idea ... that there ought to be a Society in Europe
7. Cosmoxenus – the World Stranger: the person “in the world but not of it”¹⁶⁰

The “Invisible House” refers to the site of the secret Rosicrucian texts, unknown to the world at large; in *Paul Ardenheim*, this house is Paul’s father’s Monastery, where Paul must penetrate secret chamber after secret chamber to reach the revelatory texts. “Social idealism” is present in Lippard’s Rosicrucians in spades. Universal Brotherhood, across racial and national lines, is the goal of the secret society featured in the chapter entitled, “The Parliament of the World.” “Practical and spiritual alchemy,” by which Churton refers to various programs for self-improvement, is not a prominent feature of *Paul Ardenheim*, but appears in the ritual content of the Brotherhood of the Union. The “Gnostic pedigree” suggests literal and spiritual inheritance from an-

¹⁵⁹ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 284.

¹⁶⁰ Churton 383.

cient mystics and mystery schools. Thus, Lippard's Rosicrucians existed in some form in ancient Egypt and Mexico, and the lineage is carried through the early Protestant martyrs who followed John Huss.¹⁶¹ "Secret chiefs and unknown superiors" are a common, and diabolical, aspect of Lippard's Masonic vision; Black David exploits the belief in unknown chiefs to his advantage in *Paul Ardenheim*, by impersonating a superior in a local Masonic group.¹⁶² Lippard presses the fiction that there was, in fact, a "Society in Europe," and that this society transferred its wisdom to the Ardenheims so that they could anoint the "New World Deliverer," George Washington.¹⁶³ Finally, as "Cosmoxenus," Paul Ardenheim was raised in isolation along the Wissahickon, where he developed preternatural awareness of the spirit world. He operates behind the scenes of history in the invisible world, enabling democratic revolutions but eschewing personal fame.

To Churton's list I would add one further point, mentioned by Susanna Åkerman in *Rose Cross Over the Baltic*. Åkerman invokes the paradigm of comparative religion by suggesting that the "Rosicrucian" is a specific religious attitude motivated in part by the perception of institutionalized evil, necessitating the intercession of organized good. Åkerman even claims that latter-day Rosicrucian groups incorporated this recognizable type into their own personal mythologies, allowing them to explain why the Rosicrucians in a particular lineage might be far removed in time and place:

In various modes, proponents of these modern esoteric schools argue that each epoch will force out self-identified seekers of light, some of whom will perceive themselves as Rosicrucians. Individuals with such experiences will have developed life-instincts that pit them against what in esoteric terms is called "the black

¹⁶¹ "[T]he most sacred sign of the Order ... was written on the pyramids of Egypt, and the Monuments of Mexico." Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 312.

¹⁶² Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 154.

¹⁶³ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 320.

priesthood,” that is, against the objectively powerful and institutionalized interpreters of the spirit. To take such a perennial hidden plan for humanity as a real structure can be described only as an occult mentality.¹⁶⁴

Since so much of Lippard’s literary vision revolves around the problem of evil petrified in the social phenomenon of class, it’s important to note that his firm belief in brotherhood was a response to an equally firm belief in the sort of “black priesthood” cited by Åkerman. From the hypocritical Monks of Monk Hall in *The Quaker City*, to Lippard’s paranoid conclusion in *The Nazarene* that the heartless rich incite riots to scourge the helpless poor, Lippard’s fictional villains reveal the writer as a full-bore conspiracy theorist. It’s also likely that Lippard was a “self-identified” Rosicrucian of the type Åkerman describes, and that his fraternal fervor was motivated as much by the prospect of actively fighting evil as it was by the practice of quietly performing good works. If nothing else, the black priesthood, or anti-Rosicrucian group, is a familiar feature of Lippard’s novels.

Performing a plot summary of *Paul Ardenheim* is a daunting feat, compounded by the fact that the main character may or may not exist in the physical world, several characters are manifestations of the devil, others are in excess of two hundred years old, and all of the characters are subject, at any time, to the magnetizing powers of Isaac van Behme, a.k.a. the devil himself. Character loyalties are difficult if not impossible to penetrate under these conditions, and the situation is not ameliorated by the author’s blithe contentment with the mystery he has created. Lippard concludes his novel with a frank refusal to sort out its various and tangled plots, although he hints that “many things . . . which appear dark and obscure, might be made plain as sunlight, by a simple reference to that great science of the Soul, which in our day is called Mag-

¹⁶⁴ Susanna Åkerman, *Rose Cross Over the Baltic: The Spread of Rosicrucianism in Northern Europe* (Boston: Brill, 1998) 7.

netism [sic].”¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, this flimsy *deus ex machina* does not enlighten the reader as to the fates of poor Madeline and Gilbert Morgan, simple folk who are used as pawns in the malevolent plans of the superhuman and demonic characters who populate *Paul Ardenheim*.

Lippard denies the possibility of a literal reading of *Paul Ardenheim* by leaving several plots unresolved and declaring, “I will not attempt any explanation of these mysteries.”¹⁶⁶ His feisty stance, so hostile to the expectations of the literal-minded novel-reader, supports a reading of *Paul Ardenheim* as an occult text intended to foster a transrational and personalized response to the novel’s sensational version of American Revolutionary history. This seemingly ludicrous (or postmodern, if you will) tactic of presenting contradictory appearances and fluctuating loyalties, and leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions, is in fact a conventional Masonic turn. Nineteenth century ritualists sought to evoke mystery above all else, and favored rituals in which symbols could mean different things at different times to diverse individuals, appropriate to the initiate’s own level of knowledge: “The rituals themselves informed initiates that the facile meanings were wrong, or at least incomplete. Every symbol contained deeper meanings than even the rituals’ own authors could fully comprehend ... As the ritualists repeatedly insisted, the symbols simultaneously offered concealment and revelation.”¹⁶⁷ The Masonic initiate understands the knowledge gained from ritual to be a self-reflexive endeavor, one dependent upon his own powers of interpretation and appropriate to his own degree of understanding. Lippard gestures at a similarly transrational understanding of his unaccountable novel by redeeming the

¹⁶⁵ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 533.

¹⁶⁶ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 533.

¹⁶⁷ Carnes 35.

value of what is, at first glance, “improbable” to the rational mind: “Everything great in science, history, or religion, has at first view been *the most improbable thing in the world* [sic].”¹⁶⁸

Textual evidence gathered from the private ritual book of the Brotherhood of the Union confirms that the esoteric heart of *Paul Ardenheim*, “The Manuscript of Brother Anselm” which Paul discovers in his father’s Rosicrucian chamber, is one with the most sacred narratives of Lippard’s real-life order. “The Parliament of the World” portion of Anselm’s manuscript is reproduced in Lippard’s *BGC*, minus some narrative elements and a few textual markers like “he said”; a shortened version of “The Legend of the Tenth Century,” which runs to twelve pages in *Paul Ardenheim*, also appears in the *BGC*.¹⁶⁹ The transrational trajectory of *Paul Ardenheim* functions to inspire curiosity and speculation about America’s occult history which could be satisfied, in part, by membership in Lippard’s secret order. Reading the novel in this way suggests a radial approach to understanding its plot; “The Manuscript of Brother Anselm” is positioned at roughly the mid-point of *Paul Ardenheim*’s 500-plus pages. The impenetrable actions of unbelievable characters, like van Behme the devil incarnate and his reincarnated daughter Leola, serve as ritualistic bookends – or perhaps doors, veils, or degrees – enclosing the primary Rosicrucian revelation which lies at the novel’s center. Accordingly, some of these obfuscating plots are comprehensible, and others conceal more than they reveal.

A radial, as opposed to a linear, reading of *Paul Ardenheim* argues that the narratives which directly enclose “The Manuscript of Brother Anselm” contain the more important plot-

¹⁶⁸ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 533-534.

¹⁶⁹ The *BGC* incorporates some non-standard and erratic pagination, but both of these stories appear at the end of the text, on pages 190-200. Pages 194-200 of the *BGC* correspond almost exactly to pages 312-318 of the 1848 edition of *Paul Ardenheim*. In the *BGC*, a numeric code heads the chapter which is titled “The Rosy Cross” in *Paul Ardenheim* (311). This code, “[231],” is translated in a manuscript key written out by Lippard for the *BGC*, in which he states that the “degree of the Rosy Cross” is “the supreme degree of the Order.” Lippard, “Key to figure [231] of the BGC” 1. Lippard places the supreme degree of the Brotherhood of the Union at the very center of *Paul Ardenheim*.

lines, if the manuscript chapters are viewed as a *sanctum sanctorum* around which the rest of the chapters were constructed to house. The chapters leading up to and following Paul's discovery of the manuscript are relatively coherent and straightforward, while the outermost chapters, those which begin and end the novel, are the more tangled, unbelievable, and impenetrable. In what I'll call the novel's "central narrative," both formally and in terms of development, we meet the teenaged Paul Ardenheim, clad in a flowing black robe with a cap of velvet to match. On New Year's Eve of 1774, Paul's father, Gaspard Michael, tells him of the prophecy for which he abandoned his Baronage: "*The New World is the last altar of human freedom left on the surface of the Globe. Never shall the footsteps of Kings pollute its soil. It is the last hope of man* [sic]."¹⁷⁰ The voice of God has instructed Gaspard Michael to wait for the Deliverer of the New World, whom Paul and his father anoint using oil, the Bible, a cross, and a crown of laurel in the wee hours of January 1, 1775. The Deliverer, led by some intuitive conviction into the Germantown wilderness in the dead of night, is none other than George Washington.¹⁷¹

Lippard prolongs the action leading up to the novel's central moment – Paul's penetration of the sealed chamber of the Monastery – over almost a hundred pages. First Paul must swear an oath that he won't enter the sealed chamber until a year has passed or his father is dead. Unaccountably, the pious and deferent Paul is driven to enter the chamber that very night. The wizard Isaac's demonic daughter appears from nowhere to tempt Paul, whose success in his Rosicrucian venture is dependent upon his chastity. Paul's mysterious desire to kill his beloved father is later explained in an ancillary plot about a family curse. Paul forces his way into the sealed chamber and his father is knocked down, though whether it is by Paul's murderous hand is not made clear. Haunted by fear and madness over what might have transpired that fateful night, Paul wanders in

¹⁷⁰ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 160.

¹⁷¹ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 165, 254.

Europe for over two years. Upon his return home, Paul's former neighbors along the Wissahickon treat him as a ghost, and he discovers an ominous memorial with his name on it outside the Monastery.¹⁷² Now Paul is free to explore the Monastery at length, and the sealed chamber turns out to be not one, but a series of secret rooms laden with mysterious clues and letters informing him of his fate. A manuscript appears to him in a sealed door in the breast of a statue, and this, finally, is "The Manuscript of Brother Anselm," which I will discuss shortly.

In a frame narrative heavily indebted to Poe, Lippard claims access to "MSS." written in cipher to which he owes the tale of Paul Ardenheim.¹⁷³ The novel's outer or secondary plots, in terms of their relevance to the manuscript of Brother Anselm, are designed to conceal rather than to reveal, to shock and awe as opposed to edify, not unlike the initiatory degrees in a secret brotherhood. One of these plots concerns a family with two brothers living along the Rhine during the time of Henry VIII, with the surname Mount Sepulchre. Harry Mount Sepulchre is content to carouse with his band of twenty-four noble knights, but a betrayal perpetrated by his older brother Ranulph lays a curse of parricide on the family. The current heir to the Mount Sepulchre estate, Reginald, is a British loyalist and Paul's companion while in Europe. In the final section of the novel we learn that Paul is a cousin to Reginald, and that they both suffer the parricidal tendencies of their accursed race. Paul, revealed to be the rightful heir of the Mount Sepulchre estate, is attacked by Reginald as the novel ends, and though Paul is assumed dead, he reappears to make an attempt on Reginald's life. This is one of the plots which the novel leaves unresolved.

¹⁷² "PAUL – JANUARY 1, 1775" is carved on a beech tree by the Monastery. Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 271.

¹⁷³ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 3-5.

Supernatural explanations are frequently invoked in a story which Lippard admits is “improbable,” but still insists is “true”: “true to the springs of human action – true to the secret history of the heart of man – true to the feelings, which sway mankind, in all ages and in every clime.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, Ranulph Mount Sepulchre has apparently *never* died, which is the curse he suffers for betraying his brother Harry. Paul’s father Gaspard Michael was initiated in Germany by Brother Anselm, one of the original members of the Rosicrucian Order, which would make Brother Anselm likewise about 200 years old, or, as Lippard puts it, an “aged man, who had lived far beyond the common term of human life.” It is also Brother Anselm who directs Gaspard Michael to the “New World, as the place appointed for the next Convocation of the Chiefs of the Rosy Cross.”¹⁷⁵

Another lengthy plotline concerns the bewildering initiation of Gilbert the Huntsman into a Masonic-style order named here as the B.H.A.C. While this brotherhood’s aims seem noble, proclaiming “DEATH TO THE RICH! LIFE TO THE POOR! [sic],”¹⁷⁶ and their ritual of the staged death of the initiate does not differ substantively from rituals within Masonry or those found in Lippard’s Brotherhood of the Union, Lippard clearly elevates the Rosicrucian tradition above this Masonic-style order. His oblique criticism of the B.H.A.C. is that its terrifying rituals too easily expose one to manipulation and abuse; Gilbert is drugged, accused of being a traitor, and dragged around by a cord tied to his neck. After one of several demonic presences in the novel impersonates the “Invisible,” or Secret Chief of the B.H.A.C., Gilbert is led to murder his beloved Madeline in exchange for a position of rank within the order. Local wizard Isaac van

¹⁷⁴ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 534.

¹⁷⁵ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 338.

¹⁷⁶ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 107.

Behme desires Madeline's corpse so that he can practice the alchemical feat of resurrection on the beautiful young virgin.

Lippard's "assault on the rational" leaves the reader in a benumbed, receptive state, the better to absorb the truth of Universal Brotherhood which is likewise an "improbable" possibility, as Lippard sees it, in nineteenth century America. The novel does not so much end as it simply comes to a halt. Its final chapters can only be described as psychedelic. Madeline lives – or does she? Gilbert has somehow survived his numerous ordeals – or is he just a reanimated corpse? Reginald is embroiled in marriage or seduction plots with both Madeline and the devil-woman Eola/Leola, Isaac's "daughter" as well as the reincarnation of Ranulph the Immortal's sixteenth century consort. By turns, Isaac, Black David, Rolof Sener, and Ranulph are all revealed to be incarnations of the Great Fiend, Satan himself. Black priesthood indeed. As for Paul, he is relieved to discover that his last attempt at patricide was foiled by his sister Catherine, who substituted a pillow for his father's breast to meet Paul's dagger thrust. His father dies of natural causes, and Lippard hints at even greater mysteries concerning the further adventures of Paul Ardenheim, at work behind the scenes of worldwide Revolution: "We have yet to look upon that Soul, in its matured vigor, embodied in deeds, at once generous and sublime ... What hand shall dare to lift the curtain, and reveal Paul Ardenheim gliding like a Ghost – like an embodied Fate – through the incredible horrors and gloomy triumphs of the French Revolution [sic]?"¹⁷⁷

While much of *Paul Ardenheim* is rendered intentionally opaque, its very alternations between concealment and revelation help identify it as a Rosicrucian novel. The content of the Rosicrucian manuscripts of Brother Anselm represent Lippard's fictional riffing on the Rosicrucian Order's powerful mythos. *Paul Ardenheim's* central narrative, about "Cosmoxenus" Paul Ardenheim, the sealed chamber or "Invisible House," and the German lineage of the Rosicru-

¹⁷⁷ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 532.

ans demonstrates that Lippard had access to copies of the original Rosicrucian tracts. The *Fama* and *Confessio* were printed in English in 1652, and it is possible that Lippard became acquainted with an enthusiast who owned a copy of this translation. He was, while crafting *Paul Ardenheim*, also writing the rituals for the Brotherhood of the Union, and “was busily delving into the lore of the Masons, Odd Fellows, Illuminati, Rosicrucians, and other mystic orders.”¹⁷⁸ While Lippard may have discovered a rich oral tradition of Rosicrucianism in his native Philadelphia, his knowledge of the *Fama* and *Confessio* is especially detailed, suggesting contact with an actual text. For example, Thomas DeQuincey’s magazine history of the Rosicrucians is quite thorough in its redaction of the *Fama* and *Confessio*. Yet even DeQuincey does not bother to mention that the *Fama*’s hero, Christian Rosencreutz, is raised in a cloister.¹⁷⁹ Lippard incorporates this precise biographical data about “Brother C.R.” into Paul Ardenheim’s history; Paul is raised in a monastery so that Lippard can construct him as an American Christian Rosencreutz: “I have shared your studies, father! Reared afar from the toil and the vanity of worldly life, I have made my home with you in this hermitage. Together we have wept – prayed – watched over the pages of Revelation!”¹⁸⁰ Here the physical relic of Kelpius’s Pietist “Monastery” lends religious credibility to Paul’s cloistered childhood.

Lippard draws other details from the *Fama* in crafting his Rosicrucian hero. Like Rosencreutz, Paul is also of a noble lineage.¹⁸¹ Like the eight original brothers described in the *Fama*, Paul is a “bachelor” and of “vowed virginity.”¹⁸² Remembering the linking of Rosicrucians with

¹⁷⁸ Butterfield 298.

¹⁷⁹ Yates, *Fama* 298.

¹⁸⁰ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 159.

¹⁸¹ Yates, *Fama* 298.

¹⁸² Yates, *Fama* 302.

spirit communication – popular lore derived from Brother R.C.’s acquaintance with “Elementary Inhabitants” in the city of Fez – Lippard offers us a hero with a sophisticated grasp of the spirit world. The Rosicrucian belief in “secret chiefs and unknown superiors” (recalling Churton’s list) extended authority to angelic masters in the other world, and here Lippard paints a portrait of Paul’s intimacy with a hierarchy of disembodied beings. Notably, these beings are of “a purer and diviner creation” than earthly men and women, and thus qualify as occult demons, and *not* as the lowly souls of the deceased with which Spiritualism sought to communicate.

To him, the great sky was no vague blank in the Universe. It was crowded with the Spirit People of many tongues, tribes and forms. The Stars above were the Homes of Souls, many good, many evil, some lost in crimes, and some pure as the light of God.

And even through the blue sky, he could look up, and see these spirits – or to speak in language which may be more intelligible – these Men and Women of a purer and diviner creation, circling in myriad throngs of light and darkness. Some with their faces glowing ineffable love, and others wearing upon their foreheads the fiery scorn of passion, defiance, and despair.

For, from very childhood, he had been taught to believe, that even as the chain of physical existence begins with rudest beasts and almost imperceptible reptiles, and extends upward to Man, so from Man up to God, the chain of Spiritual Life extended in one unbroken line, creation crowding on creation, and tribes of spirits rising above other tribes, until the universe beheld its supreme source and fountain in the Great Father of Eternity.¹⁸³

Lippard emphasizes the Hermetic inheritance of the Rosicrucian brotherhood, which not only allowed for communication with higher spiritual beings, but also viewed man as intimately related to God, with “creation crowding on creation” and the divinity of the individual reaching “in one unbroken line” to the Creator. Paul’s effortless communication with angelic demons marks him as a magus on par with the learned Christian Rosencreutz.

Perhaps Lippard’s most important legacy to future generations of speculative writers and secret society enthusiasts is his development of the Rosicrucian as a secret force in world poli-

¹⁸³ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 61-62.

tics. Lippard is the first writer to deploy the occult magus in this valorized position of democratic hero. While the original Rosicrucians touted their invisibility to the world at large and prophesied religious and political revolutions to come, the idea that they would foment such revolutions with their superior occult knowledge is a leap taken first by Lippard. The Illuminati scare of the 1790s imagined anarchistic plots hatched by depraved atheists which would destroy America; in Lippard's vision, a benevolent Christian society is the secret force which *enables* American democracy. From such slim details included in the *Fama* as that the Rosicrucian brothers should "follow the custom of the[ir] country" in their dress so as to maintain their anonymity, Lippard hatches a mythology about a Rosicrucian demi-god who can hide in plain sight while he directs the course of world history.¹⁸⁴ Lippard hit a particularly rich imaginative vein with this highly exportable innovation on the original Rosicrucian legend, one which not only creates intrigue in the fictional world of the novel, but also generates speculation touching the historical marvel that was the American Revolution. Like Harry Potter of the wildly popular book and film series of our day, Paul Ardenheim is the destined individual endowed with the power to combat the force of evil in the world, only Paul must take up this mantle in secret. After Paul reads the manuscript of Brother Anselm, he finds his father's note which provides further details touching his Rosicrucian mission:

As the Supreme Chief, your name will not be known in history. You will be lost to the sight of the world. You will, in truth, stamp your almost supernatural impress upon history, and sway like a Destiny the fate of nations – of mankind. But as an individual, as a man, you will not be known. Cut off from all ties of friendship and love, sacred and set apart from the ambitions or the fears of common men, you will fulfil your awful task, glide away, and leave your work, but not your name or your memory, to tell that you ever had an existence.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Yates, *Fama* 303.

¹⁸⁵ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 339.

Paul does not think twice about forsaking personal fame and other human comforts, and gladly accepts the call to become a secret chief.

Lippard shows familiarity with the original Rosicrucian tracts not only through his characterization of Paul Ardenheim, but also by reproducing the quintessential Rosicrucian moment – penetration of the sacred vault – in an American setting. The *Confessio* informs us that Christian Rosencreutz was born in 1378 and lived for 106 years; the *Fama* tells us that his burial place remained secret for 120 years. Thus, the tomb of Rosencreutz was not revealed to the living brothers until 1604, some six years before the *Fama* was first circulated in manuscript form (circa 1610), before being widely printed and reproduced in 1614.¹⁸⁶ The most compelling points of Rosencreutz’s story are not, it turns out, the events of his life, but rather his posthumous reception by brothers in the early seventeenth century, following the penetration of the vault. Rosencreutz traveled East to gain enlightenment, and since the learned pundits of Europe were not receptive to his occult insights, he decided to bind three other men to him in a secret society dedicated to the pursuit of all knowledge. The circle was later widened to include eight brothers in all. Each brother agreed to live modestly and inconspicuously in his country of origin, to meet with his fellows once a year in Germany, and to use his alchemically-infused wisdom only for healing, and not for personal gain: “none of them should profess any other thing than to heal the sick, and that *gratis*.”¹⁸⁷

Lippard pays due homage to this Rosicrucian origin story by making Paul’s father, Gaspard Michael, the successor to one of the eight original brothers: Brother Anselm was “the last of the Seven appointed by the Peasant.”¹⁸⁸ Gaspard Michael takes Anselm’s place in the order, just

¹⁸⁶ Yates, note on 308.

¹⁸⁷ Yates, *Fama* 303.

as Paul Ardenheim will replace his father; Lippard creates some suspense over just how far Paul can be initiated into the order prior to his father's death. In the original tracts, the seventeenth century members of the Rosicrucian Society accidentally discover the tomb of Rosencreutz in their meeting chamber as they are moving a heavy table. Not only is this vault filled with the sacred books and relics of the Rosicrucians, the brothers are amazed to find that the moment of their blundering entry was predicted by an inscription on the hidden door. By unnamed occult forces, Rosencreutz allowed his tomb to remain secret for precisely 120 years. The brothers understand that now is the appointed time to promote the mission of their "most godly and highly illuminated father,"¹⁸⁹ by exposing the Rosicrucian Order to the public and inviting the participation of all learned and wise men. Thus it was the excitement generated by the discovery of the secret vault, and the marvelous legacy contained therein, that led to the Rosicrucian renaissance of the early seventeenth century.

Lippard dates the flowering of the American Rosicrucian movement to the first days of 1775, when Washington is anointed as Deliverer and Paul Ardenheim penetrates the sacred vault of his father (and, perhaps, Kelpius). Just as the Rosicrucian brothers discover Rosencreutz's vault at a divinely ordained moment in history, so Paul uncovers his destiny at an auspicious period: the dawn of worldwide democratic revolution. The brothers of the tracts confront a vault of two levels and "seven sides and corners."¹⁹⁰ Paul, led by some unnamed occult force to disobey his father and enter the "Sealed Chamber," also happens upon a split-level vault which is described thusly: "Seven doors appeared in its walls; three on the right, as many on the left, and

¹⁸⁸ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 338.

¹⁸⁹ Yates, *Fama* 298.

¹⁹⁰ Yates, *Fama* 306.

one at its western extremity.”¹⁹¹ Such particularity of description leaves little doubt that Lippard was working from the original Rosicrucian manifestoes, or at least authoritative texts, when penning his own Rosicrucian plot. In the vault Paul learns the history of the order in the “Manuscript of Brother Anselm,” and is entrusted with its future in letters from his father. Ceremonial relics and mysterious inscriptions in the Sealed Chamber also call to mind the revelatory atmosphere of the vault of Christian Rosencreutz. Though the Rosicrucian Order is named explicitly several times in *Paul Ardenheim*, it is Lippard’s highly specific portrayal of the initiation of his hero, by sacred texts no less, which reveals the writer’s investment in placing *himself* within the Rosicrucian lineage through just such allusions to insider information. The exactness of the depiction of Paul’s initiation lends credibility to Lippard’s status as a Rosicrucian authority, a canny and perhaps necessary move on the part of the writer because of the creative and uncorroborated history of the order he proffers in “The Manuscript of Brother Anselm.”

Though the outer narratives which enclose “The Manuscript of Brother Anselm” are crowded with protean characters and gothic effects, like so many psychedelic doorways leading to the pure heart of revelation, *Paul Ardenheim*’s central manuscript is a rather plain and earnest text. Recalling Melville’s disappointment at plumbing the “Freemason’s mighty secret,” *Paul Ardenheim*’s readers might be disappointed to discover that the Rosicrucian dispensation turns out to be no more exotic than non-denominational Christian piety and Universal Brotherhood. Lippard embellishes on the oblique hints of revolution contained in the *Fama*, which declared, “Howbeit we know after a time there will now be a general reformation, both of divine and human things, according to our desire.”¹⁹² For Lippard, this reformation had been realized in both the American and French Revolutions, and would only be complete when organized religion was

¹⁹¹ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 280.

¹⁹² Yates, *Fama* 309.

toppled along with ancient monarchies. A Marxist who hadn't read Marx, Lippard felt keenly how institutionalized Christianity was used as a tool to oppress the poor, and he advocated a faith based on the life of the historical Jesus, the open-hearted champion of the lowly and downtrodden.¹⁹³ Though "The Manuscript of Brother Anselm" departs from any agreed-upon (or heretofore published) version of Rosicrucian history, Lippard's fictional history of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross is in keeping with the Protestant fervor of the original tracts. By capitalizing on the noblest intentions of the Protestant and non-conformist movements within Christianity, Lippard creates a compelling history of an anti-institutional secret order whose perennial goal is transforming the world into a socialist utopia.

Lippard's history of the Rosicrucians begins in the tenth century with an educated serf, a Bohemian named Michael. Locked up in a dungeon for preaching the Bible to his fellow serfs, particularly the passages which aggrandize the poor as the most beloved of Jesus, Michael is given a chance at freedom after ten years in bondage. He has only to cast a statue of Jesus in gold for a corrupt nobleman, and his heresy will be forgiven. Michael works diligently day and night at this task, but horrifies the church officials when he reveals an image of the martyr clothed in rags, cast not in gold but in lead. The anguished face of the sculpted Jesus is so haunting that it appears to encase a living soul. Michael informs the church officials that his conscience could only permit him to cast an image of "Imprisoned Jesus," whose loving heart has been enchained by the corruptions of the church. But a day will come, Michael prophesies, when the Lord "shall walk freely once more into the homes and hearts of Men. Then shall the

¹⁹³ Marx, born in 1818, was contemporaneous with Lippard, and many of Lippard's critics have noted the similarity of his vision of universal class struggle to the proto-socialism of Marx. Yet the principles of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) did not circulate widely in the English-speaking world until after Lippard's death in 1854. Given the scarcity of English translations, it is very unlikely that Lippard knew of Marx, though he was a proponent of the French socialist, Charles Fourier. Lippard's Brotherhood attracted prominent Fourierists and agrarians, and directly influenced the organization of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. Reynolds, *George Lippard* 20-21.

Lead become Gold, and the Sneer be changed into a Smile!”¹⁹⁴ For this audacious affront to clerical power, Michael is locked up with his uncanny effigy and left to die. Lippard employs the statue of Imprisoned Jesus as a visual trope of the Rosicrucian Order throughout *Paul Ardenheim*. He signals to the reader that the Ardenheims are now the carriers of the Rosicrucian lineage, by placing the “leaden Image” within the Sealed Chamber of Paul’s father. In fact, it is the activation of a “secret spring” within the Imprisoned Jesus, with “that sublimity of sadness stamped upon its sombre face,” which causes the manuscript of Brother Anselm to appear to Paul out of a hidden door in the statue’s breast.¹⁹⁵

The next time the statue appears, chronologically speaking, it is at the site of the martyred Michael’s imprisonment 400 years later, and accompanied by 4,000 followers of John Huss.¹⁹⁶ Lippard’s overwhelmingly Bohemian vision of Rosicrucian history is interesting for several reasons. To begin with, Lippard’s recuperation of the Czech martyr John Huss, who was burned at the stake for enacting Protestant reforms a century before Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, strengthens his portrayal of the Rosicrucian Order as a distinctly democratic and Protestant force in world history. Furthermore, Huss was born around the year that the fictional Christian Rosencreutz was said to have come into the world, circa 1375. Like the wisdom of Rosencreutz, the reforms of Huss were ignored – indeed, suppressed – by the European leaders of his day, and his Protestant vision would not be realized on a large scale until a hundred years after his death, much like the legacy of Rosencreutz was carried on in secret for a century prior to the “Rosicrucian Enlightenment” of the seventeenth century. Though Lippard is the first and perhaps only Rosicrucian enthusiast to argue a specifi-

¹⁹⁴ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 302.

¹⁹⁵ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 285.

¹⁹⁶ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 289, 302.

cally Hussite lineage for the Rosicrucian Order, his choice is well-informed and cogent, and supports the radically Protestant tenor of the original tracts.

A rather uncanny aspect of Lippard's privileging of Bohemia as regards the history of Rosicrucianism merits mentioning here. Groundbreaking scholar of Rosicrucianism, Dame Frances Yates, dedicates much of her text *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* to establishing Bohemia as a hotbed of radical Protestantism and Hermetic inquiry prior to the appearance of the Rosicrucian tracts in the early seventeenth century. Building on this basis, she suggests that the installation of the Protestant King and Queen of Bohemia, Frederick V and Elizabeth Stuart, could be the culmination of a Rosicrucian plot to reform the world. The plot was not successful and lasted only a season over 1619-1620, hence the couple's epithet, "The Winter King and Queen." Yates did not know of Lippard, and Lippard never makes reference to the brief reign of Frederick and Elizabeth. Yet Lippard's locating of the Rosicrucian lineage in Bohemia in the wake of the Hussite persecution comes eerily close to Yates's characterization of Prague as the epicenter of European religious radicalism in the sixteenth century. One could infer from such a coincidence that Lippard possessed specialized information as yet unknown to the world at large; on the other hand, one could just as easily chalk up the Rosicrucian elevation of Bohemia by two independent thinkers to a fluke of the dubious enterprise of Rosicrucian scholarship. In either case, *Paul Ardenheim's* fictional history is supported by some latter-day historical research.

Paul Ardenheim's big Rosicrucian reveal, to borrow a phrase of the film world, appears in a chapter of Anselm's manuscript called "The Parliament of the World." Representative brothers from all over the world have gathered in a secret mountain cavern in Germany. All lament the pitiful state of brotherhood in their own countries. All are horrified to hear that black slavery and Indian persecution are being practiced in the New World, the prophesied site of the

transformation of the social order. It's tempting to make much of Lippard's claim that "this meeting took place when the first quarter of the seventeenth century was near its close," because this timing corresponds roughly to the publication of the first Rosicrucian tracts.¹⁹⁷ But contradictory textual evidence suggests there is a misprint involved – perhaps Lippard meant "last quarter" instead of first? The colonist representative at the Parliament is "fresh from the witchcraft murders of New England," while the English representative asserts that "Charles the Second is King in England now."¹⁹⁸ Charles II died in 1685, and so none of these dates quite mesh. But the last quarter of the seventeenth century covers the historical references, at least, and is also the era when Kelpius and his pilgrims emigrated to the colonies. A peasant whose nationality is not given, though we can guess he is Bohemian because he possesses the leaden Jesus, discourses upon the history of the order for the massed Parliament. This is the first time in *Paul Ardenheim* that Lippard names the Rosicrucians outright:

He spoke of a Secret Order extending over all the earth, and dating its origin back to that dim time, when history becomes a fable, and chronology a shadow. Of the rites, symbols, and customs of the Order – which spoke to the heart through the eye, and formed a universal language, intelligible to brothers of every race and clime. Of the most sacred sign of the Order, which was written on the pyramids of Egypt, and the Monuments of Mexico, and stamped upon the dumb stone and mortar of past ages, in every quarter of the globe – the most sacred sign, a Cross placed upon a globe, and lighted by the rays of a rising sun, and therefore called the red or ROSY CROSS.

This Cross, placed upon a dark globe, with the dawn breaking over its darkness, was the emblem of the great purpose of the Order, – the regeneration of the millions of mankind, by three great ideas, Union, Freedom, Brotherhood.

The Globe was a symbol of Union; the Light, breaking upon it from the darkness, an emblem of Freedom. The Cross, standing above upon the globe, and blushing into radiance in the fast coming light, was a type of BROTHERHOOD.

¹⁹⁷ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 306.

¹⁹⁸ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 306, 308.

This Order was known among men,— known only in vague supposition and unaccredited tradition – as the BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROSY CROSS [sic].¹⁹⁹

All of *Paul Ardenheim*'s mysteries build up to and refer back to this moment, the climax of the text and its central revelation. Remembering that this story is incorporated into the highest degree of Lippard's Brotherhood of the Union, we can infer that Lippard expected his Rosicrucian mythology to heavily impact the sort of sympathetic reader named in the introduction.

The peasant predicts the coming of the New World Deliverer and the violence of the French Revolution. He is chosen as the Supreme Chief of the Order, and decrees that the next chief will be selected in 1777 – the year Paul Ardenheim receives his call. As for the chief after that, “the same God who gave a Moses to the chained Israelites, will call forth, from the shadows of Poverty in 1848, or 1884 – the Liberator of a World.”²⁰⁰ It's not clear why Lippard waffles and gives an alternate date, whether for reasons of personal insecurity or willful obfuscation, because the text's implication is all too clear: George Lippard is the latest avatar of Paul Ardenheim, himself an avatar of the noble father, Christian Rosecreutz. Lippard unveiled the Brotherhood of the Union in 1850 in a public convocation,²⁰¹ with *Paul Ardenheim* and the Rosicrucian Order functioning as its esoteric mythology. The lofty aims of his socialist organization led him to believe that he had the potential to be a “Liberator of the World”; publicly, he dubbed himself the Supreme Washington of the Brotherhood of the Union. The Rosicrucians at the seventeenth century Parliament decide that their fraternal ideal will be embodied in the archetype of the Mechanic or tradesman, just as in Lippard's Brotherhood,²⁰² and lest this mythology veer too close to that of the Masons, Lippard specifies the preeminence of the Rosicrucians. The letter of

¹⁹⁹ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 312.

²⁰⁰ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 326.

²⁰¹ Reynolds, *George Lippard*, “Chronology.”

²⁰² Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 314, and Lippard, *BGC* 186.

Paul's father clarifies this point: "For the Brotherhood of the Holy Cross is not only superior in symbolic knowledge to all other secret organizations, but, in truth, all these organizations, however styled, are but illegitimate branches of our great order. For example – that which is taught dimly among the Masonic Fraternities is fully revealed in the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross."²⁰³ The central revelation of *Paul Ardenheim*, then, serves to initiate the reader into the extremely privileged and esoteric knowledge of its author, George Lippard.

While didactic ends are nothing new in the history of the novel genre, *Paul Ardenheim* is unique in that it literally initiates the sensitive reader into both the secret history of the Rosicrucians and the transrational mystique of Masonic fellowship. Conversely, other nineteenth century American didactic texts, whether pro- or anti-slavery, pro-Temperance, or pro-Christian, would have had no need to occult their respective agendas. Lippard was writing a text sympathetic to secret societies on the heels of the Anti-Masonic era (a movement which I detail shortly), and furthermore, occult societies trade on the idea of their arcana remaining secret. In an age of internet searches and digitized archives, we may not fully grasp just how specialized and rare Lippard's occult knowledge was, relative to his milieu. An occult seeker would have had to follow obscure hints and esoteric resonances to gain his information in the nineteenth century, and Lippard delivers such supernormal atmosphere in spades in *Paul Ardenheim*. Tellingly, Lippard defends a transrational view of the world throughout *Paul Ardenheim*, but seems to care little for any high-brow theory of literature which might justify the novel's many deviations from some form of realism or linear plotting. In the year following *Paul Ardenheim*'s publication, Lippard asserted, "LITERATURE merely considered as an ART is a despicable thing. It is only, at least mainly, valuable as a MEANS ... A literature which does not work practically, for the

²⁰³ Lippard, *Paul Ardenheim* 339.

advancement of a social reform ... is just good for nothing at all [sic].”²⁰⁴ While I would argue that the jumbled and imaginative *Paul Ardenheim* contains quite a bit of artistry, Lippard’s championing of the utilitarian purpose of literature is a solid reminder to not overlook the didactic trajectory of his most outlandish and fanciful novel. It just happens that what Lippard would most like to convey in *Paul Ardenheim* – the existence of an all-but-invisible esoteric brotherhood to which the author has the keys – must be cloaked in symbolic language and imparted via the transrational means of a literary ritual.

Anti-Masonry and The Quaker City

I turn now to one of Lippard’s first novels, the runaway success, *The Quaker City*. I have discussed Lippard’s texts out of chronological order, because the context of his later novels of brotherhood and Rosicrucianism, *The Nazarene* and *Paul Ardenheim*, enhances my reading of *The Quaker City* as an occult text. While I do not base this reading of one of Lippard’s early novels on the endorsement of the occult he manifested later in his career, Lippard’s regular recourse to occult themes certainly bolsters the argument I make about *The Quaker City*. Lippard consistently masks his own occult sympathies under a socially acceptable or impenetrable narrative frame. This occult style of story-telling is at work in *The Nazarene*, when Lippard promises to portray a White Brotherhood, but encodes this plot so heavily in the subtle powers of Paul Mount-Laurel as to be almost imperceptible. In *Paul Ardenheim*, America’s Rosicrucian legacy is almost lost under a welter of complicated, unbelievable, and unresolved plots. In *The Quaker City*, the evil Monks of Monk Hall and the brothers who follow the sorcerer Ravoni are alike engaged in illicit activity involving sex, drugs, and secret rites. Yet in spite of such untoward appearances, Ravoni’s Order emerges as sophisticated and compelling by the novel’s end, with Ra-

²⁰⁴ From the *Quaker City Weekly*, February 10 and June 2, 1849. Quoted in Butterfield 290.

voni voicing the ethos of radical democracy which Lippard himself endorsed. Given such a contradictory portrait of brotherhood, Lippard's interest in the redemptive power of fraternity is easy to overlook in *The Quaker City*. Lippard had forceful reasons to obfuscate any apparent sympathy with Ravoni; unlike the Christian Paul Ardenheim, Ravoni's occult god is his own "Giant Will," and in his vision of utopia there are no churches. The legacy of the Anti-Masonic movement also made it extremely risky for anyone to openly espouse fraternal rites like those practiced by Ravoni in the early 1840s. Lippard conceals more than he reveals in *The Quaker City*, and so the context of his later novels helps to tip the scales toward a redemptive reading of the occult in this cryptic novel about secret brotherhoods.

The Quaker City is so jam-packed with hair-raising adventures that critic J.V. Ridgely dedicates four full pages to delineating its "porno-gothic" plots.²⁰⁵ While Ravoni, the enigmatic magus, commands a seemingly extraneous sub-plot in Lippard's near-600 page book, a careful close-reading reveals that Ravoni's mystical and atheistic brotherhood impacts *The Quaker City's* central narrative in surprising ways. The scene opens on the winter solstice of 1842 and the novel's various actions are all resolved by Christmas Eve. Two upper-class men, Gus Lorrimer and Byrnewood Arlington, meet in a seedy oyster-cellar where they brag about their defilement of hapless women. Lorrimer has arranged a sham marriage to be held that very night, at the den of iniquity where most of *The Quaker City's* scandalous scenes unfold: Monk Hall. Lippard's bitterly sarcastic epithet for a demented supper club and house of assignation, "Monk Hall" is a visual trope of the urban gothic, replete with labyrinthine halls, secret passageways, and trap-doors. Monk Hall even has its own Igor-like lackey, the burly troll, Devil-Bug. Lorrimer and Arlington call on an astrologer, a minor character based on Lippard's friend Thomas

²⁰⁵ Ridgely 81-84.

Hague, and he correctly predicts that within three days, one of the friends will die by the other's hand.²⁰⁶ Later that night, Arlington is horrified to discover that Lorrimer is planning to seduce his sister, Mary Arlington. Byrnewood Arlington is abducted by Devil-Bug and narrowly escapes a torturous death within Monk Hall: live burial in the cellar. Lorrimer carries out Mary's ruin and she loses her wits along with her honor. Other plots radiating from the web of corruption spun by the Monks of Monk Hall occupy the mid-section of the text, but at its end – sunset on Christmas Eve – a pistol shot rings out to confirm the “vengeance of a Brother!”²⁰⁷ Lorrimer is slain and Byrnewood trades the doubtfully named “Quaker City” for the pristine wilderness of Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley.

At first glance, this harsh tale of rape repaid with murder, based on a contemporary Philadelphia scandal, would seem to have little to do with the redemptive power of the occult. As Ridgely points out, none of *The Quaker City's* cast of criminal characters is very likeable: “Few can remain pure ... all are at the mercy of the Quaker City. They are corrupted: by the lure of gaining great wealth and by the enjoyment of it, by a class structure, by religion, by taboos on sex, by institutions – in short, by the rotten structure of urban American society.”²⁰⁸ Arlington, in common with Lorrimer, has also ruined a young girl. Yet while Lorrimer is a hardened member of the novel's coterie of corruption, the Monks of Monk Hall, Arlington finds himself drawn into Ravoni's band of brothers, the noble “twenty-four.” Lorrimer ignores Arlington's demand that he marry his sister, Mary; Arlington, however, does the right thing and marries the lower-class woman whom *he* defiled. The novel's ending scene depicts Arlington enjoying domestic tranquility with his wife and child, though mad Mary gets the tragic final word. Contemporary

²⁰⁶ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 85.

²⁰⁷ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 568.

²⁰⁸ Ridgely 84.

readers of *The Quaker City* may have understood Arlington's adventure in a secret brotherhood as one more gothic torment heaped on the beleaguered protagonist, a spoof of upstart religions like Mesmerism, Mormonism, or Millerism.²⁰⁹ Yet Ravoni's role in the text cannot be so summarily dismissed. Ravoni might have his own criminal tendencies, but he is also, paradoxically, an eloquent mouthpiece for universal democracy and Emersonian self-reliance. More than one critic has named Ravoni the novel's hero, and that this redemptive figure passes on his occult legacy, if not his very soul, to *The Quaker City's* emblem of moral reform, Byrnewood Arlington, can hardly be an accident of the plot.²¹⁰

Ravoni performs metempsychosis, literally transferring his soul to *The Quaker City's* more obvious hero, Byrnewood Arlington. The text is explicit about this. One of the reasons that this detail of the plot has been ignored is because Ravoni's occult presence fits so oddly into Lippard's "Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime," to quote *The Quaker City's* subtitle. The question I address here is thus not *whether* Ravoni embodies the Hermetic and theurgic tradition (the evidence is copious enough), but *why* the reader should entertain the validity of Ravoni's powers, at least within the psychedelic world of the text. In the frame narrative of *The Quaker City*, Lippard pretends that a veteran lawyer has bequeathed to him a record of the violence and hypocrisy practiced by Philadelphia's leading citizens. Lippard is entrusted with shap-

²⁰⁹ Carl Ostrowski details each of these possibilities in his article, "Inside the Temple of Ravoni: George Lippard's Anti Exposé," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 55.1 (2009): 1-26. Ostrowski gives due importance to Ravoni in this article, and homes in on the fact that Lippard was not unsympathetic to alternative religious expressions. Yet Masonry seems a more likely context for Ravoni's brotherhood than these more exotic channels.

²¹⁰ "[D]espite his aura of diabolism and his sorcery ... Ravoni is the novel's hero." DeGrazia 154. "Yet for all the incredible theatricality of his appearance, it is [Ravoni] who proclaims the ultimate revolutionary hope of the book; and it is so 'blasphemous' that Lippard shrinks from openly endorsing it." Ridgely 92. Gary Ashwill ends his article with a consideration of redemption in Lippard's generally nihilistic novel, and concludes, "Lippard's fiction strives to emulate the resurrectionist Ravoni, to tip the balance toward life." Ashwill 314. "Though Ravoni is killed, most commentators have rightly noted that Lippard's and the reader's sympathies are mobilized for him; he offers the only alternative to Monk-hall and the corrupt Quaker City." Denning 98.

ing this catalogue of crime into a book, and the unnamed lawyer outlines Lippard's ostensible purposes in penning *The Quaker City*:

Have you courage, to write a book from the materials, which I leave you, which shall be devoted to these objects: To defend the sanctity of female honor; to show how miserable and corrupt is that Pseudo-Christianity which tramples on every principle ever preached or practised by the Saviour Jesus; to lay bare vice in high places, and strip gilded crimes of their tinsel. Have you courage for this?"²¹¹

An overview of the novel confirms that Lippard faithfully conformed to the fictitious lawyer's objects – that is, except for the Ravoni plot. What is a gothic wizard doing in a contemporary urban exposé? Is occult practice one of Philadelphia's dark secrets which needs to be unmasked? Is ceremonial chicanery so prevalent as to require the spoof of a self-styled magus? The high-flown diction Lippard falls into when discussing his occult hero provides the answer to these questions. The Ravoni plot does not represent a satire of the occult, nor does it highlight an urban problem requiring the public's attention. Rather, Ravoni is aligned with Lippard's purposes, going further than the author himself can in railing against that "miserable and corrupt ... Pseudo-Christianity" which the text would expose.

Ravoni emerges as a heroic presence in *The Quaker City* not only because he is the most articulate character, but also because he is the most developed. The rest of the cast is comprised of one-dimensional caricatures. Lippard's black stereotypes are particularly odious, and the Jewish character, Gabriel von Gelt, is equally likely to make present-day readers recoil. Lippard's women are fungible ciphers (the cross-dressing social-climber, Dora Livingstone, being the notable exception here), and both Arlington and Lorrimer are easy to confuse with a third male pro-

²¹¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 4. Lippard was assistant to the state attorney general during 1839-1841, and so his claim to have access to Philadelphia's secret underworld of crime is not entirely fictitious. As the state's head of law enforcement, the attorney general would necessarily be intimately aware of criminal activity at every level of society, some of it classified. While no critic has yet suggested that a seasoned Philadelphia lawyer was the model for the character in *The Quaker City*'s opening vignette, the fact of Lippard's legal apprenticeship opens up that possibility.

tagonist, Luke Harvey, a weakness of the text which seriously detracts from its dramatic potential. Toward satirizing Pseudo-Christianity, Lippard offers us the Reverend F.A.T. Pyne, a Protestant Evangelist who is an absolute cartoon of corruption. After Devil-Bug, no character is as audaciously or as flatly evil as Pyne. Even Devil-Bug, the murderous thug, experiences Christian remorse and performs a good deed or two, while Pyne remains a hardened hypocrite to the very end of *The Quaker City*. An enthusiastic member of Monk Hall, Pyne had previously stolen a girl-child in the hopes of cashing in on a blackmail plot, and after his attempted rape of the girl, who has now grown into the young woman, Mabel, he casually agrees to sell her into sexual slavery. To make matters worse, Mabel believes Pyne is her real father. In the pulpit, Pyne delivers ludicrous anti-Catholic sermons: he tells a wide-eyed congregation that Protestants are turned into meat in a sausage factory adjacent to the Vatican.²¹² En route to Ravoni's mansion to arrange the kidnapping of Mabel into prostitution, the forger Fitz-Cowles asks Pyne if he believes in God: ““Why to tell you the truth Fitz, I’ve preached about that particular belief frequently, quite frequently. So often, in fact, that I’ve forgotten what is my especial faith on that point.””²¹³

Lippard could hardly do more to denigrate Christianity, and yet he does. The text's only possible foil to Pyne, the unctuous preacher, is Ravoni, the Faustian philosopher, and Lippard innovates on this gothic type by making him both compelling and convincing. Ravoni's discourse, in addition to being eloquent, is largely unassailable from a secular perspective. Lippard far exceeds his stated mark of Pseudo-Christian critique, by having the magus declaim against *all* religion and belief in God. Ravoni's first speech to the members of the “New Faith” is worth quoting at some length, because of the startling fact of its occurrence in an antebellum novel.

²¹² Lippard, *The Quaker City* 265.

²¹³ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 396.

Lippard's typically crowded prose is more restrained here, and we could almost imagine this speech springing from a Socialist press in the twentieth century:

“There has been too much of God ... Wherever Fanaticism has raised its fanes, there the name of God has been mouthed by the foul lips of priests ...

“In this fair land of the New World, the children of the Forest were hunted and butchered in the name of God! It mingled with cry of death and it shrieked in the blood-hounds yell! Helpless women and aged men were burnt by grim sectarians, who gazed upon the blackened flesh of their victims, and shouted glory to the name of God!

“In this name earth has been desolated ten thousand times and ten thousand times again. In this name home has been made a hell, the gardens of the world transformed into howling deserts, the heart of man changed into a devil! In this name blood has flown in rivers, and in this name earth has been made a pest-house, with its valleys leveled into plains, and its hills raised into mountains with the heaps of dead!

“These things have been done in the name of God! You may say that they were the work of ignorance, of superstition, of fanaticism, but still that blistering fact, stands out from the history of the world, *these crimes were done in the name of God!*

“... *Now!* Aye *now* the time has come, when something for *man* should be done in the name of MAN [sic]!”²¹⁴

If Lippard intended to paint Ravoni with the typical Faustian flaw, lust for personal power, he neglects to here – and elsewhere. Ravoni takes possession of Mabel, but makes her his priestess instead of his prey. Having changed her name to Izole, Ravoni readies the waif-cum-priestess to peer into the future. Her vision of Philadelphia two hundred years hence is as a socialist utopia, where brothers carry on the creed of Ravoni and power has been decentralized: ““The streets are filled with free and happy people. There are no rich; there are no poor; I see neither church nor gaol, priest nor gaoler, yet – yet – all are happy!””²¹⁵ For an ostensibly power-hungry occultist, Ravoni betrays a remarkable interest in the welfare of humanity.

²¹⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 446.

Lippard was not insensitive to the fact that his anti-Christian sorcerer character was rendered too sympathetically to suit the contemporary taste. He appends a defensive note to a chapter in which Ravoni gives his pedigree as a deathless magus: “The sentiments expressed in this chapter are not the opinions of the author, but of the character, which it is his object to delineate. The author does not hold himself responsible for a single word or line.”²¹⁶ Methinks Lippard doth protest too much. Lippard’s anxiety around his flattering portrait of an occultist qualifies as a tell, as does the note that appears following his introduction of the loathsome Reverend Pyne, in which the author assures us that he is a Christian.²¹⁷ In a counter-example, Lippard’s heavy-breathing seduction scenes and loving attention to the “snowy globes” of women were so salacious for the time, that his nineteenth century critics rightly questioned whether these quasi-pornographic devices were entirely justified by his polemic intent. Lippard offers no authorial apology for the sexual content of *The Quaker City*, nor does he attempt to distance his personal taste from the novel’s incredibly graphic violence, which allegedly served the purposes of exposé. Apparently the sensational aspects of *The Quaker City* sat right with Lippard’s sense of personal morality, and gruesome scenes like the one in which a sly widow is bludgeoned to death were deemed necessary as social correctives. Yet when it comes to the occult philosophy of an anachronistic magus, Lippard worries that his own enthusiasms might be on flagrant display! And of course they were: his occult villain is really a hero, and even his anxious note does not contradict this reading. Powerful depictions of the occult, papered over with flimsy denials, is one of the techniques Lippard employs to simultaneously reveal and (almost) conceal his investment in occult mysteries.

²¹⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 529.

²¹⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, note on 422.

²¹⁷ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, note on 201.

As a character, Ravoni is a paradox. Unlike F.A.T. Pyne, whose “red, round face, with thick lips, watery grey eyes, and lanky hair, of a doubtful color” augment his loathsomeness, Ravoni is sexually compelling, “singularly beautiful” and loaded with all the Byronic charisma of the Count of Monte Cristo.²¹⁸ Yet it’s not clear that Ravoni’s sexual magnetism stems from inveterate sensuality: the kiss he plants on Mabel is “too warm for a father’s kiss, too holy for a lover’s.”²¹⁹ Ravoni keeps a harem of women of all races and climes but doesn’t appear to sleep with any of them; he poses as a doctor to the insane, and Lippard rather absurdly proclaims that Ravoni’s methods are preferable to what one can find in a contemporary mad-house.²²⁰ Ravoni manipulates reality: he sees to it that Annie, the woman Byrnewood impregnated and then abandoned, is administered a drug which induces a catatonic state. Believing her to be dead, Byrnewood is thus appropriately astounded when Ravoni “resurrects” her at the height of his occult mass. But since this elaborate deception serves to awaken Byrnewood’s slumbering sense of social responsibility to the forsaken girl, is Ravoni’s stratagem justified? Are the women under his mesmeric care really being healed? Should the reader believe him when he claims to have “wrested from corruption the secret of undying energy,” i.e. achieved immortality? Ravoni’s mysterious sexual energy, “something full of passion, and yet holier than sensual love”²²¹ provides some answers on how to read this enigmatic figure in Lippard’s text. While on the one hand, Ravoni’s sexualized magnetism is a hallmark of the antebellum mesmerist, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, on the other hand the strange conflation of sexuality and spirituality in Ravoni’s character perfectly illustrates the taboo attractions of the occult which

²¹⁸ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 202, 421.

²¹⁹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 461.

²²⁰ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 527.

²²¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 461.

Lippard struggled not to approve: the erotic thrill of its power and its surprising potential as a redemptive force.

In all of Lippard's novels of the 1840s, his portrayal of secret societies is profoundly ambiguous. The reasons for this are complex, but we should not assume that personal ambivalence (or bad writing) lies at the root of these textual conundrums. Critic Gary Ashwill even finds a great measure of artistry in Lippard's confounding confluences of good and evil, which serve to express "the confusing multiplicity of urban experience."²²² Incredibly, no critic has previously explored the influence of Masonry and Anti-Masonry on Lippard's fiction, in spite of the constant refrain of secret societies as a theme in his oeuvre.²²³ Masonry's insistence on ritual secrecy, its free use of mystification as an initiatory technique, and its vilification by the popular press all contribute to Lippard's cryptic depictions of secret societies which remain opaque to the layperson. Lippard would only have been of age to join the Masons in 1843, and in his 1844 novel *The Ladye Annabel*, one of the avowed goals of the text is to reveal the archetype of the Mason and "the end and power of *Secret Institutions* ... ever the first to strike for the people, ever the first to avenge wrong and misrule, invisible yet possessed of more than human might in all the works of vengeance [sic]."²²⁴ All this is clear enough, but it does not explain why later that same year Lippard devised a novel about a hypocritical secret society, the Monks of Monk Hall, that was steeped in debauchery and conspiracy and more in line with the stereotypes advanced by Anti-Masonic groups. Did Lippard encounter a splinter group within Masonry in 1844, a Rosicrucian Order which caused him to rethink his former enthusiasm for the Masons? I

²²² Ashwill 300.

²²³ Many critics mention Masonry in passing as a context for Lippard's fascination with secret societies, yet none has invoked Masonic ritual and symbolism in any depth. Likewise, the impact of Anti-Masonry on Lippard's writing has not received any critical development.

²²⁴ Lippard turned 21 on April 10, 1843. Lippard, *The Ladye Annabel* iv.

have no answer to this question, nor does it appear that Lippard ever reached a settled opinion about Masonry. Yet by delving into the historical phenomenon of Masonry and Anti-Masonry in the antebellum United States, we gain important insight into both Lippard's novels and a neglected facet of Jacksonian America, one which, thus far, has managed to "hide in plain sight."

Masonry's role in American history has been seriously neglected by scholars. In 1897, fraternal orders in the United States collectively boasted five and a half million members. To account for the fact that many men belonged to more than one order, this statistic could be interpreted to mean that anywhere from one in eight to one in five men belonged to a fraternity.²²⁵ Masonic membership was much more modest in the antebellum era, around 100,000 in the 1820s, and dwindling to about 40,000 after Anti-Masonry had done its work.²²⁶ As these numbers show, Masonry underwent a phenomenal resurgence following its brief scourge in the twenties and thirties: "more men joined the Pennsylvania fraternity in the twenty years after 1855 than had joined in its entire previous 125-year history."²²⁷ The 1855 date is significant; though Anti-Masonry had mostly died out by the 1840s, this decade represents a fallow period for the order, one during which it recovered its financial losses and quietly rode out the stigma of Anti-Masonic propaganda. Because Masonry kept a generally low profile until the 1850s, when it entered a period of prosperity and began to recoup its members, we may assume that Anti-Masonic stereotypes still held sway in the public mind in the 1840s when George Lippard was churning out his vexed depictions of secret societies. In fact, Mark Carnes argues that it was the stigma surrounding Masonry which prompted the foundation of so many upstart or copycat groups in

²²⁵ Carnes 1.

²²⁶ Carnes 25.

²²⁷ Steven C. Bullock, "Foreword: Masons, Masonic History, and Academic Scholarship," *Freemasonry in Context: History, Ritual, Controversy*, eds. Arturo de Hoyos and S. Brent Morris (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2004) xii.

the 1830s and 1840s.²²⁸ Lippard's Brotherhood of the Union dates to this era, and may have been a response to a desire for fraternity combined with an antipathy to the corruption then associated with Masonry.

Freemasonry appeared in America within a decade after the official inception of the order in London; the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, the oldest in the country, retains a manuscript penned by a Philadelphia order dating to 1727.²²⁹ While lower-class Americans occasionally targeted the group for its elitism and aristocratic bias, Masonry was not widely thought to house covert occult activity until 1797, when John Robison published his *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. Robison's attack focused on the godlessness and radical political agenda of European secret societies, yet Americans became alarmed that the twin enemies of Jacobinism and atheism were being fomented by Masons in their own backyard. A pamphlet war ensued, with religious pundits hurling unfounded accusations, and innocent Masons asserting both their Christian faith and allegiance to the fledgling Republic.²³⁰ For a time Freemasonry's reputation was damaged, but by 1824, when General Lafayette made his triumphant and much publicized tour of the United States, proudly bearing his Masonic regalia, the order was in good odor again. It was rumored that Lafayette had taken the Masonic oath in an American military lodge in the presence of George Washington, and in 1829 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania obtained Washington's Masonic apron, said to have been embroidered with the

²²⁸ Carnes 25.

²²⁹ Wayne A. Huss, *The Master Builders: A History of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Pennsylvania; Volume I: 1731-1873* (Philadelphia: Grand Lodge F. & A.M. of Pennsylvania, 1986) 17.

²³⁰ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* 173-174.

symbols of the order by Lafayette's wife.²³¹ George Lippard was born in 1822, amidst this culture of pride in Freemasonry's role in the Revolutionary War. But in 1826 the greatest calamity in American Masonic history made the organization the subject of widespread attack and threatened to obliterate it, and inspired a political party with Anti-Masonry as its chief platform.

William Morgan, a disaffected Mason in upstate New York whose progress through his local lodge had been blocked by internal opposition, announced that he would be writing an exposé of the order to exact revenge. On September 11, 1826, Morgan was jailed for debt, and his publisher only succeeded in bailing him out after several thwarted attempts. Morgan was taken to a different jail later the same day for another dubious charge, and thereafter was allegedly kidnapped and murdered for violating the Masonic code of loyalty and secrecy. Assumed drowned, Morgan's body was never securely identified. The light sentences awarded to Morgan's kidnapers fueled local outcry against Masonic conspiracy in the government, a paranoia which would eventually spread to the whole country.²³² In the aftermath of the Morgan affair, the Anti-Masonic party organized in New York in 1827 and quickly gained a national following, showing a surprisingly strong presence in the presidential election of 1828. The party was most active in positioning itself against the winning candidate, Democrat Andrew Jackson, a logical tactic given Jackson's high-profile Masonic affiliation. The Anti-Masons would never take the presidency, and by 1838 they were completely subsumed by the Whigs. The party may have been short-lived, but the shadow it cast on Freemasonry was long. The slew of publications damning the fraternity as a hotbed of vice and un-American activity effectively induced lodges across the country to close, and resulted in Masonry shedding over half its ranks.²³³ The Grand Lodge of

²³¹ Huss 103, 123.

²³² Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* 277-278.

Pennsylvania was forced to abandon its palatial home on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia for a more modest one in 1835, and in 1837 membership in this lodge fell to an all-time low.²³⁴ This had not a little to do with the fact that Anti-Masonry gained its strongest foothold in Pennsylvania, electing not only a governor but also carrying on a media circus which lambasted Masons for appearing to control the local government.

When George Lippard was thirteen years old, Joseph Ritner took gubernatorial office on the Anti-Masonic ticket, and his crony Thaddeus Stevens spearheaded a committee in the Pennsylvania legislature appointed to investigate the evils of Freemasonry.²³⁵ Stevens would later achieve a place in history as the inexorable Congressman who would not brook any policy tolerant of slavery on the eve of Civil War. The relentlessness with which Stevens asserted his radical Republican views during the Civil War era can be glimpsed in the fierceness with which he attacked the perceived oligarchy of Freemasonry in the 1830s; contemporary accounts made frequent comparisons of his campaign to the Spanish Inquisition. In 1836 Stevens compelled twenty-five prominent Masons, including former Governor Wolf, to appear at a hearing for questioning. The men were later jailed for refusing to testify. Meanwhile, the testimony of several former Masons was circulated with sensational zeal. One of Stevens's questions provides an illustrative index of the level of discourse carried on at these proceedings: he inquired "whether Knights Templars drank blood out of a human skull?"²³⁶ As ridiculous as the question seems, it was prompted by real ritual content. The Masons and other orders made use of morbid props like skulls and coffins to add drama to their ceremonies, though one assumes that any blood

²³³ Carnes 24-25.

²³⁴ Huss 130.

²³⁵ Huss 136-137.

²³⁶ Huss 137.

drunk during such rites is, like that taken in Christian communion, only symbolic. The skull on the altar is the telltale symbol of a Masonic-style order in Lippard's novels, and in the Brotherhood of the Union the skull was such an important piece of ritual regalia that it required its own numeric code.²³⁷

Lippard could not have avoided the Anti-Masonic hubbub, which raged with particular fire in his home state, and his brief legal career placed him close to the local actors in the fray. Governor Ritner was still pushing for a law against taking extrajudicial oaths (so as to criminalize Masonry) in 1837, and at the end of the decade Lippard was assisting the Pennsylvania Attorney General, Ovid F. Johnson, who took office following the regime change of 1839.²³⁸ Thus Lippard would have been privy to factions within the legislature, which were so violent that Governor Ritner had to call the state militia to Harrisburg to insure the safe transition of government to the Democratic candidate, David R. Porter, in the "Buckshot War" of 1838. During this

²³⁷ In *Paul Ardenheim*, the dark brotherhood or B.H.A.C. uses a skull as ritual paraphernalia: "It was a small apartment, illuminated by a lamp, which stood on a table covered with a dark cloth, with a skull and an unsheathed sword by its side. The place was hung with dark tapestry, on which the various symbols of the order were emblazoned, with the 'B.H.A.C.' glittering brightly in their midst"(111). In *The Nazarene*, the diabolical L.P.O. wears ghoulish skull masks during ritual: "[E]ach face ... was concealed beneath a hideous mask. Here a row of death's-heads glared in the light: there a circle of grinning faces, with large eyes of colored glass ..." (25). In *Adonai, The Pilgrim of Eternity* (self-published by Lippard in Philadelphia, in *The White Banner*, 1851), the demon-spirit of the title takes the spirit of the "arisen Washington" on a tour of pathetic scenes depicting America's fallen ideals. They visit a Masonic-style chamber, here used as shorthand for conspiracy among the wealthy elite: "The walls, the carpet and the ceiling of this room, were alike of scarlet red. In the centre, on an altar covered with scarlet, a red light was burning in a skull. Beside the light stood a goblet filled with human blood"(72).

Lippard incorporates a surprising amount of such morbid imagery into his own Brotherhood of the Union. The unnumbered opening pages of the *BGC* describe a circular ritual space, and a tabernacle or tent with black cloth walls, within which stands an altar table covered with a scarlet cloth. A skull rests on the altar. Such satanic appearances, which correspond all too readily to the trappings of sinister brotherhood in Lippard's novels, certainly complicate our understanding of the depiction of secret societies in Lippard's fiction, to put it mildly. In the initiation ritual, the would-be brother is wrapped in "36" and "16," and led to "44"(10). The key on page 29 of the *BGC* gives the meaning of these code numbers as "pall," "skull," and "grave," respectively. In the continuation of this ritual, three masked lords in black preside over an altar on which rests a skull and a cup filled with red liquid to suggest blood (18). In a later ritual, the candidate suffers having a noose tied around his neck and being led to a gallops. The difference, finally, between Lippard's benevolent Brotherhood and the evil ones depicted in his novels may be simply one of intent. Lippard's rituals of death and resurrection were designed to instill loyalty to the Brotherhood, not to enact bondage and humiliation. Admittedly, this marks a tenuous distinction, since the evil brotherhoods of Lippard's fiction likewise justify their violent means by citing benevolent ends. More studies like the present one will no doubt contribute to unraveling the mystery.

²³⁸ Huss 141; Reynolds, *George Lippard* 4.

peak of mob tension in the state senate, the sworn enemy of Masonry, Thaddeus Stevens, was forced to escape out a window in the senate chamber under cover of night. Lippard's soon-to-be employer, Ovid F. Johnson, had circulated a vicious letter during Porter's campaign which attacked both Ritner and members of his "Kitchen Cabinet," Thaddeus Stevens among them.²³⁹ Though Porter and Johnson were Democrats, and thus pitted themselves against the Anti-Masons, this does not necessarily make either of them "Pro-Masonry," in spite of the fact that they defended the legal right of Masons to congregate. Lippard was also a staunch Democrat, and so his apparent attack of Masonry in *The Quaker City* becomes even more difficult to read, given this political affiliation. Is it possible that *The Quaker City* is a spoof of Anti-Masonic propaganda, pretending to take seriously the depiction of debauched libertines occupying the highest positions of government and society? Or was Lippard finally convinced by the Anti-Masonic rhetoric? In either case, the florid and exaggerated tales of vice and conspiracy fomented by Stevens are a likely source for Lippard's Monks.

The print culture of the time was also rife with Masonic material. Steven C. Bullock notes that after publications touching government and religion, Masonic texts comprise the highest number of imprints in the nineteenth century.²⁴⁰ In *Freemasonry, Anti-Masonry and Illuminism in the United States, 1734-1850: A Bibliography*, Kent Logan Walgren reports that Masonic publishing boomed in the 1840s, when Lippard was at his most prolific; Walgren counts 1,430 bibliographic entries for this decade alone.²⁴¹ Though ostensibly the brotherhood's rituals were "secret," the needs of a large-scale organization demanded an expedient means of codifying its

²³⁹ William Henry Egle and Joseph Ritner, "The Buckshot War," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 23.2 (1899): 137-156.

²⁴⁰ Steven C. Bullock, "Publishing Masonry: Print and the Early American Fraternity," in Walgren lxi-lxxiii; lxi.

²⁴¹ Walgren, "Compiler's Preface" xxxvii. Both this tally and the one above include Anti-Masonic texts.

rites, and to that end what was touted as an oral tradition was soon committed to print. Bullock comments on how this glut of Masonic literature in the public sphere shaped the order's development: "Besides confounding attempts to separate the spoken and the written, post-Revolutionary Masonry also challenges simple distinctions between public and private, secret and open. Largely because of its reliance on print, the post-Revolutionary fraternity became both more visible and more secretive."²⁴² Even prior to the nineteenth century, Masonic manuals were always readily available, with a new exposé appearing for every new development in Freemasonry.²⁴³ Benjamin Franklin published James Anderson's *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* in 1734, an early manual which was often used by brotherhoods experiencing difficulty and delays in obtaining more official documents. *Jachin and Boaz*, a title which contains two of the Freemason's sacred words, and *The Freemason's Monitor*, by Thomas Smith Webb, were the eighteenth century tell-alls repeatedly reprinted in the nineteenth century.²⁴⁴ The ritual forms and protocol of Masonry were something of an open secret in the nineteenth century, accessible via print but encoding greater mysteries which could only be gained through participation in the order.

One of the reasons that Masonry has been able to effectively "hide in plain sight" through most of its history is because ritual forms are simply not very interesting outside of the context of their enactment in a group. Given the general availability of Masonic secrets in the nineteenth century, the Masonic motive to murder William Morgan becomes a little murky; Morgan's exposé was redundant, and so many Masons maintain that Morgan staged his own disappearance in

²⁴² Bullock in Walgren lxxii.

²⁴³ Walgren lii.

²⁴⁴ Bullock in Walgren lxvi.

order to sell books!²⁴⁵ Indeed, the publisher's account of Morgan's kidnapping and disappearance adds a sensational element to Morgan's otherwise unremarkable text, *Illustrations of Masonry*.²⁴⁶ Anti-Masonic pundits capitalized on the menace of Masonic vengeance demonstrated by Morgan's kidnapping, and decried the Masonic oath of secrecy and loyalty as an implicit threat to American polity. The oath which appears in Morgan's *Illustrations of Masonry* thus takes on an even more sinister cast when juxtaposed with accounts of the writer's alleged drowning: "binding myself under no less penalty, than to have my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by the roots, and my body buried in the rough sands of the sea at a low water mark, where the tide ebbs and flows twice in twenty-four hours."²⁴⁷ Lippard deploys the trope of Masonic vengeance by having his character Devil-Bug perpetrate atrocious acts on the enemies of Monk Hall, and he was by no means the only writer to exploit the dramatic potential of the Morgan incident. His friend Edgar Allan Poe created a sensation with "The Cask of Amontillado," an 1846 story featuring a narrator who exacts his revenge through masonry, literally erecting a wall behind which his victim is entombed alive.²⁴⁸

In *The Quaker City*, the Monks of Monk Hall embody the worst stereotypes about Masons propagated by the Anti-Masons: their collective serves the purposes of protection for their political and social crimes, and their meeting-house, Monk Hall, is a site of feasting, drinking, and sexual debauchery. The Temple of Ravoni, conversely, is a scene of occult rites and a thea-

²⁴⁵ Huss 114. While earlier exposés covered the first three degrees of Masonry, Morgan posed an unprecedented threat to the order by claiming he would unveil the newer York Rite rituals. However, it's not clear how Morgan would have come by this information, since he was blocked from progressing in his local lodge. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* 314.

²⁴⁶ Morgan and the Batavia, New York printer David C. Miller had together devised and publicized Morgan's exposé, and Miller appends his first-hand account of Morgan's kidnapping to *Illustrations of Masonry*, which was published following Morgan's disappearance.

²⁴⁷ Morgan 15.

²⁴⁸ See Robert Con Davis-Undiano, "Poe and the American Affiliation with Freemasonry, *Symploke* 7.1-2 (1999): 119-138.

tre for Ravoni's electrifying speeches on the innate dignity and personal power of man. It seems clear that Lippard deploys the corrupt Monks as a foil to the more noble Order of Ravoni, which quietly endorses an ethic of democracy and social responsibility (in addition to being an authentic avenue to occult superpowers). Lippard's obsession with warring secret societies, and his consistently cagey manner of discussing them, together point to the eternal metaphysical war between a White and Black priesthood which is played out in *Paul Ardenheim* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Nazarene*. For clarity's sake, I gloss these poles of brotherhood in *The Quaker City* as the Masonic and the Rosicrucian, with the nefarious Monks standing in for the Masons and Ravoni's disciples representing the Rosicrucians. While textual evidence corroborates the use of these terms, it's also possible that Ravoni's men symbolize a reformed, revived Masonry, in keeping with the rewriting of Masonic ritual which dates to the 1830s and 1840s. Lippard had no way of knowing that Masonry would experience a mass resurgence and public redemption in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that did not become visible until after his death in 1854. The submerged quality of this drama of ritual brotherhood in *The Quaker City* is no doubt attributable to the legacy of Anti-Masonic propaganda, which defamed the purposes of all secret fraternities.

According to Wayne A. Huss in his history of Philadelphia Masonry, *The Master Builders*, Philadelphia Masons kept a "low-profile" in the 1840s, refraining from the public processions which had been a staple of the order twenty years prior.²⁴⁹ They had since relocated to a more modest meeting hall on Third Street in 1835, but their gothic hall on fashionable Chestnut Street still stood, a relic of more prosperous days. First erected in 1811, the Masonic Hall on Chestnut was partially destroyed by fire in 1819, and subsequently rebuilt without its massive tower and spire (see Fig. 8). The building was first sold to the Franklin Institute, but following

²⁴⁹ Huss 157.

the Panic of 1837 the Institute was unable to pay its mortgage, and the Masons were forced to repossess the building in 1841 to recoup their losses. In the intervening years the once-opulent building had fallen into disrepair, and the Masons were hard-pressed to know what to do with it. From 1841 to 1845, rooms in the Chestnut Street hall were made public, rented out to a variety of vendors and organizations on a short-term basis. The property remained a bugbear for Philadelphia Masons until 1853, when its buildings were demolished and a much grander hall was erected on the same site.²⁵⁰

The hard fortunes of the Chestnut Street hall meant that its once hallowed interiors, steeped in mystery and restricted in access, were exposed to public eyes, and there is some indication that Lippard mined the decorative features of this hall for use in the fictional Monk Hall. Byrnewood happens upon the chamber in Monk Hall where, shortly, his sister will be defiled; it is completely decked out in crimson:

It was indeed a small and elegant room, lined along its four sides with drooping curtains of faint-hued crimson silk. The ceiling itself was but a continuation of these curtains, or hangings, for they were gathered in the centre, by a single star of gold. The carpet on the floor was of the same faint-crimson color, and the large sofa, placed along one side of the apartment, was covered with velvet, that harmonized in hue, with both carpet and hangings.²⁵¹

Following the fire of 1819, the Masons redecorated their hall in much the same style as it had originally been done in 1811, with curtains “made of the finest quality scarlet moreen, a heavy wool fabric, with suitable fringe and ornaments, and the same material was used to upholster the settees and chairs.”²⁵² Byrnewood’s awed wonder at this scarlet chamber’s walls, “all one gorgeous picture, evidently painted by a master-hand,” suggests the “Special cabinet work incorpo-

²⁵⁰ For a detailed history of this beleaguered property, see Huss 73-78, 89-95, 130-131, 166-177.

²⁵¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 73.

²⁵² Huss 93.

rating Masonic symbolism and illustrations of the ritual” that “augmented the rooms” on Chestnut Street.²⁵³ On touring the main banquet hall, Byrnewood notices, “At one end of the room, reaching from floor to ceiling ... an immense mirror, framed in massive walnut.”²⁵⁴ The Masons, likewise, placed “floor-to-ceiling gilt mirrors ... on the side walls” of their central ballroom on Chestnut.²⁵⁵ While the scenes of classical mythology which decorate the walls in Monk Hall are not out of keeping with Masonic themes, Lippard no doubt embellished on extant forms to highlight the fallen morals of the Monks; paintings of Venus and Bacchus, “evidently the work of a master hand,” signal the Monks’ worship of the gods of debauchery and drink.²⁵⁶

Lippard both conceals and reveals the location of Monk Hall in *The Quaker City*, first telling us “of a queer old house down town,” and then locating this strange edifice in Southwark.²⁵⁷ Either Lippard conflates these two adjacent neighborhoods, a doubtful possibility, or he willfully obfuscates the locale of *The Quaker City*’s den of iniquity. The gothic excess of Monk Hall argues that it is a symbolic hell instead of a real place, just as Devil-Bug, “a huge insect” created by “his Satanic majesty, once on a time, in a merry mood,” is an archetype of evil as opposed to a believable character.²⁵⁸ Yet Lippard’s depictions of Monk Hall continually recall the visual tropes of Masonry and, at times, the run-down hall on Chestnut Street. *The Quaker City*’s pre-Revolutionary mansion, which degenerates into Monk Hall, does not look the same as the Georgian Gothic structure on Chestnut; Monk Hall’s façade is “one plain mass of black and red

²⁵³ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 73; Huss 93.

²⁵⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 54.

²⁵⁵ Huss 93.

²⁵⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 54.

²⁵⁷ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 22, 45.

²⁵⁸ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 51.

brick, disposed like the alternate colors of a chessboard.”²⁵⁹ This oft-referred-to building-front connotes the chessboard pattern found on Masonic tracing boards (see Fig. 9), with Lippard substituting fiendish red for white in his satanic-looking hall. Monk Hall’s “massive hall-door, defended by heavy pillars, and surmounted by an intricate cornice” is reminiscent of the Masonic Hall’s “heavily-buttressed entrance portal,”²⁶⁰ and both structures are enclosed by high brick walls. There is even some architectural peculiarity to the Masonic property to correspond to Monk Hall’s bewildering interior and exterior passageways, which frequently confound *The Quaker City*’s characters.²⁶¹ Huss describes a “small passageway” at the rear of the lot, which was dubbed Lodge Alley and which connected 7th and 8th Streets.²⁶² In the rebuilding following the 1819 fire, a second Masonic building was erected on the property and connected by passageway to the central hall.²⁶³

Though Lippard declines to give the precise location of Monk Hall, and mentions Southwark, South city, and downtown as its several homes, action in the novel comes to a stop in *The Quaker City*’s opening scenes at the exact cross-streets of the Masonic Hall. Lorrimer has just finished extolling the criminal virtues of Monk Hall, and Byrnewood has just voiced his interest in gaining access to the secret club, when Lippard informs us that they have approached the cor-

²⁵⁹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 46.

²⁶⁰ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 46; Huss 73.

²⁶¹ “In his attempt to find [Monk] Hall, he would have to wind up a narrow alley, turn down a court, strike up an avenue, which it would take some knowledge of municipal geography to navigate”(48). Lippard also mentions a “subterranean passage”(47) connecting buildings at the fore and aft of the property. One of Devil-bug’s talents is his intimate knowledge of Monk Hall’s literal ins and outs; other characters become embroiled in Monk Hall’s bewildering architecture, while Devil-Bug is always a step ahead because of his knowledge of secret passageways. While, again, the comparison is not exact, the Chestnut Street hall had been built, rebuilt, and then modified again for public use. Ad-hoc structures erected to suit a variety of vendors contributed to the ramshackle appearance of the hall, and may very well have inspired Lippard’s considerably more elaborate gothic mansion, Monk Hall.

²⁶² Huss 74.

²⁶³ Huss 91.

ner of Eighth and Chestnut. On the north side of Chestnut between 7th and 8th, the Masonic Hall would have been visible from the corner at which Byrnewood and Lorrimer stand (see Fig. 10).²⁶⁴ As if to prompt the reader to notice that the position of the two men is no accidental point in space, Lippard repeats the cross-streets on the subsequent page – and then a third time on the page after that.²⁶⁵ The men are about to make their way to the “queer old house down town,” when the State House bell rings and informs them that they are early for their date with debauchery.²⁶⁶ Just a few blocks east between 5th and 6th on Chestnut, the State House (Independence Hall) is frequently seen and heard by the characters exiting and entering Monk Hall, yet another indication that the downtown Masonic Hall is the symbolic matrix and mecca of these pleasure-loving monks. Byrnewood and Lorrimer decide upon an impromptu visit to the astrologer, also located in downtown, and the next time the reader meets them they have simply appeared in the vicinity of Monk Hall, with no indication of how they got there. It is in this section of the novel that Lippard locates Monk Hall in Southwark – which seems an awfully long way to walk from downtown in late December, along “frozen pavement” in the face of a cloak-blowing wind.²⁶⁷

While Lippard invokes the Masonic Hall on Chestnut Street to connote a debaucherous cabal, he does not fix the position of Monk Hall there, in part because to do so would be anachronistic. *The Quaker City* postdates Morgan’s 1826 disappearance by almost twenty years, and

²⁶⁴ Julio H. Rae, *Rae’s Philadelphia Pictorial Directory and Panoramic Advertiser* (Philadelphia, 1851). Bryn Mawr has made portions of Rae’s pictorial advertiser available on-line: Web, 29 September 2011. <<http://www.brynmawr.edu/iconog/inven2.html>>.

A comparison of the buildings between 7th and 8th and those between 8th and 9th on Chestnut confirms that the Masonic Hall was the most notable (striking in appearance *and* notorious) structure at the cross-streets which Lippard names thrice. The shop-fronts which appear in front of the hall were not completed until circa 1850, five years after *The Quaker City* was written, though they do give some sense of the size of the hall’s courtyard.

²⁶⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 23-25.

²⁶⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 25.

²⁶⁷ Lippard notes the bitter weather on page 21, and the main characters first approach Monk Hall on page 50. “Southwark” is first named as the structure’s location on page 45, and on the subsequent page Lippard enlarges this locale to “the out-skirts of the southern part of the city.”

the Masons had moved to their new home on 3rd at Spruce Street in 1835. Though Thaddeus Stevens had kept his campaign of Masonic persecution alive into the late 1830s, the rest of the country had moved on from the controversy much earlier, and to all appearances Masonry was a dying institution. Monk Hall is thus, to put it mildly, a curious establishment, funded by the most prominent men of 1842, while the structure itself dates to a distant era and molders in decay: “it looked so desolate, so time-worn, so like a mausoleum for old furniture, and crumbling tapestry, for high-backed mahogany chairs ... and strange looking mirrors, veiled in the thick folds of the spider’s web.”²⁶⁸ A once grand structure fallen into ruin could certainly be a reference to the Chestnut Street hall, with the “high-backed mahogany chairs,” specially crafted for Masonic officers, rendered as outmoded antiques by Lippard.²⁶⁹ Whether Monk Hall’s physical decay is a reference to the dilapidated state of the Masonic Hall in Philadelphia, or represents a more symbolic critique of a rotten institution, the novel’s message is clear: brotherhood is in trouble in Philadelphia, and in desperate need of renewal. Philadelphia Masons felt similarly, and the decline and defilement of their once sacred building was to them a crushing emblem of their fallen status. In fact, the Masons’ decision to demolish the Chestnut Street hall and build an improved one on the same spot was intended to serve as a message to both themselves and the community that a cleansing and renewal of their ancient institution had occurred. In 1851, the moral attraction of rebuilding as opposed to just renovating the Chestnut Street hall decided the Masons in favor of an entirely new structure:

The proposed plan has the inviting feature of freeing the G.L. from the odium which it endures by the many doubtful uses to which the old Hall is now put. The Sub-Committee do not contemplate any use of the new Hall, save for pure Masonic purposes, making a temple not of vice, dissipation, and immorality – but of order, charity and love ... We hope that the G.L., no longer pressed by a stern ne-

²⁶⁸ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 50.

²⁶⁹ Huss describes hand-carved, throne-style mahogany chairs on 93.

cessity, will refuse to suffer the wages of iniquity to darken and poison the holy stream of charity that flows from the pure well-springs of Masonic faith and love. It is high time that the desecration of a Masonic Hall should cease; and we the more earnestly press upon the G.L. the proposed scheme, because it must necessarily restore the property of the Order to high and holy uses.²⁷⁰

Both Lippard's Monk Hall and the old Masonic Hall were stained with "vice, dissipation, and immorality," and both cried out for renewal.

Ravoni, Emblem of the Hermetic Tradition

The sort of renewal promised by the opposite pole of brotherhood in *The Quaker City*, that voiced by Ravoni, comes from a long-standing Hermetic tradition of belief in the innate and godlike powers of the human being. While these occult superpowers are somewhat conventional of the magus characters in gothic novels (think of Victor Frankenstein's power to generate life in the laboratory), Lippard's sympathetic discussion of the philosophy behind these techniques is rather unsettling when deployed in a polemical exposé. Initially Ravoni appears to be a typical gothic immortal, power-mad and weary of the isolation incumbent upon those who abuse the laws of nature. "I believe in a God, but my God is the Power of a Giant Will. In a Heaven, but it is that Heaven which springs from the refined cultivation of all the senses. In a Hell I believe – it is the hell of annihilation."²⁷¹ Blasphemous though these sentiments are, Ravoni's endorsement of personal power and attaining heaven on earth contains a certain illicit appeal. The reader expects that, before long, the fatal flaw in Ravoni's taboo philosophy will be revealed, and Lippard's avowed belief in Christianity will temper its attractions. But instead of performing a re-

²⁷⁰ Excerpted from a speech given by one of the sub-committee to investigate the costs of re-building on the Chestnut lot. Huss 173-174.

²⁷¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 424.

nunciation, Lippard gives his magus lengthy speeches which discourse upon the Hermetic possibility of reaching a godlike state:

And through the long and drear and bloody history of this world are recorded instances of mighty souls, who appeared on the earth, gifted with powers that made men worship them as Gods. These men were thoroughly imbued with the atmosphere in which the soul breathes thoughts of God-ship. These intellects were known as Saviours, Prophets, Reformers. They were distinguished by an irresistible power, which beaming from the brow or flashing from the eye, awed and subdued the souls of the million. These men demonstrated the great truth, that the AWFUL SOUL having created us, hath left us all to our own salvation or ruin, as we shall by our own deeds determine; thus we shape our own destinies; that we are the masters of our own lives; that we, by developing the mysteries implanted in our bosoms, may walk the earth superior to the clay around us, each man *a* GOD in *soul!* [sic]²⁷²

Lippard's reference to "Saviours, Prophets, and Reformers" integrates the miraculous deeds performed by Jesus and the Saints into the Hermetic tradition, suggesting that their display of godlike powers was an occult art accessible to anyone learned in Ravoni's secrets. Lippard explains that magic does not belong exclusively to the dark ages, but is alive and well via the magnetism of the nineteenth century.²⁷³ By collapsing the difference between ancient and modern occult powers, Ravoni produces compelling rhetoric which authorizes the Hermetic goal of personal divinity to contemporary converts. "As ye all may be gods, so am I a God!" he thunders to his followers.²⁷⁴

At no point in *The Quaker City* does Lippard intimate that Ravoni's claims to occult powers are spurious. Ravoni has mesmeric or magnetic control over Devil-Bug and his own temple priestesses, and Lippard discusses his personal immortality at length. Rather than put Ravoni's unnatural longevity in the context of satanism or Faustian excess, Lippard has Ravoni

²⁷² Lippard, *The Quaker City* 447.

²⁷³ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 415.

²⁷⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 448.

indulge in a self-aggrandizing narrative which yet provides a rationale for belief in personal immortality:

Such as Ravoni have lived in all ages, in every clime! Bold Intellects who wrested from corruption the secret of undying energy. And these Intellects so various in their powers, so various in their weird histories, common Tradition has combined in one form, and called a thousand mighty Souls, by one paltry name, the Wandering Jew! Superstition must baptize a giant Truth in the waters of puerile fiction [sic]!²⁷⁵

There's a Truth, capital T, underlying the legend of the Wandering Jew, Lippard subtly argues.

Ravoni lists several high-voltage historical scenes at which he was present, such as the court of

Louis XVI on the eve of Revolution and Napoleon's conquest of Egypt; even his anachronistic

clothing attests to his centuries-old age.²⁷⁶ What is finally so strange about Ravoni's immortal-

ity, even within a tradition of gothic fiction, is that he preaches the attainment of occult super-

powers to a wide-eyed audience instead of jealously guarding his alchemical secrets. In passing

on his legacy to the twenty-four young men of his cult, he is handing down techniques that will

not only transform the world into a socialist paradise, but also effect a personal power to the in-

dividual which is rendered as overwhelmingly beneficial. Little in *The Quaker City* registers as

graceful or beautiful, but Lippard's exalted language in Ravoni's speeches hints that redemption

follows on occult practice: "Through all matter, through sun and sky and earth and air, he lives,

the soul of the Universe!" the magus exclaims. "We are all beams of his light, rays of his sun; as

imperishable as his own glory! To us all, he has entrusted powers, awful and sublime. Think not

because these powers may never be manifested that they do not exist. They are all in us, and in

²⁷⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 424.

²⁷⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 421-423.

us for good.”²⁷⁷ Any mitigating qualifications on the part of the author are notably absent from Ravoni’s promotion of the “awful and sublime” powers which, he claims, are “in us for good.”

Ravoni’s grandiose language is complemented by the equally rarefied atmosphere of his temple in *The Quaker City*. In contrast to the base goings-on at Monk Hall, the temple of Ravoni is the site of dreamy occult fantasy and a mystical sensuality. It is perhaps telling that one critic describes the temple space as an “Arabian Nights setting,” while another claims it “invokes the architecture of Catholic churches.”²⁷⁸ In fact, these visual borrowings from both Western and Eastern temples signal the Rosicrucian-Masonic tradition. The Chestnut Street Masonic Hall likewise had a room with a domed ceiling, similar to the one in Ravoni’s temple, “from whose azure expanse, innumerable lights glittered like stars in a clear sky.”²⁷⁹ The marble columns which decorate Ravoni’s temple are a clear reference to one of the central visual and symbolic tropes of Masonry, as is the “variegated floor.”²⁸⁰ Both the columns and the checkerboard floor pattern were staple imagery in Masonry in the nineteenth century (see Fig. 11), and even the “cloistered space” at the end of the row of columns, “a tent with white silken curtains,” is a nod to Masonry’s incorporation of biblical mythology.²⁸¹ Nineteenth century Masonic historian Albert Mackey reports that tents are used in both Knights Templar and Royal Arch rituals, and illustrations of these degrees had been circulated in Jeremy Cross’s *The True Masonic Chart, or Hieroglyphic Monitor*, since before Lippard was born (see Fig. 12).²⁸² The use of Masonic im-

²⁷⁷ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 447.

²⁷⁸ Ridgely 83; Ostrowski 11.

²⁷⁹ The quoted material is Lippard, *The Quaker City* 525; a Dome Room was added to the rebuilt Chestnut Street Hall in 1819. Huss 91.

²⁸⁰ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 526.

²⁸¹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 525-526.

agery to adorn Ravoni's temple bolsters the idea that the two fraternities depicted in *The Quaker City*, Ravoni's and the Monks of Monk Hall, articulate a rift within the Masonic Order. Yet the Rosicrucians shared many ritual forms with the Masons, and Ravoni's Order is characterized by ritual practice, while the Monks are linked to the Masons via their corrupt activity and degraded meeting hall. Lippard also skews the temple description toward Rosicrucianism by outfitting Ravoni's disciples in white robes, the habit of the "Great White Brotherhood," a tradition which encompassed the Rosicrucians.²⁸³

The decidedly occult or Rosicrucian tenor of Ravoni's brotherhood is also told by its weird emphasis on personal immortality. Remember that the Rosicrucians in *Paul Ardenheim* live far beyond the common term of human life, and that the central rite at the temple of Ravoni is the staged resurrection of a young woman. Annie's resurrection might not be genuine, but Ravoni's own evasion of death appears to be. Lippard ultimately kills off this troubling figure who defies the laws of nature; Devil-Bug stabs Ravoni in the back in the middle of his temple service.

²⁸² "The tent, which constitutes a part of the paraphernalia or furniture of a Commandery of Knights Templar, is not only intended for practical use, but also has a symbolic meaning." From the entry, "Tent," in Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss & Company, 1879) 805. In the "Tabernacle" entry, Mackey discusses use of the tent as ritual furniture among Royal Arch Masons (786). Cross provides images of Royal Arch tent placement in ritual on page 30 of his illustrations. Jeremy L. Cross, *The True Masonic Chart, or Hieroglyphic Monitor* (John C. Gray: New Haven, 1820). Cross's book circulated widely, and Cross "also supported himself by not only selling regalia and ritual equipment but providing charters for his new Cryptic degree system," until his death in 1860. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* 244, 247.

²⁸³ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 525. Under the heading, "White," Mackey explains in his *Encyclopedia* that white robes were worn among the Druids, Pythagoreans, ancient Egyptians, and other students of mystery schools over a great range of historical times and places; the implication is that there was a timeless, cross-cultural tradition of secret brotherhood the world over (848). Belief in this long-standing tradition authorized Masons to put the age of their order at several thousand years, even though they had only officially organized in the eighteenth century. The same logic allowed Lippard to claim that the Brotherhood of the Union (and the Rosicrucians in *Paul Ardenheim*) belong to a tradition dating back thousands of years, and native to both Egypt and Mexico. Just as Lippard sought a religious connection outside of established institutions, a Christianity of the heart, the turn to Masonry's "mystery school" history via a white-robed order registers a desire to return to the core principles of brotherhood unfettered by the corruptions of modern-day institutions. Following Blavatsky's promotion of the myth of "The Great White Brotherhood" in the late nineteenth century, the white robe of the Rosicrucians has been cited by twentieth-century historians as the inspiration for this designation. See Frater de Armand, "The Great White Lodge," *The Rosicrucian Digest* VIII.1 (February 1930) 25. Lippard's reference to a White Brotherhood in the *Nazarene* is the first time this appellation appears in print, and most likely inspired Blavatsky.

But the conflicted attitude toward Ravoni which Lippard manifests throughout *The Quaker City* is embodied even in the wizard's seeming death. Ravoni grows calm following the fatal blow and informs his disciples that he will live again. Any sense that such a claim is metaphorical is offset by the fact that Ravoni gives Byrnewood explicit instructions for effecting his metempsychosis:

“Come hither, youth! *His* face was like thine, the weird sage who taught me the secret of Eternal Youth. His name was Vayomer Aloheim – wear though that name forever! When I am dying, gaze in my face and inhale my last breath. My Soul shall pass into thine! Thou shalt be the second Ravoni of the Faith; I give thee my soul, with the last word I e'er shall speak [sic]!”²⁸⁴

Lippard submerges this controversial denouement by obscuring Byrnewood's identity. Even though Byrnewood is the last disciple to stand before Ravoni, and feels himself “drawn toward the soul of the dying man, by an irresistible influence,” Lippard has Ravoni give his occult transmission to an unspecified “student” of the New Faith.²⁸⁵ Ravoni's ambiguous death is a masterpiece of occult writing, as is Lippard's portrayal of this character on the whole; the author objects strenuously enough to Ravoni's occult order to satisfy his Christian readers, but expertly embeds the possibility of Ravoni's survival in the text in order to speak to those readers who have been mesmerized by Ravoni's occult powers. The transfer of this power to Byrnewood, the novel's hero, is a subtle valorization of the Rosicrucian-style society in *The Quaker City*.

In the end, one detail from the text of *The Quaker City* convinces me that Lippard was entertaining or imagining a Rosicrucian worldview, of ascended masters manipulating history from behind the scenes, by the time he arrived at Book Four of *The Quaker City* in which the wizard Ravoni first appears. One of Lippard's most popular fictions about American history to

²⁸⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 537. The phrase “Vayomer Eloheim” also appears as a password in Lippard's Brotherhood of the Union. Lippard, *BGC* 23, 27.

²⁸⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 537.

survive in occult circles is the “Speech of the Unknown,” a legend which he gave full development to in *Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution*, in 1847.²⁸⁶ This vignette concerns an enigmatic figure who materializes at the State House on July 4, 1776, at the precise moment that our nation’s founding fathers are waffling over whether to sign the Declaration of Independence. This “Unknown” delivers a rousing speech, which is so powerful that it galvanizes all fifty-six men to leap up and sign the manifesto that will change the course of world history. Twentieth century occultist Manly Palmer Hall popularized an embellished version of this myth in several publications without naming Lippard as his source, and so it remains generally unknown that Lippard is in fact the author of this story about America’s occult origins.²⁸⁷ David Reynolds has examined Lippard’s earlier versions of this same myth which appeared in the *Saturday Courier* in 1846, and makes a convincing case that the identity of the speechmaker is ultimately given as “Unknown” in the *Washington and His Generals* version so that Lippard would not run afoul of historical fact; the first time the tale was printed, Lippard gave the fateful speech to Patrick Henry, who was not among the Declaration’s signers. Lippard blamed this initial mistake on the proofreaders in subsequent editions of the *Courier*, and it is easy to assume that Lippard’s ignorance of history or imaginative license was the real culprit here, as opposed to any meddling editor on the *Courier’s* staff.²⁸⁸ But here I disagree with Reynolds’s interpretation of the evidence. A prototype of the enigmatic speechmaker had appeared even earlier than these July 4th myths in the *Saturday Courier*. In *The Quaker City*, the magus Ravoni claims to have exerted some invisible and unknown influence on the Declaration’s sign-

²⁸⁶ Lippard, *Washington and His Generals* 394-396.

²⁸⁷ See note 8 in this chapter, and also Manly Palmer Hall, “The Mysteries and Their Emissaries,” *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (1929; Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 2008) CC.

²⁸⁸ Reynolds, *George Lippard* 65-66.

ers, and so one must wonder if Patrick Henry was, in fact, a well-meant substitution by the *Courier's* editor for the mysterious “unknown” of Lippard’s revolutionary tale.

When listing the historical scenes at which he was present, the immortal Ravoni names both the American and French Revolutions.²⁸⁹ Remembering the Rosicrucian advocacy of the “reformation of the whole wide world” along democratic lines, one which Rosicrucians could invisibly effect by occult means, Ravoni’s appearance at these potent historical moments is a clear indication of his membership in the Rosicrucian fraternity. Americans may have had some mixed feelings over the violence of the French Revolution, but Ravoni’s influence at America’s founding can only be interpreted as beneficial. ““And in that old Hall, where Fifty-Six stern hearted citizens gave the law to a world, down-trodden by tyrants, there, there I stood, while the pens whose very ink was Destiny, were tracing the immortal signatures upon the scroll, which is now Eternal!”” Ravoni soliloquizes. While Ravoni’s involvement at the nation’s birth does not extend to anointing the future president as the New World Deliverer, as Paul does in *Paul Ardenheim*, Ravoni yet gives his invisible occult imprimatur to the project of American democracy: ““I stood by the side of Washington, when he took the Oath as President of this New World, which was then the Hope of all mankind.””²⁹⁰ Once again, Lippard asserts no authorial commentary on how to interpret Ravoni’s fabulous claims, even though he freely encourages us to despise bank presidents, hypocritical preachers, aristocratic philanderers, and other corrupted individuals throughout *The Quaker City*. If Ravoni is a megalomaniacal charlatan, Lippard is uncharacteristically silent on the matter, and his silence is so loud here that it qualifies as a tell: secret brotherhoods like Ravoni’s, when carried forth by reformed young men like Byrnewood Arlington, are the nation’s only hope of living up to America’s glorious and democratic destiny.

²⁸⁹ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 421-423.

²⁹⁰ Lippard, *The Quaker City* 423.

Epilogue

In *The Quaker City* (1845), *The Nazarene* (1846), and *Paul Ardenheim* (1848), George Lippard respectively implies, hints at, and extols the merits of benevolent brotherhood. In each of these cases, the benevolent brotherhood is represented by an individual possessed of some occult power: Ravoni is an immortal magus and mesmerist, Paul Mount-Laurel is a local legend and exerts subtle control over social factions in Philadelphia, and Paul Ardenheim talks to spirits and is the destined Supreme Chief of the Rosicrucian Order. The knee-jerk response of critics to represent these fantasies of secret power as Lippard's desire for social reformation must be adjusted to take into account the fact that Lippard endorsed supernormal faculties and rituals of brotherhood in his own life. His sense of the power of occult ritual was not a fictional device, but a lived reality, and his occult belief system is in fact inextricable from his political ideals. While increased knowledge of Lippard's investment in Masonic and Rosicrucian-style rituals offers rich insight into a facet of nineteenth century life which has heretofore been addressed only superficially, can such context change the way we read Lippard's novels? I argue that it should.

The incredible popularity of Dan Brown's speculative novels in our own day should alert us to the fact that the American public has a considerable hunger for alternative religious histories and the romance of the occult tradition. That we as critics find these mystical areas of Lippard's corpus irrelevant, or worse, embarrassing, is far more a statement about our own critical moment than a reliable assessment of the intrinsic worth of various themes in Lippard's oeuvre. Lippard's interest in racial harmony and his graphic depiction of sex allow us to laud him as being very culturally prescient or "modern," i.e., like us, while his enthusiasm for remote systems like Masonry strikes us as backwards, antique, and unsuitable for reclaiming from the past. In

this way occult history is effectively ghettoized and consigned to the trash-heap with other outmoded ideas, and the continued appearance of these themes, whether in the novels of George Lippard or in those of Dan Brown, is politely ignored. The socialist Lippard, who seemed to “predict” the march of human progress and Marxist revolution with his fiery rhetoric, is the most popular critical representation of the author, while the occultist Lippard has not come to the critical fore, in spite of the fact that occult ideas are ubiquitous in his writings.

If we are to reclaim Lippard as an important and unique voice in the American literary tradition, we cannot ignore the authorial biases and predilections which compelled his uniqueness. Of the three novels I discussed in this chapter, each is resolved by recourse to the occult. In *The Quaker City*, the hero’s moral redemption is induced by involvement with Ravoni’s Rosicrucian-style society. In *The Nazarene*, contemporary social ills are quelled by Paul Mount-Laurel of a mystical White Brotherhood (as in *The Quaker City*, Lippard caps off this novel with the sudden and incongruous appearance of a Wandering Jew). In *Paul Ardenheim*, a gaggle of plots is supposed to be resolved by the specter of magnetism, the nineteenth century word for magic. It would be lazy and dishonest for critics to pretend that Lippard wrote himself into a corner, and that these essentially religious resolutions were desperate expedients, devices that Lippard would have discarded could he have thought of something better. On the contrary, Lippard’s turn to more-than-human means for the working out of social discord is a reflection of his deeply-held beliefs, convictions which led him to pen bizarre and spectacular novels that are unlike anything else in the American tradition. While Lippard’s socialist writings were progressive for the nineteenth century, they have not grown into a franchise the way that his alternative American histories have – it is fair to say that Lippard invented the Rosicrucian tradition in America. So while Lippard may not be a mouthpiece for the dignified and philosophical literary

trajectory that falls under the heading, “American Renaissance,” he is yet a colorful and visionary author who told enduring tales about America, a speculative writer whose creative wellspring was the imaginative world of Western occultism.

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