

Reviews

Conducted by Theodore Hornberger

“In the Mystical Moist Night-Air”¹

AS NEARLY AS I CAN MAKE OUT, MOST GOOD STUDENTS OF AMERICAN CULTURE, intellectual history or literature are at least aware of the surprising extent to which occult doctrines permeate our intellectual and artistic history. But most seem to shy away from occult ideas when they encounter them—perhaps because of fear that their colleagues will think of them as somehow unsound; perhaps because any mention of such matters in the classroom inevitably brings forth enthusiastic but distracting undergraduate speculation about flying saucers, E. S. P. and related topics. Or perhaps it is merely because until recently we have lacked a systematic and academically respectable introduction to the field.² Fortunately, such an introduction is now available in John Senior's *The Way Down and Out*, a work not merely impeccable in its scholarship, but thoroughly sophisticated in its critical approach. Its purpose, according to the author, “is not necessarily to defend or attack occultism, but to understand it; and to achieve that purpose it is necessary to take occultism seriously” (p. xix). Our rational heritage predisposes us to view the universe in causal terms; Senior would have us remember that mystics and occultists do not. Like

¹ John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959); William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); Ely Stock, “Nada in Hemingway's ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,’” *MASA Journal*, III (Spring 1962), 53-57; Lyman V. Cady, “Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*,” *American Literature*, XXXIII (March 1961), 20-32.

² There are, actually, a good number of popular works on the subject; they seem to have considerable commercial appeal. In the *New York Times Book Review* for January 7, 1962, I note two sizable display advertisements peddling “Fascinating books about/ PSYCHIC PHENOMENA/ THE WORLD BEYOND/ OCCULT SCIENCE,” one a trade-book advertisement from E. P. Dutton & Company; the other, an invitation to join a book club specializing in occult literature. The books offered are, to say the least, of mixed quality, running the gamut from accounts of faith-healing to studies of oriental religion.

It is a curious fact, and one borne out by these advertisements, that if one follows the lead offered by almost any influential occult work, the trail eventually takes one to a major author. Advertised on both of these lists in the *Times* is *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1905; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1923) (and still in print) by Richard M. Bucke; sure enough this turns out to be the same Bucke who was one of Whitman's literary executors.

“primitive” people, they hold rather that “the universe is animate; there is an animating ‘force’; this force can be controlled through sympathy and contagion in various kinds of ritual and discipline” (p. 8).

The Way Down and Out opens with a brief survey of the history of occult doctrines. Mr. Senior’s purpose is both to “rehabilitate” the word occult, taking it “out of the pejorative vocabulary” and making it “stand, as it should, for a serious, traditional world-view,” and also, while doing so, to give us a working notion of its central assumptions. The reader emerges from the survey convinced, I think, that the occult view has in fact been with us all along in Western civilization—although the Age of the Enlightenment undoubtedly represents a low point in its influence—and that in the East its force has never been seriously challenged. In terms of the history of ideas, literary romanticism with its interest in the Orient may be thought of “in part, at least, as a reaffirmation of the animistic universe” (p. 35). This section of Mr. Senior’s book concludes (pp. 39-41) with a list of twenty-one “related notions” in which “occultists tend to believe.” Being itself a summary, the list is impossible to summarize, but some crucial attitudes may be repeated: “the universe is one, single, eternal, ineffable substance.” It is indeed “a living man.” “The task of man is therefore self-realization. To know thyself is to be everything”; the man who achieves this state is not merely “in touch” with the spirit of the universe; he is God, “appraised of his possibilities by illumination, an accidental or induced state in which heat, fire, or light surround him and he sees ineffable and profoundly moving proof of the oneness of the universe.” This vision he desires to communicate to “the less-developed mind on its unconscious levels.” To do so he uses the symbol.

I have selected those aspects of this list which seem most relevant for literature. Mr. Senior fears that in dealing with the works of writers who feel themselves in the occult tradition, we, because of our rational bent, tend to construct “a false syllogism—I don’t believe it, I like [the artist’s work], therefore he could not have believed it” (p. 43). Such an attitude on our part can only produce distortion; whether or not we like the idea, these artists have more than aesthetic goals. They are not producers of aesthetic patterns; rather it is their purpose “to get us to participate, vicariously, in the experience of the vision” (pp. 53, 46).

William York Tindall comes to similar conclusions in *The Literary Symbol*,³ although his work is different in purpose than Mr. Senior’s. In his effortless prose he seems less eager to prove anything than to turn over

³ The similarity in point of view is no accident. Mr. Senior was a student of Tindall’s during the time that *The Literary Symbol* was taking shape. I am told that the student-teacher relationship was one of reciprocal influence.

enough facets of the literary symbol to show the whole stone. He does, however, concern himself quite explicitly with the symbol in its occult sense. Like Senior, he regards the romantic era as a period of "cosmic reconstruction" (p. 40), and quotes Coleridge as saying that "by a symbol I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form or fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents" (p. 39).

I take as an indication of the slight difference in attitude between Tindall's book and Senior's a statement such as the following, referring to the use of the symbol by "the Transcendentalists of the early nineteenth century." Mr. Tindall writes, "At once prevented and teased by their instruments, they made the symbol a way to what feels like knowledge and is its only expression; for, like mystics coming home, these feelers could not translate their feelings into prose" (p. 41). I doubt that they would have wanted to. Senior is rather more forceful on this issue; he insists that the truth which the visionary desires to communicate is not translatable into prose, and that the best he can do is to recreate for the reader the sensation of the moment of revelation. It is not that the symbolic work is as near as he can come to expressing the truth he feels; rather it is that it is the only way.

Both books strike me as being enormously helpful and suggestive, even in their parenthetical points. Tindall's good differentiation between the metaphysical poets' "wit," which is based on connections between the seemingly unconnected (i.e., a flea and love), and the Hermetic conception of connections-as-equivalents, for example, was news to me, and should help draw boundaries and open up territory for scholars and critics dealing with those modern figures under the influence either of the metaphysical poets or of occultism.⁴ And as if to show us the way into these new fields, Mr. Tindall provides disarmingly perceptive comments about occult aspects of (to select a few Americans) Wallace Stevens, Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

To illustrate the usefulness of *his* rather more disciplined approach, Mr. Senior offers discussions of Rimbaud, Huysmans, Villiers, Mallarmé, Yeats and T. S. Eliot, a list which should suggest that his interpretation of the word "symbolist" is rather broad, although I think perfectly valid as an *ad hoc* definition. His discussion of T. S. Eliot is perhaps most rele-

⁴ Both Tindall's book and Senior's also have a curious predictive quality. To speak of one example which came to mind as I was reviewing my notes on Tindall: he intuits rather casually that Emily Dickinson must have known the metaphysical poets; a recent article in *American Literature* (Judith Banzer, "'Compound Manner': Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets," XXXII [January 1961], 417-33) establishes just that.

vant here. While carefully qualifying what he says ("The author of *The Waste Land* was a bright young intellectual who picked up ideas much darker than he knew. But he did pick them up."), Mr. Senior succeeds in convincing at least this reader that a knowledge of occult conceptions can get one nearer to an understanding of what this poem is for than can all the explications and identifications of sources, glosses and translations which are available. The trouble with such approaches, according to Mr. Senior, is that "much of [this] evidence is like unevaluated FBI material—every guess, every anonymous phone call from every crank in Christendom, lies file by file, without any serious determination of its worth" (p. 178). Once we are familiar, for example, with the occult idea that one of the ways to illumination is "the way down," we understand the reason for the trip into the waste land, and the allusions to such occult systems as tarot cards and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* come to fit into a far more purposeful pattern than we had suspected. It is also to Mr. Senior's credit that he never lets his enthusiasm carry him away: a comment like the following strikes me as refreshingly sane. "The ending of *The Waste Land* may be, poetically, disaster because the unfamiliar Sanskrit sounds silly, but the meaning should be clear and beautiful" (p. 183). Moreover, the pattern established in *The Waste Land* is shown to continue through other poems of Eliot. *Ash Wednesday* spells out in surprisingly explicit detail the process of purification of the self which is the basis of all occult systems: "the doctrine of *Four Quartets* is the perennial [i.e., occult or Hermetic] philosophy, and the imagery which clothes it, though it is largely Christian, is Hindu and Buddhist as well."⁵

Senior's critical conscience may be seen operating in a passage such as the following, in which he tries to define as closely as possible the nature of Eliot's commitment to the occult:

Is *Four Quartets* an occult work, then? It is based on occult doctrines, and the method like that of *The Waste Land* is universal analogy. Each of the four "quartets" represents one of the four elements and one of the four seasons. In them, what happens in history is juxtaposed with what happens in the life of the individual; what happens in the stars is said to happen in the blood; and since "all time is eternally

⁵ Occultism and Christianity are not, as Mr. Senior explains, incompatible. An occultist would regard Christianity, as well as other religions, as the slightly distorted remains of what was originally the vision of an occult saint, one who had seen the truth and had been moved to attempt to communicate it by constructing a symbolic system. Hence, in this view, Christ's speaking in parables. (To carry speculation one step further than we have any right to go, we may ask whether Eliot's "turning" to Anglo-Catholicism has anything to do with the way down and out. Perhaps for the sake of our Episcopalian friends we should hope not, but something within the Jewish consciousness of the present writer says, "Yes.")

present," everything is said to exist at once; and the task of the poet is, therefore, so to fix the apparently moving flux about us as to make us see the Absolute. (p. 187)

Or again, in his discussion of "Burnt Norton":

"Garlic and sapphires in the mud/Clot the bedded axletree." We should find this meaningless except for the image of the wheel suggested by the axle. The garlic and sapphires are the opposites, mixed in the mud of this world, which whirl on the samsaric wheel. Garlic and sapphires—the stench and the glitter; the one nourishes, the other dazzles. Or perhaps the lines do not mean this at all. These are only hints and guesses. A precise idea of the image is perhaps not possible, and perhaps poets should not write this way. But again, as in *The Waste Land*, though the surface may be inexplicable, the meaning of the passage is clear. "The dance along the artery/The circulation of the lymph/are figured in the drift of stars." The lyric celebrates the doctrine of corresponding wheels of existence. Things above are as they are below, as the Emerald Tablet said, and all opposites are reconciled when they are seen as part of a pattern. (p. 188)

This does not mean that conventional scholarship is useless in explaining Eliot's purpose in these poems. What it means rather is that Mr. Senior has given us the key to the basic pattern into which all these details fit. The occult concept of the yantra—a symbolic system, a pyramid, a mystery, an object, an art work designed as a means to grasp the absolute Something which occultists believe lies beyond—provides a more plausible basis for the structure of the poem and its use of imagery than anything we have had offered to us. The images themselves are frequently taken from occult sources; they are used as they would be used in a yantra.

"In America . . . , Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Henry James—all are influenced by occultism," says Mr. Senior (p. 51, note); undoubtedly the list could be made longer. Consider the case of Poe.⁶ I am not yet certain of the exact nature of Poe's commitment to the occult, but it already has become clear to me in the brief time since I first read Mr. Senior's book that it is sufficiently strong to justify calling Poe an occultist, and not merely, as in the case of some other Americans, a writer who used the occult.⁷ First, he believed in the power of words in the occult sense.

⁶ Mr. Senior, in response to a letter from the author, writes, "As far as Poe is concerned, I suspect from the Baudelaire and Mallarmé reaction, that he was serious about the occult. They were both shrewd judges. America was bursting with spooks—high class intellectual over-souls, socialistic phalansteries, rapping tables, Mormon revelations, Masonic rituals, etc."

⁷ Paradoxically, one could cite portions of Poe's criticism to bear this out and others which seem to contradict it. This is because one side of Poe's thinking is mechanical, as when he claims that he wrote "The Raven" entirely by formula, while

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 that of 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. He insisted that we take *Eureka* seriously, that it was his magnum opus. If we do not, perhaps it is because we do not know what it is for. I would suggest that Poe intended it as a textbook of occultism, and that it can be read more consistently as that than as anything else. Fourth, the heightened sensitivity characteristic of so many of his protagonists is like that by which initiates of occultism perceive their visions. The visions themselves have a great deal in common with those of occult mystics (and, according to Aldous Huxley, mystic visions are usually similar).⁸ Moreover, the manner in which Poe's characters reach the supersensitive state of receptivity is frequently exactly what Senior calls "the way down." This is by no means a complete account of what *The Way Down and Out* has to teach about this one American author, but it should suggest something of the "fruitfulness" of the book.⁹

In his checklist of occult doctrines Denis Saurat¹⁰ lists two Americans, Emerson and Whitman, among his nineteen examples of authors who held at least some occult ideas. The list could be much longer. We do not have detailed discussions of the shaping power of occult ideas on American authors, although it would seem from a couple of recent publications that a start is being made.¹¹ Lyman Cady's recent discussion of "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden," for example, demonstrates an obvious familiarity with and competence to handle

the other side sounds very like those romantic or transcendental assumptions which seem most closely related to the occult, for example, the idea that the poet is a "seer." We have the testimony of numerous sources that Poe, late in his life, behaved more and more as though he were in fact some sort of visionary; there is every indication, in short, that he had become as committed to this body of ideas as he was capable of being committed to anything.

⁸ Aldous Huxley, "Heaven and Hell: Visionary Experience, Visionary Art, and the Other World," *Tomorrow*, III (Summer 1955), 7-35; Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954).

⁹ Not all of these things are brand new. There is an extensive literature which deals with Poe's sources and with influences on him. But Mr. Senior's approach enables us to piece together more of the picture than we have ever seen before.

¹⁰ Tr. Dorothy Bolton, *Literature and Occult Tradition* (New York: L. MacVeagh, 1930), p. 70.

¹¹ Two earlier works on the general subject are Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932) and Fred-eric Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930).

Oriental philosophy in its own terms, and Ely Stock's carefully-qualified discussion of "*Nada* in Hemingway's 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'" at the very least provides a fascinating possible second reading for that story; he takes *Nada* in precisely that sense in which Mr. Senior recommends: as part of a system of equivalent opposites in which Nothing is Something and the way Out is the way Down. There are also a few pioneer studies, though not of Americans, which admirably combine the insights and methodology of modern criticism with an understanding of occult influences; Mr. Tindall's discussions of Lawrence¹² and Joyce¹³ are there to mark the trail.

What all this means I suppose, is that we must learn to take authors seriously when they say that they are operating in terms of the occult process of revelation and inspiration. Perhaps *our* rationalistic predilections make this difficult to do, but it is clear that *they* take it seriously. As intellectual historians, we should not find it too hard to see that the romantic attempt to recapture the magical view of the universe involved the rediscovery of the world-view on which that magic was historically based, and that phenomena as diverse as the romantic scientific interest in the primitive past, Emerson's pose as the prophet of his people, and the tremendous popular interest in, say, astrology, are at least distantly related.

Certainly the occult pops up in unexpected places. Wrote Hamlin Garland, "If these super normal events are illusory, then all the events of my life are illusory. They happened and I recorded them."¹⁴ There can be no question that Garland meant what he said. Or: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* began as a science-fantasy tale whose main appeal was to the imagination; the machinery of his plot was clearly descended from the pseudo-occult popular magazine stories, of which Edgar Poe's are only the most famous. Even after Bellamy had fallen in love with his book's economics, enough remained of the plot line to make its origin discernible, and to this day Bellamy (who had a brother who was a Theosophist) is popular with the Theosophists.¹⁵

¹² William York Tindall, *D. H. Lawrence & Susan His Cow* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939). See esp. pp. 130 ff.

¹³ William York Tindall, "Joyce and the Hermetic Tradition," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVI (January 1954), 23-39.

¹⁴ *Forty Years of Psychic Research: A Plain Narrative of Fact* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937).

¹⁵ For Bellamy's original plan for the novel, see Robert L. Shurter, "The Writing of *Looking Backward*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXVIII (July 1939), 235-61. For Bellamy's philosophical outlook, see Arthur E. Morgan, *The Philosophy of Edward Bellamy* (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1945), esp. pp. 5, 24 and 25. For a discussion of the Theosophists' reactions, see pages 30 and 33 ff. of Morgan's book.

With modifications, the approach which grows from an understanding of the nature of occult tradition and beliefs can be extremely fruitful in dealing with the rather large body of contemporary works, which, although not explicitly in the occult tradition, rest on assumptions which *are*. Mr. Tindall's chapter on what he calls the "poetic novel,"¹⁶ although perhaps too intuitive for some tastes, I found richly suggestive. Since Melville and Flaubert independently invented it in the nineteenth century, it has become the dominant form of the "better novel," but, as Mr. Tindall points out, has seldom been discussed in poetic terms. The list of novels of this sort is long enough so that any approach which sheds new light on them seems exceedingly valuable: Mr. Tindall in this chapter lists, among others, *Moby-Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Finnegans Wake*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, *Anna Karenina*, *Ulysses*, *A Passage to India*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, *Party Going*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Magic Mountain*, *The Trial*, *The Plumed Serpent*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Under the Volcano*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Marmot Drive*. And Mr. Senior reminds us that we are dealing with artistic procedures related to occult theory whenever we discuss stream of consciousness. In Joyce, Woolf or Faulkner, what lies beneath the stream is the assumption that connections between seemingly unconnected things are in fact significant: the stream is "sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars."

In a recent letter, Mr. Senior says, "In cutting my book, I threw out a lot of material on Fourier who was beyond question an occultist and some suggestions about his influence on American Literature. I'm sure the whole vein is rich." Our concern thus far has been primarily with the influence on literature, but as Mr. Senior's mention of Fourier suggests, the occult left its mark on other fields as well. I can clearly remember the humorous manner in which the professor in an American intellectual history course treated the phenomenon of Madame Blavatsky's popularity. He was a superb teacher, but it now strikes me that he failed to impress upon us the fact that however amusing the manifestations of popular occultism in late nineteenth-century America, and however rationally they can be explained as a sort of watered-down and popularized Transcendentalism, they should also be accounted for at least partially in terms of their own tradition. That is, although we can perhaps explain why the nation was ripe for them at that time—because of the number of nervous, neurotic widows and spinsters in the country, because of the

¹⁶ "Supreme Fictions," *The Literary Symbol*, pp. 68-101. By "poetic," he means "built on associations and equivalences which cannot be translated into prose."

extent to which romantic ideas in popularized form had filtered down from the intelligentsia, because of the psychological impact, particularly on lonely women, of the Civil War—the beliefs themselves are conventional statements of the tenets of an age-old tradition of thought.

Even the sciences do not seem to be immune from occult influences. Whether Professor Rhine's work at Duke is sound or misguided is very much a matter of debate between academic psychologists and True Believers, but C. G. Jung takes it seriously as evidence that there is Something going on. Both Mr. Senior and Mr. Tindall note repeatedly the occult implications (and frequently occult beliefs) in the works of both Freud and Jung.¹⁷ Certainly Jung's dead-serious investigation of "Synchronicity"¹⁸ is an attempt to relate meaningful coincidences to his larger conceptions of archetypal symbolism and the collective unconscious. "Meaningful coincidences" . . . he says, "seem to rest upon an archetypal foundation."¹⁹ I don't know what our historians of science are doing with the occult, but to use Mr. Senior's words again, "The whole vein is rich." Doubtless we should mine and burrow our way through these hills. We tend to forget that even educated Puritans who considered themselves scientists believed literally in astrology. They were not the first American scientists to do so, and I doubt they were the last.

I am convinced, in short, that these books, and especially Mr. Senior's, will be looked back upon twenty or thirty years from now as landmarks in critical and intellectual history, although I rather wince at the thought of the resultant studies—"Salinger and the Occult," "The Beat and the Bhagavad-Gita," "The Way Down to Walden Pond," "Pfaff's Restaurant and Whitman's Mysticism," "What Secret Power *Did* Ben Franklin Have?" Such studies, however, should shed light not merely on writers really in the occult tradition, but also on those who, like some of the figures in my not-altogether facetious list of articles, merely made use of elements which Mr. Senior tells us are in the broad tradition of occultism.

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¹⁷ In line with these observations about science and the occult, one might add that it would be well for the psychological critics to know with what they are dealing. We have always known that certain literary artists of the nineteenth century (and even earlier) anticipated many of the major insights of contemporary psychology, and that Freud was deeply influenced by them. Now that the connection has been established between such nineteenth-century works and the occult, and between Freud, these works and the occult, we are perhaps in a position to reassess Freud's relation to intellectual currents of his time.

¹⁸ In his essay "Synchronicity: a Causal Connecting Principle," trans. R. F. C. Hull, in C. G. Jung and W. Pauli, *The Interpretation of Nature and the Psyche* (New York: Bollingen-Pantheon, 1955).

¹⁹ Jung, pp. 33-34. See also pp. 140-43.