

# Conversion and the Idea of the Secret

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*I* begin with an unlikely starting point for probing the complexities of conversion and the idea of the secret: Jacques Derrida's musings on religion and secrecy and their implications for a broader understanding of the stakes of religious conversion. *The Gift of Death* (1995), a work that closely follows the human rights activist Jan Patočka's aptly titled *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (1975), is Derrida's most sustained meditation on religion, and specifically on conversion.<sup>1</sup> Among the most striking features of Derrida's argument is an insistence on the idea of the secret as key to the dynamic process of conversion, which Derrida approaches not as a movement between religions but the subordination of one mystery to another. In a neat progression of religious forms, each embedded in its successor, "orgiastic mystery" (as Derrida terms it) is subsumed by Platonic mystery—a turning toward the Good—which in turn is superseded and incorporated by Christian mystery.<sup>2</sup> Again following from

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of secrecy, far from always having the sense of intentional concealment, frequently takes on the meaning of "secret energies," corresponding closely with

Patočka, Derrida finds that conversion retains whatever it displaces in the form of a secret, which persists at the core of religious transformation as an enduring reminder of earlier religious forms and mysteries.

In his near-obsession with the notion of the secret in his writings on religion, Derrida uncannily evokes a predecessor with whom he has rarely, if at all, been compared—the Russian occultist and Theosophist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91). Blavatsky’s occult writings set the stage for the kinds of speculations on crypto-conversion, conscience, and responsibility that permeate Derrida’s work. Framing my essay are perspectives on conversion and secrecy culled from the writings of Blavatsky and Derrida, which will be followed by a close reading of an occult text, W. B. Yeats’s “The Manuscript of ‘Leo Africanus,’” that exemplifies the problematics of crypto-conversion as delineated by Blavatsky and Derrida in their respective ways.<sup>3</sup> Presented as a contentious communication with a dead spirit, “Leo Africanus” stages Yeats’s encounter with a figure alternatively grasped as his anti-self and historical conscience. A breakthrough in understanding allows the poet to acknowledge an occluded history—his as much as that of his deceased interlocutor—that can only be told in the terms of crypto-conversion, in this instance of a sixteenth-century African slave forcibly converted to Christianity and turned into a native informant of African history and geography. The prescient irony that hangs over the slave’s narrative is that his secret selfhood finds vindication only when expressed through a dead, disembodied voice, offering an object lesson to Yeats’s feelings of alienation from both Ireland and Catholicism as the politically subjugated religion of his homeland.<sup>4</sup>

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Derrida’s “orgiastic mystery.” See Antoine Faivre, “The Notions of Concealment and Secrecy in Modern Esoteric Currents since the Renaissance (A Methodological Approach),” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Manuscript of ‘Leo Africanus,’” ed. Steve L. Adams and George Mills Harper, in *Yeats Annual No. 1*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 1–47. Hereafter referred to as “Leo Africanus.”

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Sharpe captures the challenges presented by gaps in the archive when those who might have told their stories in their own voices have died, their “ghostly echoes” reinforcing the significance of silence as truth-telling (see Sharpe, “The Archive and



At one level Derrida's description of the secret appears to resonate with the typical definition of the *marrano* as an individual who retains aspects of a secret religious identity, while avowing allegiance to another religion adopted by force or inducements, be they material or spiritual.<sup>5</sup> However, Derrida's interest lies not so much in ethnicity and identity than in historical knowledge. Like Blavatsky, Derrida deploys the concept of the secret to signal the histories hidden from view in the course of religious change. In this respect he implicitly contests the notion that individuals, in their practice of an embargoed faith, preserve an identity threatened with erasure—an identity expressed in ethnic, racial, or gendered terms. Rather, he takes a broad view of religious formation as a series of substitutions of one religious mystery by another, which at the same time encrusts one secret within another—like nesting boxes—as a defiant sign that total obliteration of past beliefs is impossible. The secret, for Derrida, is less an aspect of hidden identity than a symptom of the denial of historicity, which he seeks to recuperate by unpacking conversion's semantic meanings, beginning with the concept of change. Derrida disputes notions of passage or transition, just as he also challenges the idea that conversion is a movement from darkness to light. Instead, he reads conversion in terms of a repetitive economy of exchange that preserves a hidden core of meaning inaccessible to interpretation. There is no steady movement from one religion to another, no shedding of the skin of the past: “the Platonic *anabasis* does not provide

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Affective Memory in M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 16 [2014], 466).

<sup>5</sup> In the context of Jewish religious history in Spain, Michael Ragussis distinguishes *marranos* (or converted Jews who secretly practiced Judaism) from *conversos*, or Jews who converted to Catholicism out of conviction. The distinction, however, became moot in light of the prohibitions against holding office by *conversos*, who were suspected of relapsing into Judaism whenever the occasion arose. In this respect, Judaism remained a “secret” in the senses in which Derrida uses the term. See Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), p. 158.

a passage from orgiastic mystery to nonmystery. It is the subordination of one mystery by another, the conversion from one secret to another" (*The Gift of Death*, p. 8).

Indeed, the idea of the secret militates against conversion, which rests on a fundamental understanding of the new as entirely new, disconnected from the familiar and the old. The secret, in contrast, is a sign of the persistence of the knowledge-systems that have supposedly been supplanted, challenging the concept of newness embodied by conversion. The impossibility of newness entails that conversion can be no more than a succession of carefully preserved secrets, and, for this reason, it produces repression rather than destruction of preexisting beliefs. Derrida establishes a set of equivalences between conversion and repression that ultimately supplants the more conventional associations between conversion and repudiation of old belief systems and related institutions. In effect, he views repression as a constitutive feature of conversion, the repressed secret at once preventing conversion from breaking free of the past and persisting as a source of tension in future remakings of the self.

A string of successive displacements of the meanings associated with conversion leads to a breakthrough for Derrida, allowing him to propose that conversion is mourning because it denies the secret that it contains, or, as he notes, it "keep[s] within oneself that whose death one must endure" (*The Gift of Death*, p. 9). The psychoanalytic economy of mourning not only preserves secrecy at the core of conversion but also cultivates the sense of a living death that must be repeatedly experienced, reenacting the willed but inconclusive death of the old and the forsaken. Derrida goes on to say, in a description hauntingly reminiscent of Blavatsky's principal argument in her major works *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1887): "what one keeps inside at the very moment that there comes into play *a new experience of secrecy and a new structure of responsibility as an apportioning of mystery*, is the buried memory or crypt of a more ancient secret" (*The Gift of Death*, p. 9; emphasis added). Where Derrida differs markedly from Blavatsky is in his introduction of the element of responsibility as intrinsic to "an apportioning of mystery," an enigmatic phrase at best suggesting that the formation of religious conscience entails the assignment of

mystery to a pre-ethical moment identified with mystical rapture. Derrida complicates his argument further by maintaining that conscience, despite its attempts to separate itself from orgiastic ecstasy, always bears traces of its mystical origins: “this coming-to-conscience still retains its mystical element; it still takes the form of a mystery, this time unacknowledged, undeclared, denied” (*The Gift of Death*, p. 8). Mystery and secrecy thwart the narration of a linear history toward the Platonic Good, which, in an endless cyclical movement, is drawn back to that which it represses. Accordingly, mystery and secrecy are *interruptions*, and Derrida, much like Blavatsky, turns to these moments in order to narrate the occluded history of self and the self’s relation to responsibility. Blavatsky had argued in her most ambitious work, *Isis Unveiled*, that “the progress of proselytism” had been arrested by Celsus, a Neo-Platonist, “successfully proving that the original and purer forms of the most important dogmas of Christianity were to be found only in the teachings of Plato.”<sup>6</sup> She further maintained that Platonism held back the radical break that Christianity would have made with the creeds it supplanted, and instead drew Christianity toward clarification of its inner beliefs.

No account of conversion can be complete without a rendering of the convert’s relation to self and world, and Derrida takes on this challenge when he writes, “the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so it becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility” (*The Gift of Death*, p. 15). Conscience is a reflection of the movement inward toward what Derrida calls “subjectivizing interiorization” (*The Gift of Death*, p. 13). This movement would be smooth and unhampered were it not for the role played by mystery and secrecy, which make it impossible not only to write a linear history of humankind but also to chart a straightforward genealogy of the individual. The stark reality, for Derrida, is that there is no revolutionizing conversion, no unfolding of new consciousness or transcendental experience, but only the retention of that which is denied or repressed. The convoluted

<sup>6</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: J. W. Bouton and Co., 1877), II, 51.

trajectory of responsibility turns out to be a process “in which what seems a single leitmotif—unlimited, infinite or absolute responsibility—is unfolded only to be folded in again.”<sup>7</sup>

As might be expected, Blavatsky had a more confrontational view of religious change than Derrida, for she viewed repression as a form of violence, obliterating past histories and selfhoods. Her intense focus on Christianity’s battle with the beliefs over which it eventually triumphed produced an understanding of conversion as a larger process that extends beyond the individual and entails religious expansion and consolidation.<sup>8</sup> The history of world religions cannot be written outside the context of conversion, which Blavatsky takes in its broadest meaning as the propagation of a single religious worldview. That is why she dwells at such length on “the secret”: the secret denied by Christianity is its own history, its formation from the heterogeneous religions that fanned beyond Asia toward Europe and the Near East and indeed had their origins in the East (as understood by the appellation “the Oriental Jesus”):

Had not the ancient creeds been speedily obliterated, it would have been found impossible to preach the Christian religion as a New Dispensation, or the direct Revelation from God the Father, through God the Son, and under the influence of God the Holy Ghost. As a political exigence the Fathers had—to gratify the wishes of their rich converts—instituted even the festivals of Pan. They went so far as to accept the ceremonies hitherto celebrated by the Pagan world in honor of the *God of the gardens*, in all their primitive *sincerity*. It was time to sever the connection. Either the Pagan worship and the Neo-platonic theurgy, with all ceremonial of magic, must be crushed out forever, or the Christians become Neo-platonists” (*Isis Unveiled*, II, 51; emphasis in original)

<sup>7</sup> Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990), p. 294. Quoted in Tyler Roberts, “Sacrifice and Secularization: Derrida, de Vries, and the Future of Mourning,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York and London, Routledge, 2005), pp. 274–75.

<sup>8</sup> See *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993); see in particular Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement toward Institutional Church,” pp. 47–63, which tracks the growth of early Christianity in terms of its ascendancy over intra-denominational rivalries and consolidation of power by its absorption of small, local cults.

Nowhere in this assertion can we find common ground with Derrida's insistence on Christianity's relation to ethical responsibility. Derrida's introduction of responsibility and conscience considerably alters the course of his argument, which appears to retrace many of Blavatsky's convictions about the cohabitation of Christianity and earlier pagan mysteries but does so with a different intent. From following a trajectory that reads conversion as a layering of successive secrets, Derrida shifts his focus to an account of how such embedding accounts for the tensions between an ethical progression toward responsibility and the pull of ethno-nationalistic sentiment. The residual presence of the orgiastic in responsibility produces religious fervor, which the state takes over to foster a spirit of nationalism. What Blavatsky sees as early Christianity's "political exigence," which had to be abandoned for the new religion to take root, Derrida views as a more insistent feature of religious change. The state, in other words, requires the pagan element in culture in order to keep people in a condition of frenzied passion about the nation as the ultimate expression of the sacred. Festivals, ceremonies, and parades are Pan-like in their orgiastic spirit and advance the idea of the nation as divinely inspired.<sup>9</sup> In its most extreme form, the orgiastic frenzy of the people so necessary to national celebration goes awry when it turns into destructive radicalism. No figure better expressed this conviction about the links between revolutionary passion and paganism than the Abbé Barruel, whose *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797–98) sought to unmask the French Revolution as the culmination of a long history of heresy stretching back to the Manichaeans of late antiquity through the Freemasons. As "the survival of dark and anarchic paganism," Jacobinism proved an affinity between the classical past and the revolutionary present, defying that past's benevolent characterization in the Romantic imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Viewed thus, there is no escaping an Enlightenment mode of thought that upholds the trajectory of reason in guiding responsibility's emergence from orgiastic mystery. Surely not

<sup>9</sup> See *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1993), p. 41.

oblivious of this contradiction (and the implicit valorization of Enlightenment reason), the only way Derrida can break free of its stranglehold is by recasting the tension between reason and passionate frenzy in the terms of mutual constitution. Derrida resists seeing Christian teleology in a direct progression from darkness to light—or from orgiastic mystery to responsibility—and instead argues that the path toward the Good (which is another word for responsibility) constantly involves the repression of the orgiastic. In that moment of recognizing the repressed “other” of responsibility begins historical knowledge.

This ongoing cycle of return to the object of repression characterizes Derrida’s definition of conversion. To note this tension is to concede, as Peter Goldman does, that “the resistance of the sacred (and hence of responsibility) to stable conceptualization” points not only to the limits of traditional metaphysics but, more crucially, to the impossibility of the transcendental. In other words, “The sacred and responsibility have no timeless essence apart from human history.”<sup>11</sup> There is no escaping the idea of history as the crucible in which responsibility establishes its arc. The turn to interiority repetitively engages with the path to responsibility, which begins with an acknowledgment that interiority can never be truly responsible if, in the terms suggested by Akeel Bilgrami in the context of enchantment, it is not adequately responsive to the call of external agency.<sup>12</sup> The starting assumption is that there can be no sense of agency when human beings are driven purely by their desires, and that moral agency entails an external source of value, quite outside one’s personal drives.



If Derrida saw the secret (or repressed other) as a challenge to transcendental conceptions of selfhood, Blavatsky saw the preservation of ancient mysteries as the

<sup>11</sup> Peter Goldman, “Christian Mystery and Responsibility: Gnosticism in Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*,” *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology*, 4, no. 1 (1998), 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Akeel Bilgrami, “What Is Enchantment?,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 145–65.

key to achieving a world order beyond the narrow ethnocentrism and nationalisms dividing peoples. She rarely uses the word “responsibility” in her work, nor does she engage with ideas of the Platonic Good. But everything in her writing suggests that her idea of responsibility rests on accepting Christianity’s multiple historical origins, including those that came to be characterized as heterodox offshoots or mystery religions. She goes so far as to insist that “Christian” is a term that has a pagan provenance and carries a secular meaning, noting that “the secular meaning of *Chrēstos* runs throughout the classical Greek literature *pari passu* with that given to it in the mysteries.”<sup>13</sup> But at the same time, she argues that *Chrēstos* also refers to an Eastern adept or *chela*.<sup>14</sup> A great deal of Blavatsky’s description of Platonism as the foundation of Christianity resonates with Derrida’s argument in *The Gift of Death*. Blavatsky refers to Clement of Alexandria’s Christianity as “no more than a graft upon the congenial stock of his original Platonism,” and to Clement himself as “an Initiate, a new Platonist, before he became a Christian” (*Esoteric Character*, p. 188).<sup>15</sup> In a deliberately transgressive move, Blavatsky insists that the early Christian followers had their own metaphorical transcriptions of Christ: as traveler, truth-seeker, and soul in pursuit of divine wisdom—in short, as an embodiment of *gnosis*. Blavatsky’s exhortation to find “the Christos within yourselves” had the effect of turning Christ into a metaphor for the search for self-knowledge, so that the meaning of Christ was broadly transformed into that of “a good man” (*Esoteric Character*, p. 189; emphasis in original). Blavatsky uses linguistic etymology to uncover the pagan roots of Christianity, beginning with the pre-Christian name Christos, and then expanding the person of Christ to “the ‘Christ-condition’” and finally to “the ‘Mahatmic-condition’” (*Esoteric Character*, p. 190).

<sup>13</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Esoteric Character of the Gospels* (1887–88), rpt. in H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings, Volume VIII: 1887* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1960), p. 186. Hereafter referred to as *Esoteric Character*.

<sup>14</sup> See Blavatsky, *Esoteric Character*, pp. 186–87.

<sup>15</sup> Clement (referred to in Blavatsky’s text as Clemens Alexandrinus, c. 150-c. 215) was a convert to Christianity and a Christian theologian who taught in the Catechetical School of Alexandria.

In short, Jesus is written out of the story and “Christ” becomes a place name for truth-seeking.

Significantly, Blavatsky metaphorically retells the story of Christ’s crucifixion as a journey from flesh to inner, subjective theophany, linking Egyptian rituals associated with the dead body to the Christian notion of the afterlife. In so doing, she seeks to bring the time of classical antiquity (including that of Eastern traditions) into the historical time of Judeo-Christianity. Furthermore, she traces the idea of the resurrection to Egyptian mummification and notes that early Christian monuments bear no representations of the historical resurrection of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The closest figure is Lazarus, whom she refers to as an Egyptian mummy: “Lazarus is the Karest, who was the Egyptian Christ, and who is reproduced by Gnostic art in the Catacombs of Rome as a form of the Gnostic Christ, who *was not and could not become an historical character*” (*Esoteric Character*, p. 198; emphasis added). If the resurrected Christ is really Lazarus, then who is Jesus, and, more important, how did he become central to the Christian narrative? Blavatsky partially answers her own questions by observing:

Thus the child-Christ of the historic faith is born, and visibly begins in the *Karest* image of the dead Christ, which was the mummy-type of the resurrection in Egypt for thousands of years before the Christian era. This doubles the proof that the Christ of the Christian Catacombs was a survival of the *Karest* of Egypt.  
 . . . The Mummy was the earliest human image of the Christ.  
 (*Esoteric Character*, p. 199)

In her account of the “natural genesis” of mysteries, which pushes heterodoxy to its limit, Blavatsky pointedly renders the idea of Christ banal when she writes that the gnosis of mysteries may yield as mundane a proposition as the one that “our Christology is mummified mythology” (*Esoteric Character*, p. 200). Tracing Christ to Egypt is not even so much about divine wisdom as it is about *gnosis*, the knowledge of history,

<sup>16</sup> See Blavatsky, *Esoteric Character*, p. 198. Blavatsky claimed that in the Great Pyramid of Cheops she heard voices that connected her to a deep mystical past that dissolved the boundaries between religions.

which in its banality contradicts the transcendental, rupturing effects of the Christian narrative. "History" becomes Blavatsky's code word for a conscious process of displacing hegemonic, exclusionary narratives wrapped in the garb of the transcendental.

In his pioneering study of occultism and modernism, Leon Surette has argued: "Nothing is more characteristic of post-Renaissance thinking than the notion that cultural and political change through time is comprehensible and will yield its secrets to scholarly or theoretical investigation" (*The Birth of Modernism*, p. 20). This supposition, designated by the general term "historicism," has engaged theorists as diverse as Giambattista Vico, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann G. Herder, Edmund Burke, Georg W. F. Hegel, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx. A corollary of historicism is an "epochal" view of historical events, for comprehension of the past demands that it be organized into measurable units, or epochs. To assume otherwise is to accept history as a disorganized mass of indecipherable secrets. However, the secret does not lead back to something difficult to know or deliberately made obscure, but to a history to which only the discourse of myth, served by active imagination, is likely to give access. History, when presented as a series of documented events and visible traces, is full of gaps that signify far more than the loss of empirical data. Indeed, history is replete with secrets that elude the kinds of action that can be performed on texts to yield their meaning, because concrete, tangible historical events are not what they seem to be at face value. In this sense, history is as much an object of esoteric interpretation as nature.

Take, for instance, the writing of the history of Christianity, exemplified by the layered architectural structure of the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. Seeing the sanctum sanctorum of Mithras in the lower levels of a twelfth-century Christian church, which was constructed on a fourth-century church that was, in turn, built over a second-century Mithraeum, is akin to stumbling on a secret that unveils the simultaneous orders of historical memory. Such simultaneity opens a window onto a layered history only imperfectly conveyed by documents on early Christianity, which are assembled and streamlined into

a progressive, sequential narrative. The knowledge is experiential, the experience is iconic, and the icon is a crystallization of unspent energies of historical formation, yielding a new order of perceptual understanding. The secret is, at bottom, a notion that leads us back to the distinction between the profane and the sacred, and therefore is not unique to esotericism; indeed, far more than generally acknowledged, the secret is germane to historical knowledge itself.



I have been suggesting that for Blavatsky, far more than for Derrida, the dislocated past can only be salvaged by nonrational experiences, reinforcing the paradox that lost histories—like religious heterodoxies—are in themselves neither mythical nor mystical, but can be accessed only by such means as myth and mysticism. This paradox manifests itself in Yeats's occult writings, whose esoteric preoccupations mask their intense engagement with the dynamics of historical knowledge. Yeats's initial attraction to Theosophy was not radically different from the interest of those who turned to this alternative spiritual movement for answers to troublesome questions. Like so many of his generation, Yeats was alienated by religion's claims to ultimate truth, while also disillusioned by science's tyrannical hold over the modern mind. Even after his disaffection with the Theosophical Society, of which he was briefly a member, he wrote nostalgically about his encounters with a "philosophy that confirmed [his] vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless."<sup>17</sup> In subsequent statements, it became apparent that Yeats was drawn even more to the mindset, if not the personality, of Theosophy's founding guru, H. P. Blavatsky, who, to quote Ken Monteith, "took old ideas and made them seem new again, and did so through an authority which extended beyond her own credibility" (*Yeats and Theosophy*, p. 4). In his search for projected dual identities

<sup>17</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* (1955; rpt. New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 98. Quoted in Ken Monteith, *Yeats and Theosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

beyond the limitations of self, Yeats was intrigued by the possibilities opened up by such forms of “deferred authority” as practiced by Blavatsky.<sup>18</sup> Blavatsky’s willing accommodation of science to religion, and religion to science, encouraged him similarly to view skepticism as having its source not only in modern science but also just as impressively in the heterodox religious philosophies either banished or superseded by doctrinal religions. By the time Yeats published *The Secret Rose* in 1897, Catholic readers had already come to see his work as heterodox; indeed, his publisher A. H. Bullen declined publication of two stories in the volume, fearing negative public reaction.<sup>19</sup> But Yeats was closer to the currents of his time than critics have acknowledged, especially to the extent that those currents in turn reflected the appeal of earlier metaphysical speculations: Blavatsky, for instance, insisted that scientific questions about the nature of creation, matter, and energy had forerunners in heterodox systems of thought (such as Gnosticism and Hermeticism) that explored the origins of the cosmos from alternative perspectives, creating myths that functioned as literary versions of scientific theories.

Of particular importance to Yeats was Blavatsky’s effort to do more than merely adapt Theosophical principles to contemporary intellectual discourse; in truth, Blavatsky’s interest lay in demonstrating that Gnosticism and historical materialism conceptualized the past in comparable ways, in that history represents a process of corruption and degradation from an originary time when science and religion went hand-in-hand. Garry Trompf terms this metalevel of history “macrohistory,” observing its echoes in the Gnostic view of matter as a corruption of divine purpose and all forms of descent from spirit as degradation.<sup>20</sup> In representing a combination of Theosophical principles and historical materialism, macrohistory implicitly offers a way of thinking about myth and history together, as

<sup>18</sup> See Monteith, *Yeats and Theosophy*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> See Susan Johnston Graf, *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> See Garry W. Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 382.

Yeats spectacularly sought to do in “Leda and the Swan” (1923), a poem that strikingly exemplifies the principles of macrohistory, in that the Greek myth of divine coupling with mortals functions as a template for the workings of history or, more specifically, the instantiation of historical events. Significantly, Yeats’s motto for the Order of the Golden Dawn, *Demon est Deus Inversus* (or, the devil is the converse of God), is most likely taken from Blavatsky’s magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine*, specifically, from Book I, part II, section IX of volume 1, which is a section of the book describing the Kabbalistic view that good and evil coexisted at the moment of creation and derived from the same root cause.<sup>21</sup>

Blavatsky’s unremitting critiques of both religious orthodoxies and scientific materialism resonated with Yeats, whose rejection of mainstream religion did not necessarily mean that he was ready to flee into the arms of science. Blavatsky had steered a middle course between the polarities of science and religion (one that preserved science’s quest for knowledge) while at the same time insisting that true scientific understanding extended beyond matter to include supersensible phenomena, that is, those phenomena of nature that are not reducible to scientific laws nor can be apprehended by the immediate senses. To Blavatsky, such a middle ground was best represented by Theosophy because of its view that spirit, while outside matter, is not a subjective phenomenon, but instead has a reality accessible only to those endowed with heightened sensibilities, such as the spiritual adepts or Mahatmas. Initiation into esoteric mysteries, for Blavatsky, was the key process by which knowledge of ultimate reality was attainable.

Blavatsky opened doors for the exploration of psychic and spiritual states that defied rational, positivist comprehension and heightened the value of the creative imagination. Artists like Yeats were less ruffled by the raging controversy about whether Blavatsky’s spiritual interlocutors, the Masters, were real or not, or whether her occult transmissions were genuine

<sup>21</sup> See Graf, *Talking to the Gods*, p. 42. Blavatsky writes: “*Daemon* and *Deus* at one and the same time; the sun and moon, good and evil, God and Demon” (H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1 [Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1979], p. 394).

or concocted. Indeed, Yeats had no trouble in coming to terms with the Masters as stimuli to the poetic imagination, whose visualization as inhabitants of the remote Himalayas—and as keepers of secret knowledge—would initiate the spiritual regeneration he believed would surely come to Ireland. Yeats turned this understanding into a source of poetic inspiration: highlighting the occultist's imagination served to show that the magus, far from being a passive medium, was in control of—and indeed actively shaped—the visions generated by magical practices. Absorbing a key notion of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was convinced that memories are not isolated but instead are parts of one great memory that can be evoked by symbols.<sup>22</sup> Yet the interlocutor of such communications was Theosophically inspired, with the figure of the Masters assuming the role of the dialogic other.<sup>23</sup>

Exemplifying the marked interest in dialogism in Yeats's canon is his poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1919). "Hic" (the objective self) debates with "Ille" (the inner or subjective self) on whether selfhood can be conceived as anything other than nondialectical:

*Ille:* By the help of an image  
I call to my own opposite, summon all  
That I have handled least, least looked upon.

*Hic:* And I would find myself and not an image.<sup>24</sup>

In the penultimate stanza, "Hic" belligerently asks why the search for an unseen reality should be more compelling than self-understanding, to which "Ille" responds:

<sup>22</sup> Writing about the slaves thrown overboard a ship transporting them, Jenny Sharpe describes their lost voices as emanating not simply from a "personal memory . . . but a collective one already formed through a transmission of stories and a way of being in the world indelibly marked by slavery and its legacy" ("The Archive and Affective Memory in M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*," p. 469).

<sup>23</sup> See Gauri Viswanathan, "The Ordinary Business of Occultism," *Critical Inquiry*, 27, no. 1 (2000), 1–20, for an analysis of the racial dynamics in the occult correspondence between the Theosophist A. P. Sinnett and the Masters (also known as Mahatmas), which was often belligerent and cantankerous and echoed the tensions between British colonial administrators and the Indians employed in their service.

<sup>24</sup> W. B. Yeats, "Ego Dominus Tuus," in *The Poems: Second Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 161.

*Ille.* Because I seek an image, not a book.  
 Those men that in their writings are most wise  
 Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.  
 I call to the mysterious one who yet  
 Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
 And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
 And prove of all imaginable things,  
 The most unlike, being my anti-self,  
 And standing by these characters disclose  
 All that I seek; and whisper it as though  
 He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud  
 Their momentary cries before it is dawn,  
 Would carry it away to blasphemous men.

(“Ego Dominus Tuus,” p. 163)

Such expressions involved stripping away the speaking voice of its historical baggage and even its own personality. Speaking through other voices is more than a trope of the poetic imagination. When combined with the widespread interest in the sciences of ventriloquism, hypnotism, and mesmerism, polyvocality is constitutive of modernity itself, deliberately fragmenting centers of authority into multiple speaking selves. Like the ventriloquists and mediums that define occult practices, historical subjects would have to see themselves outside their historical moment.

No work better illustrates the stepping out of time and space than Yeats’s “The Manuscript of ‘Leo Africanus,’” which, as a lesson in the simultaneous experience of history, dramatizes the author’s engagement with the spirit of a sixteenth-century African-Arab scholar, linguist, and poet known in history as Leo Africanus. George Mills Harper calls Yeats’s occult encounters with the spirit of Leo Africanus “possibly the most extensive and varied series of psychological researches ever recorded by an important creative mind.”<sup>25</sup> By narrating his life of forcible conversion and the secret practice of Islam, Leo’s spirit simultaneously reveals the fissures in Europe’s

<sup>25</sup> George Mills Harper, “Unbelievers in the House’: Yeats’s Automatic Script,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 14, no. 1 (1981), 1–15. Quoted in Brenda Maddox, *Yeats’s Ghosts: The Secret Life of W. B. Yeats* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 83.

understanding of Africa and the limits of Yeats's understanding of Irish history. Echoing Derrida's conception of mystery and secrecy as interruptions of linear history, Leo interrupts Yeats's struggle to achieve an integrated selfhood in which the Anglicized subject can cohabit with the Irish anticolonialist. The whole point of Leo's occult transmissions is to convey to Yeats a world much larger than one's own, one in which colonialism and conversion combined to produce "not wholly stable" identities—identities that Leo, at the same time, acknowledges as instances of the historical changes set in motion by European expansion. Oliver Hennessey illuminates the complicated dynamics of "Leo Africanus" by focusing on Yeats's contradictory identification with Renaissance Europe as a strategy to resist British imperialism: "Ultimately, his mode of cultural resistance becomes a paradoxical identification with the oppressor's past."<sup>26</sup> The succession of identity-swaps—Africa as a stand-in for "England's disorderly antiself," Leo as alternately European and African, and early-twentieth-century Ireland exchanged for early-modern Europe—allowed Yeats to explore the idea of historical cycles through the spirit of Leo Africanus.<sup>27</sup>

Yeats and his wife, Georgie, were convinced that spirits had chosen them personally to receive the hitherto-unrevealed secrets of the universe. No less powerfully felt by them was the belief that spirits of evil intent were trying to disrupt the flow of communication with lies and false information. In 1912, during a period when he frequented many séances, Yeats first felt contact from a spirit claiming the name of Leo. Even though the spirit had a strong Irish accent, this voice from the dead described himself as a Moorish writer and explorer. Claiming to have been with Yeats since childhood as his alternative or opposite self, Leo asks the poet to write to him "as if to Africa." In a curious conflation of the past life of a dead being with textual presence, Yeats's discovery of Leo's original name comes about only after researching *Chambers Biographical*

<sup>26</sup> Oliver Hennessey, "Talking with the Dead: Leo Africanus, Esoteric Yeats, and Early Modern Imperialism," *ELH*, 71 (2004), 1035.

<sup>27</sup> See Hennessey, "Talking with the Dead," p. 1027.

*Dictionary*, where Yeats learns that Leo was formerly Al Hassan Ibn-Mohammad al-Wezar Al-Fasi, a sixteenth-century Spanish Arab poet and explorer captured as a Roman slave and subsequently forced to convert to Christianity. Leo was a Spanish Moor born in Granada, exiled to North Africa after the invasion of Granada by a Catholic coalition, and later kidnapped and placed in the service of Pope Leo X, who gave Leo the slave his Christian name. Leo's position of exile bears a remarkable resemblance to Yeats's dual estrangement from Ireland and Catholicism under British rule (Catholicism invoked as the colonized religion of otherness in his homeland), a point that Leo emphasizes in his push to make Yeats enlarge his understanding of world history.

Leo's insistence that Yeats write to him as if he were still living among the Moors and the Sudanese acquires a particular poignancy in the context of his servitude, forcible conversion, and subsequent repression of his African self—at once the source and context of his continual mourning for a past that endures in his interlocution. To recall Derrida, Leo's Christian conversion dispensed his former religious identity to the status of a repressed secret, as if one were "keeping within oneself that whose death one must endure" (*The Gift of Death*, p. 9). In his communications with Yeats, Leo, defying his condition of slavery, comes across as perpetually migratory, multilingual, religiously adaptive, and therefore not easily captured by the fixed ethnographic categories that served the empire so well: "If I have been sent to give you confidence & solitude it is because I am a brooding & braggart shade, & even in this I am not wholly stable, for at times I am aware of a constraint upon my thoughts or my passion deepens *because of one who is remote & silent & whom while I lived in Rome I was forbidden to call Mahomet*" ("Leo Africanus," p. 29; emphasis added). In Yeats's text, Leo Africanus is strategically poised between the figure of a ghost and social personhood, the repressed secret of Mahomet holding Leo within an indeterminate space. Indeed, it is worth recalling Avery Gordon's observation that ghost and social figure have to be conjoined in order for a haunting to take place. The ghost that is not simply a dead or missing person cannot, in the words of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, be

“reduced to a mere sequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace.”<sup>28</sup>

Narrated through a tin trumpet and all the paraphernalia of mediums and séances, Leo’s story of Africa, colonialism, and slavery makes him both guide and anticolonialist. That is to say, he appears to be a native informant when his records of travels are incorporated into European writings on geographical exploration. But Leo is also fiercely an anticolonialist, as when his disembodied voice taunts Yeats for his skepticism and rationality as prime causes for the poet’s failure to recognize the “not wholly stable” identity produced by colonialism. Leo chides Yeats for being a man of his age: “You only recognize what in the best opinion of your time has been proved by deductive science. . . . You insist on considering spirits as unknown causes, though they have interfered in your own life often enough” (“Leo Africanus,” p. 28). Flamboyantly heteroglossic, Leo represents transgression itself in his ability to communicate with all people: the dead, the living, Africans, Arabs, Europeans; he even enters the body of a rabbit. Leo’s self-narration begins as a posthumous statement: “After my death in battle . . .” (“Leo Africanus,” p. 30). The fact that he has memories, like a living person, is explained by the idea that “memory is not seated in the physical body . . . but in a more delicate body” (“Leo Africanus,” p. 33). Leo’s memory, even in death, requires him to be known, however provisionally and skeptically, as if he were still living, and such an imaginative gesture both apprehends his social figuration and challenges his appearance as a ghost. Leo remarks that the delicate body housing memory is a function of the *Spiritus Mundi* that Yeats’s “century has named the unconscious.” But the world in which images are formed is a radically social world: “for we can share each memory like souls drifting together—& build a common world, just as it sometimes happened that two sleeping men, [or] a sleeping man & woman will share the same dream” (“Leo Africanus,” p. 34).

<sup>28</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972, 1991), p. 216. See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 20.

Most importantly, the voice of Leo's spirit reaches Yeats not as private, mystical experience but as public history. Nothing in the text conveys this effect more than Leo's conjoining of two geographies to show the scale of a world much larger than the one dominated by the West: "side by side with the streets of Fez, or desert I seemed to see another world that was growing in weight & vividness, the double of yours, but vaster & more significant" ("Leo Africanus, p. 31). Such a vision cannot be told in the sequential narratives of Western history but requires a simultaneous experiencing of seemingly disparate moments in time and space, akin to the experience of viewing the Mithraeum in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. Yeats's use of the occult collapses the binaries between us versus them, opening the door to an exploration of hidden or repressed histories that dislocates the "local" as the time and space of immediate experience. It is precisely this disruption of the local that enables the writing of another kind of history in which an ethical knowledge of the effects of religious conversion and crypto-conversion can be produced. Such knowledge literally requires the dead to speak, and not simply through the texts that appropriate and become mute stand-ins for the actual voices of historical subjects. Yeats's agonistic encounter with Leo's spirit in the geographies of the historical imagination shifts the register of discovering the past through language or textuality. Leo appears before the poet through mediumship, to be sure, but the vivid reality of other worlds beyond Yeats's immediate grasp comes about through the ethical turn represented by Leo's archaeological method of reconstructing the poet's memory of forgotten, repressed histories. In Derridean terms, such reconstruction "ma[kes] possible a new understanding of ethical responsibility, transforming the good from an objective thing to the relation to the other . . . on the basis of which the subject can be spoken of as responsible."<sup>29</sup>

Leo's occult transmission to Yeats aimed at providing a corrective to the work that Leo performed in the Pope's service, when, as a new convert to Christianity, he was asked to write

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Hanson, "Returning (to) the Gift of Death: Violence and History in Derrida and Levinas," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 67 (2010), 11.

historical tracts, particularly about his “homeland” of North Africa (which, of course, was his land of exile, not his homeland at all). Not only were the tracts written in the condition of slavery, but Leo Africanus’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa, written in Arabicke and Italian by Ion Leo A More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie* (1600) was later appropriated as a pro-imperialist text, thus wresting from the author any control he may have had over the meaning of his work. Reflecting on this history, Michael Taussig writes: “Whatever the role of this spirit in the formation of the modern antiseif, . . . it comes as somewhat of a shock to be informed by Margaret Hodgen in her *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* that Leo Africanus declared that Negroes not only led a beastly life but ‘were utterly destitute of reason.’”<sup>30</sup> Taussig’s incredulous response is possible only because of the way this work circulated in subsequent anthropological accounts, turning Leo Africanus into a native informant. Such indeed is the legacy of Leo Africanus when he enters the anthropological literature.<sup>31</sup>



Why would an obscure work in the Yeats corpus be important at all as a key text in my effort to understand crypto-conversion? After all, Yeats’s interest in occultism has always been a thorny issue for literary critics, many of whom are reluctant to engage with it, other than to see occultism as offering Yeats an elaborate repertoire of symbols that eventually spring free from their occult moorings and get reconstituted as a defining feature of his imagination. As Leon Surette puts it, “like Pound’s fascism, Yeats’s occultism has been

<sup>30</sup> Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 215.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Hennessey, in contrast, observes that Leo’s willful shifts in persona, which appear to suggest that he had been co-opted by his captors and turned into a native informant, are indicative of his efforts to resist being reduced to a single identity, his critiques of Western culture from the standpoint of an African coexisting with his critiques of African civilization from a Eurocentric point of view. Hennessey notes: “[Leo Africanus] is alternately European and African, without necessarily promoting one position over the other. The same operations can be seen to play out in Yeats’s textual explorations of his spiritual other” (“Talking with the Dead,” p. 1029).

a subject not to be raised in polite company" (*The Birth of Modernism*, p. 9). Much the same has been said about Yeats's brief flirtation with Theosophy and his involvement with the Order of the Golden Dawn. To some extent Yeats himself privileged the poetic over the occult, especially in the introduction to the 1937 edition of *A Vision*, in which he relates the material more emphatically to his literary writings than to his occult experimentations, claiming that the spirits enriched his imagination and gave him "metaphors for poetry."<sup>32</sup> "Effectively, Yeats created a frame for the 1937 edition that presents it as a book about his poetry rather than a book about occultism" (Graf, *Talking to the Gods*, p. 39). Yet I will argue that the relevance of Yeats's involvement with occult systems as varied as Theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn is precisely that, as a response to the crisis of knowledge, occultism challenged the received developmental narratives of official knowledge and salvaged obliterated histories, cultures, and beliefs by means that were at once nontemporal and nonspatial.

In their response to the crisis of science and knowledge in the late nineteenth century and in their symptomatic questioning of representationalism in aesthetics and philosophy, such occult traditions can loosely be described as anticipating some of the ethical concerns of poststructuralism and postmodernism. If figurative and representational art constrained the colonized world, then release from representationalism provided a freer way of expressing the historical experience of colonization. The search for a higher reality beyond matter was simultaneously a search for ways of expressing the historical experience of oppression and subjugation as well as a means of bypassing the Manichaean binarism of good versus evil. The unresolved tension between the spiritual and the secular, with all that the struggle implied for the modern subject, emerged as constitutive of a new dialectic of modernity. As Alex Owen astutely observes, occultism addressed this tension and sought to negotiate the oppositional deployment of a contingent and transcendent self

<sup>32</sup> W. B. Yeats, "Introduction to 'A Vision,'" from *A Packet for Ezra Pound*, in W. B. Yeats, *A Vision: The Revised 1937 Edition*, ed. Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 1937, 2005), p. 7.

as formulated through competing accounts of subjectivity, enacting what she pithily terms “the ambiguities of the modern.”<sup>33</sup>

In introducing a note of ambivalence as to whether *A Vision* is about poetry or about occultism, Yeats implicitly suggests the existence of two tracks of reading, with one set of readers likely to seek esoteric meanings, while the other reads for exoteric content.<sup>34</sup> Yeats reflected ideas he encountered in Blavatsky’s work, especially those that distinguished between *esoteric* and *exoteric*, which served to illustrate that while memory preserves the cross-flow of religious experiences, texts stabilize and anchor them in ritual traditions. Blavatsky shifted the weight of truth in religion from the exoteric to the esoteric, thereby creating a space for the recovery of core meanings through such eclectic means as memory, imagination, and the paranormal faculties. Indeed, Wouter Hanegraaff has persuasively argued that secular modernity provided a context for the emergence of occultism, which can be understood, in his view, as “*all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world . . . from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.*”<sup>35</sup>

As a starting point for reconstructing the discarded scraps of religious history, Blavatsky proposed a radical reorientation of method, spurning the philological approach favored by Orientalist scholarship. Notwithstanding the sympathetic contributions of a Max Müller or a William Jones, she held Orientalist philology responsible for promoting a hierarchy of

<sup>33</sup> See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 238–57.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Melzer, in *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014], p. xiii). To an extent, Yeats rehabilitated imagination as a knowledge-producing faculty, challenging reductive approaches to “A Vision” as no more than an exercise in the Romantic imagination. Instead, he refocused attention on the imagination as a trigger of historical critiques that, in effect, blur the divide between esoteric and exoteric. Alex Owen reaffirms the strength of the conviction experienced by Yeats and other occultists that “the ‘spirits’ might be creatures of human invention” but nonetheless reflected “visions of truth” (*The Place of Enchantment*, p. 184).

<sup>35</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 422; emphasis in original.

languages that defined older civilizations as undeveloped, primitive prototypes of Judeo-Christian culture. The grand project motivating her numerous writings aimed to salvage the ruins of civilizations destroyed by imperial conquest and catastrophe, which included submerged continents lost to history. Blavatsky maintained that unlike ancient languages, which can be deciphered by searching for a common origin that then becomes the key to reading other languages, ruins resist the best efforts of cryptographers. Ruins became for her the open, visible sites of gaps in historical memory—gaps that resist interpretive closure.

Blavatsky's references to the knotted cords, or *quipus*, used by the predecessors of the Peruvians as forms of communication served to illustrate her point about the challenges posed by gaps in meaning.<sup>36</sup> Though the *quipus* are recoverable by archaeological research, the community that understood their meaning is no longer alive, and so the meanings of the knots would have presumably vanished with them. Does that then mean the *quipus* can be no more than empty signs, devoid of meaning? Blavatsky refused to answer in the negative and instead posed a different sort of question: if meaning is known only by interpretive communities, how close to the truth can it be? She restlessly searched for the gaps in history that, when their meanings are revealed, would produce a revolutionary order of understanding, a new form of ethical knowledge restoring plenitude to received narratives. Her archaeological method consisted of gathering citations, passages, annotations, and cross-references dispersed in the texts of ancient authors. Most importantly, she separated the citations from later glosses, as well as the fragments from later reconstructions, in an effort to find traces of thought that had not yet become part of an archive of commentary.<sup>37</sup> Blavatsky's effort, quite simply, was

<sup>36</sup> See Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *A Land of Mystery* (n.d.; rpt. Bangalore: Theosophy Company, 1982), p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> In this endeavor, her method was strikingly similar to that of Nicholas Fréret, cited by Paolo Rossi as one among a handful of eighteenth-century thinkers who sought to find a critical position from which to view all past human history and whose goal was the full integration of Egyptian and Chinese history within the general history of mankind. As early as 1750 Fréret differentiated his methods of study and interpretation from those practiced by scholars of the preceding century, and, according to Jean Pierre de Bougainville, he "weighed these different testimonies and,

to break the archive free from the hold of interpretive communities.

In viewing history as an assemblage of fragments, Blavatsky pushed back against a historiographical method that regarded the achievements of ancient civilizations as part of a disjointed textual archive associated with an irretrievable past—a secret buried in the heart of succeeding civilizations. Or, to cite a previous quote from Derrida, “what one keeps inside at the very moment that there comes into play a new experience of secrecy and a new structure of responsibility as an apportioning of mystery, is the buried memory or crypt of a more ancient secret” (*The Gift of Death*, p. 9). Instead, Blavatsky insisted that the continuing vitality of ancient civilizations was accessible not by interpretive or philological practices, but by a clarifying insight that closely resembled an epiphany of heightened experience. If Christian revelation is produced by divine reckoning and therefore outside history, or in messianic time as Walter Benjamin understood it, then Blavatsky restored to revelation its secular, historical character. Revelation, for her, meant gnosis, the hidden knowledge of spiritual meaning effaced by institutional forms of religion. Invoking the Day of Judgment in its broadest sense as not simply the moment of Christian reckoning but, more importantly, as the day when the unknown but always present histories of the world would be made known (revealed), Blavatsky placed direct, unmediated understanding at the heart of ethical knowledge, or, more accurately, knowledge that is not defined by interpretive communities. The seeping of past religious belief systems into the new religion marks the lingering influence of religious plurality and multiple origins, in which competing ideas keep the idea of a singular, dogmatic truth at bay. Conversion may well be undone by the secret it contains.

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comparing them one to the other, he had the pleasure of remarking an agreement among them by which he himself was astonished” (Bougainville, “Eloge de M. Fréret” [1796], quoted in Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984], p. 191).

## ABSTRACT

Gauri Viswanathan, "Conversion and the Idea of the Secret" (pp. 161–186)

Obsessed with the notion of the secret in his writings on religion, Jacques Derrida uncannily evokes a predecessor with whom he has rarely, if at all, been compared—the Russian occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. This essay argues that Blavatsky's occult writings set the stage for the kinds of speculations on crypto-conversion, conscience, and responsibility that subsequently engaged Derrida. Like Blavatsky, Derrida saw conversion not as change but as retaining whatever it displaces in the form of a secret, persisting as an enduring reminder of supplanted religious beliefs. While Derrida was more interested in conversion as a form of repression that mutually constitutes the old and the new, Blavatsky held a broader and more dynamic view of conversion-as-repression: in describing Christianity's battle against the heterogeneous belief-systems it eventually supplanted, she sought to illuminate conversion as a larger process well beyond the individual and involving religious expansion and consolidation. The essay culminates in a close reading of an occult text, W. B. Yeats's "The Manuscript of 'Leo Africanus,'" that exemplifies the problematics of crypto-conversion as delineated by Blavatsky and Derrida in their respective ways. "Leo Africanus" stages Yeats's encounter with a dead spirit alternatively grasped as his anti-self and historical conscience. A breakthrough in understanding allows Yeats to acknowledge an occluded history—his as much as that of his deceased interlocutor—that can only be told in the terms of crypto-conversion, in this instance of a sixteenth-century African slave forcibly converted to Christianity and turned into a native informant of African history and geography.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida; Helena Petrovna Blavatsky; W. B. Yeats; crypto-conversion; occultism