

Introduction: Exploring the Legacies of Theosophy

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This collection of papers was inspired by a two-day conference held at the University of Sydney in October 2010, and organised by the immediate past president of SSLA, Associate Professor Vrasidas Karalis. Titled ‘The Legacies of Theosophy: Unveiling Mysteries of the Creative Imaginary,’ the symposium considered the vast inheritance of Theosophy in art and culture. This volume itself is a varied and profound look at the idea of creativity and imagination as regards the development of religions. Specifically, of course, each article links back to a connection with the Theosophical Society. Because of this, each sheds new light on the development of religious and cultural ideas around the start of the twentieth century and beyond.

Our issue opens with Dara Tatray, President of the Theosophical Society in Australia. Tatray’s article introduces the substantial impact that Theosophy has had upon the creative arts. She also draws attention to the achievement of the Theosophical society in familiarising the West with now-everyday concepts including karma, reincarnation, meditation and the spiritual path. Her research explores the esoteric teachings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky as a counterpoint to the exclusion of psychic elements in the Enlightenment, rationalist perception of the human, and the universe. Madame Blavatsky is presented as a figure of dissent against the materialistic sciences and dogmatic theology. Tatray’s article traces the curious and ever-changing relationship between theosophical concepts and modern science.

Harry Oldmeadow’s contribution continues this important examination of how the East has inspired the West. His article unpacks the Western perception of India as an exotic and romantic enigma; the source of both fear and excitement. Oldmeadow explores the impact of the East upon the modern European philosophical and literary imagination. He brings to our attention the ongoing transformation of the West under these influences. Oldmeadow examines the German and English Romantics who were excited by Indian scriptures, and the American Transcendentalists who drew influence from a similar source. He also explores the inter-war writers whose adoption of Eastern religio-philosophical ideas are related back to a European cultural crisis. His well-rounded examination concludes with the counter-cultural movements of the 1950s.

Garry W. Trompf considers the employment by Blavatsky of the four schemata of macrohistory (progress, regress, repetition and teleology) in her

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general vision of the past. Trompf places her reworkings of cosmic history into this methodological category in order to examine how the realm of the fantastic and the imaginative take their place in the building of new world concepts in the late 19th century. He argues that Theosophical history was intended to counter materialist science and to establish Indian temporal models as the most appropriate way to explain the history of religions and the esoteric development of humanity. Trompf's paper explores the differences in macrohistorical orientation between *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), both foundational texts for the rebirth of occultism in the West.

Carole M. Cusack examines Gurdjieff's autobiographical memoir and Brook's film adaptation of it, with a view to establishing the ways in which Gurdjieff's status as an enlightened teacher was conveyed in writing and film. It is argued that neither the book nor the film are historical documents, but are symbolically charged portraits of Gurdjieff as a spiritual seeker. However, the purposes underlying the two media differ: Gurdjieff's memoir was addressed to his pupils in the Work, the initiatory esoteric teaching he disseminated; whereas Brook's film was a portrait of the 'enlightened master' for people outside of the Work. Cusack concludes that the spiritual climate of the West has changed since Gurdjieff's death in 1949, and that new audiences of seekers, who are eclectic and do not join the Work, have been attracted to Gurdjieff's teachings through Brook's film.

Johanna Petsche considers the largely unexamined interrelations between the teachings, public personas, and biographies, both factual and mythological, of H. P. Blavatsky and G. I. Gurdjieff. Both figures were pioneers in reviving occult traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in introducing Eastern religious and philosophical ideas to the West. Charismatic and controversial, both courted reputations as charlatan gurus, imposters, and spies, and remain problematic figures, vilified by some while emphatically honoured by others. After an examination of these parallels, Petsche argues that Gurdjieff used recognisable Theosophical terminology, and donned a Blavatsky-like image, when he began his role as a spiritual teacher in Russia in the early twentieth century. As the Theosophical movement was at the height of its popularity at the time, Gurdjieff was, in this way, able to define himself in a way that was acceptable and attractive to society.

Al Boag examines the relationship and sharing of knowledge between Jiddu Krishnamurti, Annie Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater, and Madame Blavatsky. His article argues that the influence of esoteric Christianity and the 'Path of Initiation' have been largely ignored in scholarly analysis of Krishnamurti's teachings. Studying Blavatsky's reworking of eschatology, Boag asks why the importance of Judaeo-Christian ideas has been understated

in the study of her macrohistorical metaphysic. Exploring Biblical texts such as *Enoch* and *Daniel*, Boag illuminates the scriptural origin of Blavatsky's teachings. He provides a thorough account for the 'shortening of the years' based on these sources, weaving together scriptural analysis with the history of the Theosophical Society. Boag also explores the developing belief system of Krishnamurti, tying it to his growing understanding of 'involuntary breathless attention,' a notion that he feels the Theosophical Society has largely suppressed.

Luke Fischer explores the ways in which Rudolf Steiner's narrative of the 'evolution of consciousness, and his esoteric conception of 'Imagination,' inform Owen Barfield's views on metaphor and poetry. Barfield, a thinker, literary scholar, writer, solicitor, and eminent interpreter of Steiner's Anthroposophy, developed Steiner's ideas in relation to semantic history and the poetic imagination. With particular reference to Barfield's *Poetic Diction* and *Saving the Appearances*, Fischer discusses key ideas in Barfield's conception of the poetic imagination, illustrating some of the debts that his works owe to Steiner's philosophy and anthroposophy. Fischer shows that 'Imagination' and the 'evolution of consciousness' are two central, and inseparable, expressions in Barfield's philosophy. For this reason Fischer's treatment of imagination includes close consideration of Barfield's understanding of the 'evolution of consciousness.'

Neil Anderson considers Rudolf Steiner's cultural legacy in twentieth century theatre in the English-speaking world. He focuses on the practical, aesthetic and spiritual indications given by Steiner for a renewal of speech and drama, and shows how these led to a training of the actor. Anderson also examines the ways in which key features of Steiner's spiritual worldview informed the theatrical practices of influential Russian-American theatre practitioner Michael Chekhov, nephew of playwright Anton Chekhov. As Michael Chekhov's theatrical practices has been utilised by non-Anthroposophical practitioners, Anderson questions how one should evaluate Chekhov's method, and how 'Steiner' it really is. Anderson focuses on the text *Lectures on Speech and Drama* (1924), which outlines Steiner's views on the relationships between gesture, speech and drama, the esoteric aspects of the sounds of speech and the significance of character, plot and destiny in drama.

Helen Farley accounts for the pseudo-history of Tarot, exploring the popular belief that the cards are of Egyptian origin. She ties the enigma of Tarot to the enigma of gypsies, exploring the alleged preservation esoteric secrets from an Egyptian priesthood. Her article provides a detailed account of the French and British Egyptomania that fuelled these enduring misconceptions. Farley explores the motivations for wilfully ignoring the Italian Renaissance origin of the cards in favour of the pseudo-legitimacy

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provided by a fanciful foundation. Her article stretches to the present day, examining the romantic ideal of the Gypsy fortune-teller and functions ascribed to Tarot by the New Age movement.

Morandir Armson explores the Theosophical background and symbolism of the Waite-Smith tarot deck, the earliest commercially available, purpose-designed divinatory tarot deck. Armson shows how the deck and its pictorial symbolism drew from the Theosophical background of its creator, Arthur Edward Waite. Focus is first paid to Waite's involvement with various occult societies, as this then provides the context for an analysis of the deck's pictorial symbolism. Using common esoteric interpretations, Armson's analysis demonstrates how Theosophical ideas informed this symbolism. Further, Armson shows that, as the Waite-Smith tarot deck has been disseminated and utilised by wider occult and New Age communities, it has become a passive carrier of Theosophical thought. In this way occult practitioners, and eventually the general community, absorbed many Theosophical concepts without any conscious knowledge of their origins.

Fiona Fraser brings to light her highly original research on Phyllis Campbell, a Theosophical composer. She presents Campbell's work as an early (and substantially unexamined) example of modernism in Australian music. Fraser details the influence of folksong and Eastern scales on her compositions. Campbell's spiritual beliefs are thoroughly explored in Fraser's article. She saw music as a source of revelation and cultural renaissance, and felt that Australia could derive great spiritual benefits from such compositions. Fraser's important discoveries centre on Campbell's dialogue with contemporary visual artists and her desire to transcend the physical world through synaesthetic 'sound colour'. Fraser draws interesting parallels between the musical and visual arts, capturing a Theosophically inspired zeitgeist of Sydney that coalesced various creative movements.

Zoe Alderton's article continues this research trajectory, with an examination of synaesthetic visual arts in Australia. She explores the impact of Leadbeater and Besant, in particular their treatment of 'thought forms', on creative expression. Artists discussed include Roy de Maistre, Grace Cossington Smith, Wassily Kandinsky, and Hilma af Klint. She argues that Theosophical concepts resonated with the aims of abstract art, which became a medium for the refinement and development of humanity. Alderton compares the visual music plates of *Thought Forms* and aura plates of *Man Visible and Invisible* with symbology from abstract art.

Credit is also due to those who presented at 'The Legacies of Theosophy: Unveiling Mysteries of the Creative Imaginary' and do not have articles in this volume. These speakers include Michael Gomes, Alex Norman, Vrasidas Karalis, John Blackwood, Christopher Hartney, and Robert Tulip.