

CULTURE AND COSMOS

A Journal of the History of Astrology and Cultural Astronomy

Vol. 19 no 1 and 2, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter
2015

Published by Culture and Cosmos
and the Sophia Centre Press,
in partnership with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David,
in association with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology
in Culture,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David,
Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, SA48 7ED, UK.
www.cultureandcosmos.org

Cite this paper as: Joscelyn Godwin, 'Astral Ascent in the Occult Revival', *Celestial Magic*, special issue of *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 19, nos. 1 and 2, Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer 2015, pp. 189-206.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue card for this book is available from the British Library

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publishers.

| |
|----------------|
| ISSN 1368-6534 |
|----------------|

Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source

Copyright © 2018 Culture and Cosmos
All rights reserved

Astral Ascent in the Occult Revival

Joscelyn Godwin

Abstract: The occult revival of the later 19th century inherited Neoplatonic and Hermetic ideas of astral ascent and commerce with the planetary spirits, but felt obliged to square these with contemporary discoveries in astronomy. In the 1850s, Andrew Jackson Davis adapted Swedenborgian ideas into a semi-scientific cosmology that served as the norm for spiritualists. In the 1870s, occultism separated from spiritualism and made its own pact with science, with results visible in the works of Emma Hardinge Britten, H. P. Blavatsky, and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. Outside these well-known movements, Cyrus Teed, known as Koresh, taught that the earth is a concave sphere with the heavenly bodies at the center. His system revived the themes of astral immortality through asceticism and an alchemical relation of humans to a closed cosmos. It was the basis for one of America's more successful utopian communities, which outlasted Teed for more than 50 years.

The ascent of the soul through the planetary spheres is one of the archetypal images of the Western esoteric tradition. The classic account is in the *Poimandres*, the first book of the Corpus Hermeticum, where the divine Mind explains to Hermes Trismegistus what happens to the human being before birth and after death.¹ The Hermetic ascent takes for granted the 'Standard Model' of how the cosmos is put together: a model that unites astronomy, psychology (the science of *psyche*, the soul), and metaphysics. Louis Rougier calls it the 'astral religion of the antique world', that was

[f]ormulated by the Pythagoreans, developed in the winged myths of Plato, appropriated by Posidonius of Apamea to Stoic physics, permeated by Chaldaean astrology, expounded by Cicero in the form of a neo-Pythagorean apocalypse in the *Dream of Scipio Africanus*, celebrated in the Emperor Julian's *Discourse on the Sovereign Star* as the religious testament of

¹ See *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation*, ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-7.

Joscelyn Godwin, 'Astral Ascent in the Occult Revival', *Celestial Magic*, special issue of *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 19, nos. 1 and 2, Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer 2015, pp. 189-206.
www.CultureAndCosmos.org

Hellenism; hymned at paganism's close in Hierocles's *Golden Verses*; then, for more than ten centuries, after successively infusing the oriental salvation religions of Judaism, Gnosticism, Mithraism, Christianity, Manicheism, and Islam, it was the veritable faith of the elites of the Mediterranean shores. It survived the triumph of Christianity; it traversed the Middle Ages and inspired the *Divine Comedy*, and received its quietus only with Kepler's new astronomy and Galileo's modern mechanics.²

The Standard Model is spherical, geocentric and dualist. In its classic formulation by Aristotle and, following him, Ptolemy, it consists of a perfect world of eight celestial spheres, enclosing an imperfect world of four elements distinguished by their tendencies towards or away from the center of the system.³ In principle the elements form four concentric spheres, with all the earth compressed in the center and all the fire on the outside, but in practice they are continually stirred up and mingling with each other: hence the mutable condition of the sublunary world. The celestial world, in contrast, is made from a subtle quintessence or aether. From the Moon's sphere outwards, all is self-moving, eternal, and perfect, and consequently all the motions of the stars and planets are circular. The Standard Model terminates with an eighth sphere carrying all the fixed stars, including the twelve constellations of the zodiac. Beyond that, nothing is visible; hence opinions differ. Aristotle posited a Prime Mover (*primum mobile*) as the necessary mechanism that spins the whole celestial world once a day around the static Earth.⁴ Some Hermetic texts insert the thirty-six Decans between that all-encompassing sphere and the zodiac.⁵ The Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus extends the system with a hierarchy of Intelligibles;⁶ Kabbalism does likewise with the ten

² Louis Rougier, *L'origine astronomique de la croyance pythagoricienne en l'immortalité céleste des âmes* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1933), pp. vi-vii. Author's translation.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.8 (1073b-1074a) on the planetary spheres, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 882-83; *On Generation and Corruption*, II.2 (330a-b) on the four elements (ed. cit., pp. 510-11); *On the Heavens*, I.2-3 (269b-270b) on aether (ed. cit., pp. 400-402); on all of these, Ptolemy, *Almagest*, Book I, in *Ptolemy's Almagest*, trans. and annotated G. J. Toomer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII,7-8 (1072b-1074a), pp. 880-82.

⁵ G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (London: John M. Watkins, 1949), vol. III, p. 46, quoting Stobaeus.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.2.8, see Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), pp. 167-8; Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's*

Sephiroth;⁷ Christianity, with the nine orders of angels, makes a third, divine world above (or enclosing) the celestial and elemental worlds. Beyond that is infinite emptiness, or if you prefer, God.

Since the microcosm resembles the macrocosm, the human body corresponds to the elemental world, the soul to the celestial. At least, that is the exoteric version. In the Neoplatonism that became the mainstay of esoteric anthropology, the human being is threefold. To *soma*, the body, and *psyche*, the soul, it adds the *nous*.⁸ That translates as ‘mind’, ‘heart’, ‘soul’, ‘intellect’, ‘mood’, ‘reason’, ‘discretion’ or ‘judgment’; so evidently English has no word for something perfect and eternal, belonging to a state where knowledge and being are one. The *nous* has its home either among the stars, or beyond them. According to Trismegistus, we are here on Earth because our divine part has left that perfect condition to descend through the constricting spheres of the Standard Model.⁹

This is the astral *descent*, a necessary prelude to the present theme and the most imaginative rationale for natal astrology. On its way down through the spheres, the *nous* acquires seven vestures that constitute the *psyche*.¹⁰ Each sphere stamps it with qualities and tendencies, which vary according to the planet’s current position and aspects. By the time the soul enters the body with the baby’s first breath, it bears the imprint of the celestial world as it stood at that moment, recorded in the natal horoscope. It then grows as body and soul, with the knowledge of its divine origin as a dormant potential.

Parmenides I, 1, in *Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 1, also the chart of the hierarchy on p. xxxiii.

⁷ First appearing in the *Sepher Yetzirah*, see *The Book of Creation*, trans. Irving Friedman (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977), pp. 1-2.

⁸ The triad appears in Plato, *Timaeus*, 30b, see *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 1162-63. For the meanings of *nous* or *noos*, see the searchable *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy*,

<http://plato.stanford.edu/search/searcher.py?query=nous> [accessed 20 April 2016].

⁹ See *Hermetica*, I, 12-15, p. 3. Compare Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.7.13, IV.8, pp. 356-64.

¹⁰ Elaborated in Aristeides Quintilianus, *De Musica*, II.17 (87), see *On Music, in Three Books*, ed. and trans. Thomas J. Mathiesen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 152; Macrobius, *In somnium Scipionis*, 12-13, see *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 136.

To the Hermetic philosopher, life on Earth is a preparation for the return to the pre-lapsarian state. The *Poimandres* describes the process.¹¹ At death, the physical body returns to the elements of which it was compounded. The vital energies dissolve in the general reservoir. The psyche, free from its material baggage, rises to the first celestial sphere, that of the Moon. Is it able to renounce or slough off those tendencies that it picked up from the Moon on its way down? If so, it continues upwards and outwards. If not, it wanders around in the sublunary region until it can incarnate again.

Continuing with the Hermetic account, at every celestial sphere the soul has to surrender one of its powers, or at least the negative aspect of it. To the Moon, ruler of generation, it surrenders the ‘power of increasing and diminishing’; at Mercury’s sphere, ingenuity turned to evil purposes; at Venus’s, concupiscence; at the Sun’s, desire for power and ambition; at Mars’s, rashness and violence; at Jupiter’s, the evil impulses that come from wealth; at Saturn’s, falsehood and deceit. ‘And then stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the Ogdoad [the eighth sphere]; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father.’ Even that is not the end for such souls, for ‘having become powers, they enter into god, which is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god’.¹²

Thus the *Poimandres*. Less familiar is the *Apathanatismos*, a unique document from the cult of Mithras, preserved in a fourth-century papyrus manuscript now in Paris.¹³ It instructs the initiate in a process resembling the Hermetic ascent, but in a much more active mode befitting the warrior mentality. When he faces the various hazards, trials and challenges he shouts ‘Silence!’ or bellows like a bull. On meeting each of the Seven Immortal Gods of the cosmos, who are the planetary gods, he does not submit to their judgment but conjures each one to ‘Open the door!’. After passing their spheres he greets the Fates, who appear as seven virgins with serpent heads, and the Lords of the Pole, seven gods with the heads of black bulls. Finally Mithras himself appears, the polar divinity, whom the initiate commands to stay forever in his soul.

¹¹ *Hermetica*, I, 24-26.

¹² *Hermetica*, I, 26.

¹³ English translation, with commentary, in Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic: Rituals and Practical Techniques for the Magus*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan (Rochester, VT.: Inner Traditions, 2001), pp. 98-128.

Deification was not an option in the monotheistic traditions, nor did their concept of man require the *nous*. Exoteric Christianity and Islam kept the Standard Model as their cosmology, but modified the soul's history within it. Souls have no prehistory and only one life; the only judge is God; the only outcome an eternity in Hell, which is probably inside the earth, or in Heaven beyond the cosmic circuits. Dante compromised with the esoteric view in his *Divine Comedy*. He kept the purgative stages of the astral ascent as levels on the Mountain of Purgatory, and made the planetary spheres the lower circles of Paradise. But the fortunate souls in the monotheists' heaven are still souls, not gods or even angels.

With the Renaissance and the rediscovery of the Hermetic and Neoplatonic writings, the possibilities re-expanded. We can call this the first occult revival. The Renaissance magi, true to their Neoplatonic preceptors, saw the process as something to be attempted during life, rather than after it. György Szőnyi chooses the term *exaltatio* for the doctrine, 'according to which man—with the help of certain techniques, including magic—could bring himself into such a state that enables him to leave the body and seek the company of the Deity'.¹⁴ He quotes Pico della Mirandola, who in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, declares that man can attain a state from which he can 'measure all things' and 'become He who made us', and Paracelsus, who claims that man is 'greater than heaven and earth' and that in his creative work he 'establishes a new heaven'.¹⁵ Ficino, in his 'Praise of Philosophy', ended with the promise of the *Golden Verses*: that upon death, the devoted philosopher 'will go straight and free to the upper regions and will ascend beyond human form, having become God of life-giving heaven'.¹⁶ Cornelius Agrippa devoted his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* to the magics of the natural, celestial, and angelic worlds, all accessible because 'not only man being made another world [i.e. a microcosm] doth comprehend all the parts thereof in himself but also doth receive and contain even God himself'.¹⁷

The notion of human exaltation survived the trauma of the Reformation, uniting Protestants, Catholics, and Hermetists in a common esoteric vision.

¹⁴ György E. Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 34.

¹⁵ Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (London: Ginkgo Press, 1985), Vol. III, p. 21 (Letter 13).

¹⁷ Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. 'J.F.' (Hastings: Chthonios Books, 1986), p. 459 (Bk. III, ch. 36).

As examples we need only mention the English magus John Dee (1527-1608), the Hermetic martyr Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the mystic and theosopher Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) and the enigmatic alchemist Cesare della Riviera (ca. 1538-1625). Riviera, writing while Bruno was awaiting martyrdom, conceives of a special type of man he calls the 'Hero'. His goal is the attainment of the second Tree of Life, i.e. the return to the state before the Fall of Man, whether the fall is from the Garden of Eden or through the planetary spheres.¹⁸ Riviera's method is to construct a microcosm in the imagination, comprising both the elemental and the celestial world. Without leaving his chamber, the Hero observes the motions of the stars and the harmony of the spheres, unknown to the vulgar. He populates it with all the elemental and celestial species, free from all corporeality, and fixes them as though in transparent ice. Thereupon the incorporeal and intellectual forms are opened to him.¹⁹ This sounds like the Hermetic initiate conversing with the blessed beyond the eighth sphere, except that the Hero, like the Mithraic initiate, has got there through his own will. Instead of being contained by the Standard Model, he contains it and controls its energies within himself.

Towards the end of this period the Hermetist Thomas Vaughan (1621-1666) writes in a related vein of an art by which a particular spirit can be united to the universal, and nature thereby 'strangely exalted and multiplied'.²⁰ His commentator A. E. Waite remarks that this implies the union of the individual spirit with universal consciousness.²¹ In another work Vaughan advises the reader to 'know the region of light', to 'converse with spirits, and understand the nature of invisible things'; then he will know the Universal Subject.²² In both cases, he seems to be defining the activation of the *nous* while still incarnate.

While these late Hermetists were at work, the Standard Model was breaking down. In 1543 Copernicus's heliocentric system was offered as a better basis for calculating planetary movements. Kepler, refining and testing that model, proved in *Harmonices Mundi* (1619) that the planets orbit the sun not in perfect circles but ellipses. After Galileo's telescope revealed the mountains on the Moon, the phases of Venus, the spots on the

¹⁸ See Cesare della Riviera, *Il mondo magico de gli heroi: Edizione del 1605 in caratteri moderni* (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1986), p. 19.

¹⁹ Riviera, *Il mondo magico*, pp. 93-4.

²⁰ Thomas Vaughan, *The Magical Writings of Thomas Vaughan*, ed. A. E. Waite (London: George Redway, 1888), p. 51.

²¹ Vaughan, *The Magical Writings*, p. 157.

²² Vaughan, *The Magical Writings*, p. 147.

Sun, the moons of Jupiter and the bulges on either side of Saturn, the heavens seemed more like the untidy, mutable world of the elements. Newton confirmed this in his *Principia* (1687) by proving that a single law, universal gravitation, obtains throughout the cosmos, and that the circular movements once thought to be so perfect are just the complex result of the straight-line pull of gravity. The whole cosmos, celestial and elemental worlds alike, was reduced to a uniform condition of materiality, a body without a soul, and so it remains. This I call the 'New Model' of the cosmos and the psyche. Coincidentally, social and political thought tended towards the end-point of Marxism, in which a soulless humanity is reduced to the lowest degree of its previous hierarchy: that of the material earth.

The esotericists of the post-Newtonian world could hardly deny the astronomical superiority of the New Model, and their spiritual cosmography easily adapted to it. That God should be at the center of the universe rather than at its circumference made metaphorical and metaphysical sense. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) learned in his spiritual conversations that the Creator resides in the Central Sun, around which there are three heavens: Celestial, Spiritual and Natural.²³ But the symbolism of the astral ascent was too good to lose. Swedenborg ascended without leaving his armchair, politely interviewing the inhabitants of the Moon, Jupiter and other 'earths in the universe' and sometimes being taken up in the spirit to view them himself.²⁴ The prospect for ordinary folk is that, on the leaving the body, each soul gravitates to the place suited to it, whether a heaven or a hell, and continues its life there much as it did on Earth. Yet since Swedenborg's angels claim that they were once humans, there must be some kind of progress in the heavens, and this idea was eagerly taken up by his successors.

A de-Christianized version of Swedenborg's system entered the popular forum in the late 1840s, thanks to Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910), the 'Seer of Poughkeepsie'. Already in his teens, Davis had absorbed much of Swedenborg's doctrine and tested it against his own visionary experiences. His writings, especially *The Principles of Nature* (1847), had a tremendous

²³ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. John C. Ager, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/swd/hh/hh01.htm>, sects. 29-31 [accessed 20 April 2016].

²⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Earths in the Universe*, trans. John Whitehead, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/swd/eiu/eiu03.htm>, sects, 128, 134 [accessed 20 April 2016].

effect.²⁵ They supplied the metaphysical framework for the Spiritualist movement, and in some respects for the whole New Thought and New Age movements that evolved from it. Davis's cosmology, like Newton's, is unitary, except that the substance out of which everything is made varies in its coarseness or subtlety. It manifests in ascending order as Solids, Fluids, Vapors, Ether, Essences, Laws, Principles, Ideas, and finally, Deity.²⁶ Adjacent to the gross elemental states in which we live lies the 'Summer Land', to which we rise when we leave the body at death. Davis assigns it a definite astronomical location, on the opposite side of the Milky Way from the Earth. There it has its own stars, suns, and planets, and so closely resembles the material world that some souls cannot at first believe that they are dead. However, everything there is infinitely more harmonious, beautiful and wisely ordered than on Earth. Once there, we embark on an endless adventure of spiritual activity and development. Davis's Summer Land sounds like the True Earth described by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, or the world beyond the Cave in the *Republic*.²⁷ It also resembles Hūrqualyā, the 'imaginal world' of Persian theosophy that is described as objective but lacking a material substratum.²⁸ But there is a big difference: no particular effort or talent is needed to get to the Summer Land. It is simply the next stop on our evolutionary journey. The Universalists, most optimistic of Christian sects, had prepared the way thither by promising eventual salvation to every soul, either immediately on death or after a period of purgation. Such doctrines were in tune with the times, for the mid-nineteenth century believed in progress on Earth and liked to imagine it continuing in the heavens.

An important innovation in Swedenborg's system is the idea of marriage in heaven, not necessarily between those who were married on Earth but between 'twin souls'. The idea found a warm reception among the American spiritualists and social reformers such as Davis and his wife Mary, the presidential aspirant Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927) and

²⁵ See Antoine Faivre, 'Magnétisme et spiritisme aux États-Unis dans le milieu du XIXème siècle', in *Des Médiums: Techniques du corps et de l'esprit dans les deux Amériques*, ed. Silvia Mancini and Antoine Faivre (Paris: Imago, 2012), pp. 135-66.

²⁶ Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land* (Rochester: Austin Publishing Co., 1909), p. 51.

²⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, 110b-111c, pp. 91-92; *Republic*, 515c-d, 748.

²⁸ See Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 75-79.

Thomas Lake Harris (1823-1906), of whom more below. It was a time when women's rights were in hot debate, and the idealized Victorian marriage was being criticized as sexual slavery. The doctrine taught that while every man and woman has a twin soul, few are lucky enough to have found, much less married, him or her. Most will have to wait until after death to reunite with their other half and continue their evolution as a 'bi-unity' or an androgynous angelic being. Meanwhile the Free Love movement demanded the right for men and women to seek their destined 'affinity'.²⁹

Mormonism, which took doctrinal form in the same decade as Davis's revelations (1840s), had its own version of the ascent. In the later revelations of Joseph Smith (1805-1844), as with Swedenborg, there are three heavens. They are called, in ascending order, Telestial, Terrestrial and Celestial, and our spiritual condition determines the level to which we go when we die.³⁰ God (who is 'a man in flesh and bone'³¹) dwells with Jesus in the highest subdivision of the celestial heaven, and those who attain it will eventually become gods too, and rule universes of their own. The Mormon practice of baptism for the dead is part of the scheme. It offers to those who died without knowing the message of Jesus and Joseph Smith the opportunity of accepting it. If they do so, they may ascend from the lower heaven they currently inhabit to a higher one, there to rejoin their Mormon descendants. While for Mormons this is mainly a device for gathering one's ancestors and reuniting families, it recalls those spiritualists who made it their duty to educate and redeem lost and depraved souls, and help them forward in their evolution. Likewise there is an echo of the twin souls in the Mormon practice of 'sealing' marriages for all eternity. In Mormon doctrine, no one can attain the highest heaven without being thus married and sealed, and that presumably includes both Jesus and God, endowed like Hindu deities with their female *shaktis*.

The messages of the spiritualist mediums and the paranormal phenomena of the séance room satisfied their auditors for a while, reassuring them that there was a reality beyond the material world, that death is not the end, and that their loved ones were awaiting them in the

²⁹ See Cathy Gutierrez, 'Deadly Dates: Bodies and Sex in Spiritualist Heavens', in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 309-32.

³⁰ Joseph Smith, *Doctrines and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Books, 1880), Section 76.70-98.

³¹ Smith, *Doctrines and Covenants*, Section 120.32.

future state. But it did not give its believers anything more to do than to sit in circles, join progressive causes, and lead a moral life. The general banality of spirit communications and the unmaskings of fake phenomena gradually sapped the energy from the movement.

Two things changed during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. One was the emergence of mediums who were not passive channels, but asserted their own spiritual authority. Some examples, beside Davis, are Thomas Lake Harris (1823-1906) and John Murray Spear (1804-1887), who led communities on the strength of their daily commerce with higher worlds; Anna Kingsford (1846-1888), medical doctor and animal rights defender, who developed from her visions a new Christian Hermetism; and Lady Caithness, Duchess of Pomar (1830-1895), whose self-identification with Mary, Queen of Scots made her a prophet as well as a patron of the movement. The other was the second occult revival. During the 1870s a new movement emerged from a blend of Hermetism, Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah and Behmenist theosophy. Whether or not there was a hidden hand directing it, similar metaphysical schemes appeared from three independent and influential sources. They were Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875), a black American clairvoyant; Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), an English medium and inspired lecturer; and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society. All three had past histories as mediums under spirit control, but had become authorities in their own right.³²

The system of this occult revival revolves around a central spiritual sun, the source of all.³³ It emanates rays that are co-eternal with it, but in some sense individualized as ‘spirits’ – presumably equivalent to Plato’s *nous*. These set out on a journey through countless states and transformations lasting for aeons of cosmic time. Eventually they arrive at the human state, where the spirit makes a trinity with the soul and the body. Here we shift perspective from the spirit to the soul, the seat of consciousness both in life

³² The definitive work on Randolph is John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Marc Demarest’s exhaustive research on Emma Hardinge Britten is available at the website ‘Chasing Down Emma’, <http://ehbritten.blogspot.com/> [accessed 20 April 2016] and in his annotated edition of Britten’s *Art Magic* (Forest Grove: Typhon Press, 2011).

³³ For comparative examples of the system, see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 295-6, 303-5.

and after death. The soul is made from ethereal matter and is not naturally immortal. It can only achieve immortality through union with the spirit. If it succeeds in this, after death the soul and the spirit form an inseparable and immortal individual who continues its pilgrimage as a god or angel and eventually returns to its source, yet even then is not annihilated. If however the soul has failed to make contact with the immortal spirit during life, the spirit abandons it at death. The soul is left to roam the elemental world like the impotent shades in the Graeco-Roman Hades, until it dissolves. Just as a corpse resembles the living person for while, so these cast-off souls may retain memories and opinions that make them seem conscious if they are evoked in the séance room. Randolph and Blavatsky greatly offended the spiritualists by telling them that the self-declared spirits of their loved ones were nothing but these ‘astral shells’, and Emma Hardinge Britten could never bring herself to believe it.³⁴ This doctrine of conditional immortality seems to me a re-formulation of the Hermetic ascent. There, too, it is the rare soul that succeeds in passing all seven planetary spheres to exit the cosmic round, escape the necessity of rebirth, and become a god. All the rest are recycled, body and soul.

The second occult revival was a group effort, for all the contentions between its members, by three prophetic types. First were those rare men and women who could put themselves into a clairvoyant or lucid state, control it to some degree, and report on what transpired there. Beside those already mentioned (Swedenborg, Davis, Randolph, Harris, Blavatsky, Kingsford), these include Charles W. Leadbeater (1854-1934), who dominated the second generation of the Theosophical Society, and Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who left it to form the Anthroposophical Society. All made the Hermetic ascent, or at least set foot on the threshold of higher worlds, while still alive (though whether there is any truth in what they report is another question entirely; Swedenborg, at least, says that the spirits often lie!). A second type acted as channel for higher intelligences through speech or automatic writing, but with a more critical and active participation than the common trance mediums. Such were Emma Hardinge Britten, John Murray Spear, the clergyman medium William

³⁴ See Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), pp. 131-2, 138; Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, pp. 92-93, 110-12; Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles; or, Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth. A Complete Historical Compendium of the Great Movement Known as 'Modern Spiritualism'* (New York: William Britten, 1884), pp. 2-5.

Stainton Moses (1839-1892), Helena Roerich (1879-1955), wife of the painter Nicolas Roerich, and Alice Bailey (1880-1949), whose channelled writings became a mainstay of the New Age.³⁵ A third type was equally influential in its revelations of the cosmic order and the destiny of man, but such people were not themselves gifted, and used mediums to obtain their information. Examples are Allen Kardec (1804-1869), founder of the French school of *spiritisme*; William H. Dower (1866-1937), founder of the Temple of the People and scribe of *Theogenesis*; Max Theon (1848-1927), founder of the ‘Cosmic Philosophy’, who experimented with over a hundred sensitives before finding the best medium in his wife, Mary Woodroffe (1843-1908); the magus Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), whose entranced wife Rose Kelly (1874-1932) opened the *Book of the Law*; and the poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), whose vision of the gyres and other poetic images were likewise given through his wife Georgie (1892-1968).³⁶ These examples, by the way, alert us to the varieties of sexual magic that were the great secret of many such figures and their cults.

Theon writes of the danger of this process to the sensitive medium, and of how she has to cross a region he calls the ‘Hostile’ in order to reach the higher regions of the spirit and soul.³⁷ (This might correspond, in Hermetism, to the trials of the planetary spheres.) Once across it, she arrives in the place where twin souls sleep, pending their incarnation.³⁸ One can hardly miss the parallel with Plato’s myth of the androgyne as the primordial human condition.³⁹ Just as the Hermetic ascent awaits us all after death, while the initiate attempts it during life, some occultists enjoyed union with their twin souls here and now. Thomas Lake Harris, leader of the Brotherhood of the New Life in New York State and California, had a human wife who consented to a sexless marriage because

³⁵ Britten did not name her spirit guides. Spear claimed inspiration from the ‘Association of Beneficents’, Moses from ‘Imperator+’, Mme. Roerich from ‘Morya’, and Bailey from ‘The Tibetan’.

³⁶ Kardec, Crowley and Yeats are amply documented. For the lesser-known examples, see *Theogenesis: The Third Section of the Ancient Stanzas of Dzyan* (Halcyon: Temple of the People, 1981), pp. xxv-xxvi; Christian Chanel, ‘De la “Fraternité Hermétique de Louxor” au “Mouvement Cosmique”: L’oeuvre de Max Theon’ (unpublished PhD thesis, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1993), p. 359.

³⁷ Chanel, ‘De la “Fraternité Hermétique”’, pp. 779-84.

³⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chanel, John Patrick Deveney, eds., *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Historical and Practical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism* (York Beach: Weiser, 1995), pp. 15-16.

³⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 189d-e, p. 542.

his true bride was the Lily Queen, a spirit who dwelt in a sublime region called Lilistan.⁴⁰ As an accomplished spirit traveller, Harris was able to visit her, and somehow or other they bred spirit children. Anna Kimball, an American physician, psychometrist and ex-Free Lover, was the first of many New Thought leaders enthused by the idea of sex with spirits.⁴¹ It worked both ways: men could rise to the spirit worlds, like Harris, and father children there, while women could entertain spirit husbands, in which case their children would surpass their physical fathers. Randolph, too, taught that the highest goal of sexual magic was to bring down superior souls into one's children.⁴²

The chief attraction of occultism was that it offered not just theory or consolation but practical instruction. The fruits of spiritualism were bland by comparison, nor did the Theosophical Society deliver on its early promise to investigate the occult powers of man and teach how to acquire them. Just as Socrates said that the philosopher practises dying here and now in order to be prepared for the event,⁴³ so practical occultism taught techniques for the separation of the soul from the body, astral travel and contact with higher beings. The methods of choice were the magic mirror, sex and drugs—the trio consecrated by Randolph and adopted by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor⁴⁴—and ceremonial magic, which reached its apogee in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Both arose during the 1880s, and had an influence out of all proportion to their small membership.

Among twentieth-century occultists, Crowley experimented with another form of astral ascent when he set out to explore the thirty Aethyrs.⁴⁵ These are part of the Enochian system of magic revealed to the

⁴⁰ On Lilistan and its Lily Queen, see Arthur A. Cuthbert, *The Life and World-Work of Thomas Lake Harris, Written from Direct Personal Knowledge* (Glasgow: C.W. Pearce & Co., 1908), pp. 217-19.

⁴¹ On Anna Kimball, see 'Six Degrees of George Chainey' on Marc Demarest's website <http://ehbritten.blogspot.com/2013/02/six-degrees-of-george-chainey.html> [accessed 20 April 2016].

⁴² See the first goal of the 'Mysteries of Eulis' in Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, p. 337.

⁴³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor*, pp. 68-77.

⁴⁵ See Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012), pp. 197-203.

Elizabethan magus John Dee in 1584 through his scryer Edward Kelley.⁴⁶ Each of the Aethyrs, or Airs as Dee called them, is a distinct zone between the Earth and the sphere of fire, inhabited by its own spirits. Each has a Call that enables the adept to ascend through it, beginning with no. 30 and ending with no. 1. In 1900, while he was in Mexico, Crowley started experimenting with the Enochian Calls using a crystal, but could not get beyond the first two Aethyrs.⁴⁷ Nine years later he succeeded in completing the course, with the help of Victor Neuburg, during a month-long magical retreat in the Algerian desert. The process was hazardous, especially when Crowley was possessed by the demon Choronzon and tried to kill Neuburg, but Perdurabo ('I will endure') lived up to his name. He was probably the first person since Enochian times to have run the gauntlet of all thirty Aethyrs. After that, he was in no doubt of his status as Magister Templi and vehicle for the law of the New Aeon.

Another place where old magical texts were put to experimental test was the Gruppo di Ur, an Italian association of the 1920s led by the Pythagorean mathematician and freemason Arturo Reghini (1878-1946) and the traditionalist philosopher Julius Evola (1898-1974). They published the Mithraic ritual mentioned above, with a commentary that sets it in a context of Kundalini yoga and Tantric practices.⁴⁸ By 'magic' they meant the science of self-realization, and the ritual and its commentary were intended as an aid to the process. Like the Enochian Calls, the Mithraic ritual makes high demands on the initiate, presupposing a strongly developed active imagination, so that whatever is commanded to appear before the inner senses appears with no less reality than the external world. Someone trained in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola might have an inkling of the process, though of course the purpose is very different: it is deification through defying the gods.

The whole question of the soul's ascent took on a new aspect in the teachings of Theosophy and its offshoots. In the Mahatma Letters⁴⁹ and

⁴⁶ See Meric Casaubon, ed., *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years, Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits* (New York: Magickal Childe Publishing, 1992), pp. 139-52.

⁴⁷ See Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ See Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, pp. 98-128.

⁴⁹ *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K. H. Transcribed and Compiled by A. T. Barker*, ed. Christmas Humphreys and Elsie Benjamin (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1979). See especially pp. 75-76 (Letter XIII).

Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*,⁵⁰ in Rudolf Steiner's writings on evolution,⁵¹ and in Alice Bailey's communications from the Theosophical Mahatma Djwhal Khul,⁵² human fate is intimately linked with that of the planets themselves. Blavatsky and her sources unfurl a formidably complex scheme of evolution through Root Races and Rounds. To simplify it for now, the main principle is an expansion of the Hermetic descent and ascent to a planetary scale, and even beyond. According to Theosophical prehistory, the whole of life on earth began in a purely spiritual state, and became progressively denser as the planet itself materialized. That is the point at which we find ourselves today. In the Theosophical system the other planets in the solar system seem dead and uninhabited to material science, because the life-waves on them are occupying their non-material counterparts. That is our destiny, too, as we become progressively more spiritualized and complete the cycle by returning to our original condition—but with the harvest of experience behind us.

In Rudolf Steiner's version of the Theosophical cosmogony, the present Earth is the middle of a sequence of seven planetary epochs, similarly defined as a descending and ascending cycle.⁵³ Behind us are the Saturn, Sun and Moon epochs; ahead, those of Jupiter, Venus and Vulcan. As the Earth itself evolved, extruding first the Sun, then the Moon from itself, various classes of cosmic beings provided the multiple vehicles with which the human being operates.

Alice Bailey's teachings speak more of the individual's experience of death, as a threefold process of Restitution, Elimination and Integration.⁵⁴ At death, the physical body is discarded, and so is the etheric body. The Restitution is the return of those bodies, with their atoms and cells, to their originating source. Elimination takes place in full consciousness, now centred in the astral body and the mental vehicle. This is probably the equivalent of the Hermetic ascent through the planetary spheres, since

⁵⁰ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1888).

⁵¹ Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmic Memory: Prehistory of Earth and Man*, trans. Karl E. Zimmer (Hudson: Steinerbooks, 1987).

⁵² For a brief summary, see Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (New York: Lucis Publishing Co., 1922), p. 96.

⁵³ Steiner, *Cosmic Memory*, pp. 156-64.

⁵⁴ Alice Bailey's teachings on the subject are conveniently collected in *Death, the Great Adventure. Compiled by Two Students from the Writings of Alice A. Bailey and the Tibetan Master, Djwhal Khul* (New York: Lucis Publishing Co., 1985); here cited, pp. 81-83.

what is eliminated is the emotional and mental tendencies that have accumulated around the soul. Integration seems to correspond to whatever happens once the Hermetic initiate has passed the eighth sphere.

Another strain of occultism treated the physical body not as rubbish to be discarded, but as a potential sharer in the soul's immortality. To believers in biblical authority there were the examples of Enoch, who lived 365 years and 'walked with God, and he was not, for God took him' (Genesis 5:24); Elijah, taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (II Kings 2:11); and of course Jesus, who could vanish and reappear at will in tangible form. (The Assumption of the Virgin Mary did not figure among the examples, probably because of anti-Catholic prejudice in the Anglo-Saxon world.) In 1814 the disciples of the English prophetess Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) were sure that she had achieved immortality and would be resurrected, until they were obliged to bury her corpse. The same happened in 1817 with Jemima Wilkinson (1752-1819), the 'Publick Universal Friend' regarded as God's feminine manifestation. The possibility of physical regeneration was the ultimate goal of the New Thought movement, exemplified by Cyrus Teed (1839-1908), the founder of Koreshanity, who disappointed his disciples by dying. Within living memory Mira Alfassa (1878-1973), a former pupil of Max Theon and, more famously, the 'Mother' of Sri Aurobindo's ashram, was believed by her disciples to be on the brink of achieving physical immortality and thus inaugurating a new type of humanity.

The case of Cyrus Teed is so curious and interesting that I will close with it.⁵⁵ He was a physician and alchemist in Utica, a flourishing city in Central New York, who was visited by an angel in 1869. The angel revealed a great cosmological secret: that the earth is a concave sphere, and that we live on the inner surface of it. The sphere is about 100 miles thick, and going outwards, or from our point of view downwards, it consists of seventeen layers: five geological strata, five mineral layers, and seven

⁵⁵ Primary sources are Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed], *The Cellular Cosmology, or The Earth a Concave Sphere* (Esterro: The Koreshan Unity, Inc., 1983); Sara Weber Rea, *The Koreshan Story* (Esterro: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1994); Cyrus R. Teed, *Illumination of Koresh. Marvelous Experience of the Great Alchemist Thirty Years Ago, at Utica, N. Y.* (Esterro: Guiding Star Publishing House [1900]). The following account is summarized from Joscelyn Godwin, *Upstate Cauldron: Eccentric Spiritual Movements in Early New York State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 217-27. The same book includes chapters on Jemima Wilkinson, Joseph Smith, Andrew Jackson Davis, John Murray Spear, Thomas Lake Harris, H.P. Blavatsky, and Paschal Beverly Randolph.

metallic shells, the outermost one being pure gold. Going inwards or upwards from the surface on which we live, there are seven spheres corresponding to the planets, then a solar sphere, and at the center a star. This astral center has dark and light sides, and its rotation is the cause of night and day.

After his revelation, Teed assumed the name of Koresh and devoted the rest of his life to teaching his doctrine of 'Koreshanity' and gathering disciples.⁵⁶ If you raise objections to his cosmology, you can be sure he had an answer to them, and besides, in 1897 he proved by experiment that the earth's surface is concave.⁵⁷ On a long stretch of beach in Florida using state-of-the-art surveying technique, his team extended a perfectly straight 'air line'. It began eleven feet above the ground, and after four miles it met the surface, just as he predicted. More relevant to our subject is the Koreshan vision of a closed system in perpetual motion. When animal, vegetable, or mineral matter decays on Earth, its waste products flow upwards or inwards to the 'great alchemico-organic battery' of the central star, which sends them back as spiritual substances to the outer shells. The seven planetary spheres are loci at which this spirit-matter accumulates on its way up and down, or in and out.

In Koreshan doctrine, humanity is a microcosm of all this. Jesus Christ is its central star, and the seven planets correspond to seven types of man. When we die, our bodies join in the general alchemical interchange of matter and spirit, while our consciousness waits in the spirit world for its next embodiment. But our true destiny is to become as Jesus was. His bodily nature was unique because he had been conceived without sexual intercourse. At his death, his body was dissolved and became the Holy Ghost, to be absorbed by all who received it. In Koresh's Christology, as in Rudolf Steiner's, this was an event of cosmic importance, without which there would be no hope for the world.

As for method, forming a utopian community was more important to Koresh than any particular practice. He banned alcohol and tobacco, supported all the progressive causes, but the core of his method was sublimation of the sexual urge. The nineteenth-century horror of wasting or losing the semen found its explanation in the esoteric doctrine: that

⁵⁶ There is no connection between Teed's movement and the Branch Davidian movement of David Koresh (1959-1993). Both adopted the biblical name of Cyrus, King of Persia and restorer of the Jews to Israel.

⁵⁷ There is an amusing account in John Michell, *Eccentric Lives and Peculiar Notions* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), pp. 41-50.

retaining the semen was essential for regeneration—at least for males. For woman, Koresh promised that in time menstruation will cease and the substances now wasted will be used to improve her brain. To those who feared that without sex the human race would die out, Koresh only needed to point to Jesus's birth as proof that God was perfectly capable of peopling the earth by other means.

Like most prophets, Koresh saw himself as the herald of a new age. By his calculation it would last 24,000 years, corresponding to a precessional cycle. By the end of it, humanity will have rid itself of social, political, and economic ills and regained its birthright. The Koreshan emphasis on physical immortality puts it on the side of the non-dualist cosmologies, in which spirit and matter are different states of a Universal Substance. Otherwise his system has neatly turned the Standard Model inside out. Both are spherical and limited, the Standard Model by the central earth and the starry sphere, the Koreshan by the central star and the golden shell. Both contain planetary spheres through which the soul makes its ascent. From a scientific viewpoint, both models are as wrong as can be, but if there is truth in any of our sources, that is the last thing we need to worry about.