

Ireland through the stereoscope: reading the cultural politics of theosophy in the Irish Literary Revival

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In 1907, Charles Johnston, W.B. Yeats's one-time school-friend, member of the first Dublin Hermetic Society and now better acquainted with the poet's father in New York, published an intriguing guidebook for the emigrant market called *Ireland through the Stereoscope*.¹ Sir Charles Wheatstone had invented the stereoscope in 1838, a year before Daguerre unveiled his early photographic discoveries in Paris. It consisted of a double lens and a sliding rack into which one placed a stereograph (a double image of the same scene taken from slightly different angles). When viewed through the lens, this double image was resolved into a single three-dimensional photograph. Twenty years after its invention, the American essayist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, took out a patent on his own design for the mass market and described the stereoscope's enduring appeal:

All pictures, in which perspective and light and shade are properly managed, have more or less of the effect of solidity; but by this instrument that effect is so heightened as to produce an appearance of reality, which cheats the senses with its seeming truth.²

Johnston echoes these large claims in his prefatory instructions for using the apparatus:

3. Hold the stereoscope with the hood close against the forehead and temples, shutting off entirely all immediate surroundings. The less you are conscious of things close about you, the more strong will be your feeling of actual presence in the scenes you are studying.

4. Think definitely, while you have your face in the hood just where your position is, as learned from the maps and explanatory text. Recall your surroundings to mind, i.e., think what is behind you; what lies off at the

¹ Charles Johnston, *Ireland through the stereoscope* (New York and London: Underwood and Underwood, 1907). ² Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The stereoscope and the stereograph,' *Atlantic Monthly* 3 (June 1859), pp 738–48. For more details about the stereoscope and stereographs, see the website of the National Stereoscopic Association at www.stereoview.org.

right; at the left. You will find yourself richly repaid for the effort by your fuller sense of presence in Ireland.

Note that the general map of Ireland, though referred to from the beginning, is numbered 7 and inserted last; this is in order that it may conveniently be kept unfolded during the reading of the book ready for comparison with any one of the other sectional maps as may be desired.

5. Do not hurry. Take plenty of time to see what is before you. Notice all the little details, or rather, notice as many as you can each time; you will be surprised to find, the next time you look at the same place, how many things you had failed to notice at first. By taking time to notice some of these numberless details, and by thinking definitely of your surroundings, you are helped especially to feel you are in Ireland – which should be your constant purpose.

In effect, Johnston suggests that once ‘the immediate surroundings’ of the city’s brownstones are shut out by darkness, the stereoscope will transport the viewer to Queenstown or Upper Lough Leane with his or her position to be verified against the co-ordinates on the accompanying maps: pictorial record gives way to the sense of real presence for the user.

Johnston’s access to the Ireland of the emigrant imagination, then, is mediated by a device that replicates the conditions of the séance room with its cloth-covered darkness, meditation, and the awareness of a supernatural presence in the visualized phenomenon. The spiritist resonances of these instructions may be more than incidental, by hinting as they do at the author’s own familiarity with such pursuits. Charles Johnston’s early enthusiasm for theosophy, sparked by Mohini Chatterjee’s visit to Yeats’s Hermetic Society in 1884, was further strengthened by his scandalous marriage some five years later to Vera Zhelikovskaya, the niece of Madame Blavatsky, founder of the international Society. Mediumship, while officially disapproved of by the founder, fascinated many members. More generally, the resemblance between the stereoscope which ‘cheats the senses with its seeming truth’ and Madame Blavatsky’s nightly dictations from her two Tibetan spirit masters may have a broader cultural resonance, for esoteric science often anticipated the patent claims made for new technology in the nineteenth century. Lisa Gitelman has described in her book, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, how shorthand and the first typewriters were indebted to new constructions of agency experienced in automatic writing. Gitelman also notes that Thomas Edison joined the Theosophical Society soon after its establishment in 1877.³

³ Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, grooves, and writing machines: representing technology in the Edison era* (Stanford, Cal: Stanford UP, 1998), pp 184–218, p. 193.

In this essay I want to reverse the stereoscope and use it to reveal how the author of this guidebook or manual recognized in theosophy a way of negotiating Ireland's double status as both sister kingdom in the British empire and internal colony. The second son of the Orange MP for South Belfast, Charles Johnston had been introduced to theosophy by his classmate at the Erasmus Smith High School, W.B. Yeats, who lent him a copy of A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1881), a founding text of the movement. Yeats had first heard the book discussed at a soirée held by Edward Dowden, whose high Victorian respectability did not prevent his daughter, Hester, becoming one of London's most successful mediums.⁴ As is now a matter of record, Johnston and Yeats linked up with two other High School alumni, Claude Falls Wright and Charles Weekes, to form the first Dublin Hermetic Society, which held its inaugural meeting on 16 June 1884.⁵ This auspicious date might explain the prevalent musings about theosophy that pass through the pages of *Ulysses*.⁶

Yeats's later recollection of this group as meeting in a York street attic is deceptive, perhaps designed to associate it with the Young Ireland Society which did meet there under O'Leary's auspices.⁷ Instead, the group met in Trinity College Dublin, where its founding coincided with the emergence of the Irish Protestant Home Rule Association and the magazine that broadly served as its organ, the *Dublin University Review*. Although Yeats later maintained that the society he chaired was 'not Theosophical at the start', his interest in a more aesthetic and self-serving mysticism was very much the minority view.⁸ Johnston's inaugural paper, titled 'Esoteric Buddhism' in homage to Sinnett, makes clear the younger Hermeticists' keen alignment with the international Society, as confirmed in the *Dublin University Review*'s brief report on their first meeting which begins: 'A society has been started in Dublin to promote the study of Oriental Religions and theosophy generally.'⁹ The physicist, and a founding member of the Society for Psychical Research, Professor William Barrett (FRS), also took the chair on occasion. By April 1886, when Charles Johnston and Claude Falls Wright obtained the charter for the first Dublin lodge of the Theosophical Society from Sinnett, now in London, the Society had issued 121 charters for lodges, with 106 of these in India, Burma and Ceylon.¹⁰ Within a decade of its founding,

⁴ See Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: the life of Mrs W.B. Yeats* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002), pp 353. ⁵ See R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: a life, the apprentice mage*, vol. 1 (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1997), pp 46–7. ⁶ J.J. O'Molloy's question to Stephen about theosophy's cultural significance still poses a genuine conundrum for the Revival: 'What do you think really of that hermetic crowd, the opal hush poets: Æ – the master mystic? That Blavatsky woman started it. She was a nice old bag of tricks', in Hans Walter Gabler (ed.), *James Joyce: Ulysses, the corrected text* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), p. 115. ⁷ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Papermac, 1992), p. 90. ⁸ Allan Wade (ed.), *The letters of W.B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp 591–2. ⁹ *Dublin University Review*, July 1885, p. 155. ¹⁰ Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's baboon: theosophy and the emergence of the western guru* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), p. 68.

membership was numbered in the thousands.¹¹ Theosophy had gone from being a metropolitan exoticism to a complex colonial endeavour.

It may at first seem remarkable that Johnston and his early associates from the Hermetic Society should have joined the Society at a time when Blavatsky was being investigated for producing fraudulent phenomena by the Society for Psychical Research. When the damning report was eventually published in December 1885, its contents do not seem to have deterred W.B. Yeats, Johnston, Wright or Æ from pursuing the syncretic philosophy she had founded.¹² Yeats was typical of the group in finding arguments to rebuff the scientism of the SPR as inappropriate to the investigation of a medium, who might employ a certain level of trickery to heighten and dramatize real revelations from the spirit world.¹³ Yet the attraction of theosophy was that it promised more than the phenomena of the séance room. The Society had a broadly utopian appeal. In Britain, theosophy enjoyed a core support among social reformers, epitomized by Anna Kingsford, anti-vivisectionist and dress reformer, and Annie Besant, labour activist, freethinker and birth control campaigner.¹⁴ They responded to the idealism of the Society's aspirations, as described self-deprecatingly by its president, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott:

John Kelly suggests Yeats was a close associate, but not a member, of the Dublin Lodge. See John Kelly and Eric Domville (eds), *The collected letters of W.B. Yeats, vol. 1, 1865–1895* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 514 (hereafter *CL*, 1). However R.F. Foster includes his name among the charter members, listed as L.A.M. Johnston, W.B. Yeats, F.T. Gregg, H.M. Magee, E.A. Seale, W.F. Smeeth, R.A. Potterton and Charles Johnston. See Foster, *The apprentice mage*, pp 45–52; p. 552n. Yeats certainly joined the Esoteric Section of the Blavatsky Lodge in London in Dec. 1888. *Ibid.* p. 102. **11** *Ibid.*, p. 68. **12** Cf. R. Hodgson, 'Report of committee appointed to investigate phenomena in connection with the Theosophical Society', Society for Psychical Research, Dec. 1885. **13** In trying to fathom his own arguments about the spiritual existence of Madame Blavatsky's teachers, Yeats propounded four hypotheses: 'I as yet refuse to decide between the following alternatives, having too few facts to go on, (1) They are probably living occultists, as HPB says, (2) They are possibly unconscious dramatizations of HPB's own trance nature, (3) They are also possibly but not likely, as the mediums assert, spirits (4) They may be the trance principle of nature expressing itself symbolically. The fraud theory in its most pronounced form I have never held for more than a few minutes as it is wholly unable to cover the facts.' See Yeats's 'Occult notes and diary, etc.', Appendix A, in Denis Donoghue (ed.), *Memoirs* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp 281–2. **14** Anna Kingsford broke with the London Lodge in Apr. 1884, in protest at the Society's endorsement of A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. She established the rival Hermetic Society which sought to correct theosophy's increasingly Asiatic turn by firmly embracing gnostic and neo-Platonist mysticism. Although the shared name might suggest connections between her breakaway society and Yeats's group, this should not be over-stressed as Sinnett remained an important influence on all members of the Dublin circle. Lady Wilde and her two sons attended the inaugural meeting of Kingsford's society and Yeats later met Kingsford's biographer, Edward Maitland, at a dinner held at the Wildes. See Col. Henry Steele Olcott, *Old diary leaves*, vol. 3 (Madras: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904), pp 90–8; *CL*, 1, p. 118. For a fuller account of Kingsford's life and visions, see E. Maitland, *Anna Kingsford: her life, letters, diary and work*, 2 vols (London: George Redway, 1896).

Fanatics if you please; crazy enthusiasts; dreamers of impractical dreams; devotees of a hobby; dupes of our imaginations. Yet our dreams were of human perfectability, our yearnings after divine wisdom; our sole hope to help mankind to higher thinking and nobler living.¹⁵

This sense of social mission meant that theosophy could compete with a career in the imperial services or the church in serving the Protestant middle-class conscience.

These affiliations with the High School and Trinity College might suggest that part of theosophy's appeal for Æ, Johnston, and later James Cousins, lay in the echoes of imperial sentiment fostered in these bastions of Protestant education. Cousins, who taught in the High School, reports in *We Two Together* that its 'special pride' was founded on the numbers of 'old-boy Bishops and members of the Indian Civil Service' among their ex-pupils and, as Yeats noted, Charles Johnston was very much their rising star.¹⁶ When his inaugural paper on 'Esoteric Buddhism' was published in the *Dublin University Review*, it found its proper home in a journal that balanced home rule principles with reminders of Ireland's part in the administration of the wider empire.¹⁷ Two months earlier, an article titled 'The Irish Universities and the Imperial Services' observed that at a ceremony held to award honorary degrees to graduates of Queen's University Belfast in February 1882, out of twenty-six recipients, fourteen were in the British imperial service, with eleven serving in India.¹⁸ Johnston's own Sanskrit studies helped prepare him for his post as assistant magistrate and revenue collector in the district of Murshidabad, which he took up after eloping with Vera (much to her aunt's displeasure) in January 1889; while in 1896, he followed up his textbook, *Useful Sanskrit Nouns and Verbs* (1892), with a selection from the *Upanishads*.¹⁹ In a letter home from Berhampore, he told his father

15 Col. Henry Steele Olcott, *Old diary leaves*, vol. 2, p. 25. **16** James H. and Margaret Cousing, *We two together* (Madras: Ganesh, 1950), p. 98; Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 90. **17** *Dublin University Review*, 6 (July 1885), pp 144–6. For an extended profile of the *Review's* political and cultural outlook, see Yug Mohit Chaudhry, *Yeats, the Irish literary revival and the politics of rint* (Cork: Cork UP, 2001). **18** Edward Stanley Robertson, 'The Irish universities and the imperial services', *Dublin University Review*, 4 (May 1885), pp 79–82. **19** Several members of the Irish gentry escaped financial scandal via the imperial civil service. Alvin Jackson reports that Charles' father, William, bankrupted by the collapse in earnings from his estate and the costs of pursuing a parliamentary career in Westminster, 'sought relief from his creditors through a colonial governorship.' See Alvin Jackson, 'Irish unionists and the empire, 1880–1920, classes and masses' in Keith Jeffrey (ed.), *An Irish empire?* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), p. 129. Yeats took notes on the progress of Charles's courtship for Katharine Tynan's amusement: 'Charley Johnston was at Madame Blavatsky's the other day with that air of clever insolence and elaborate efficiency he has ripened to such perfection. The before mentioned penitent frivolous [*sic*] delight in him. If you only saw him talking French and smoking ciggarets [*sic*] with Madame's niece [*sic*]. He looked a veritable peacock. Such an air too of the world worn

that he was learning 'Hindi, Bengali and Russian, so that with routine work my time is pretty well filled up.'²⁰

With the establishment of 'the Household', a commune founded by an engineer Frederick J. Dick at his home address, 3 Upper Ely Place, in April 1891, the Dublin lodge became more rigorous in its pursuit of theosophical study. Monday nights were spent discussing Madame Blavatsky's two-tome exegesis of the dictations she took under spirit direction, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), while Friday nights were devoted to theosophical texts of a more elementary nature.²¹ Sanskrit study groups were held in the Georgian rooms decorated by Æ's murals of ethereal beings and Dick entertained his houseguests on the piano.²² William Kirkpatrick Magee ('John Eglinton') frequently visited his elder brother, Malcolm, who shared a room there with Æ. Yeats also dropped in for conversation where he was amused by Dick's attempts to restrict debates to members of the lodge only, against Æ's insistence on a more open and heterodox approach to their meetings.²³ Meals could be got from the vegetarian restaurant established by D.N. Dunlop and his future wife, Eleanor Fitzpatrick, where Hindu medical students, impoverished young authors and the Irish theosophists were brought together out of shared dietary necessity.²⁴ Ada and Georgiana Johnston took up their brother's interest and worked in the restaurant, while Lewis, an elder brother, whose name appears alongside his brother's on the charter, also joined them. Georgie became briefly engaged to Claude Falls Wright, a lifelong Irish theosophist who later rose through the ranks of the American section, and also organized what Katharine Tynan cruelly describes as 'a debating society of an appalling dullness', identified as the Ethical Society by the editors of the Yeats letters, but more likely I think, the Vegetarian Society, in which both Georgie and her mother took a keen interest.²⁵ Charles, meanwhile, had been invalided out of the Indian Civil Service after eighteen months, and after returning to

man of society about him. As if he also were one of the penitent frivolous instead of a crusading undergraduate': *CL*, 1, p. 99; see also, pp 101, 104, 105, 108. **20** Manuscript letter from Charles Johnston to his father, dated 9 Aug. 1889, and enclosed loose in William Johnston's diary for 1885, PRONI D/880/2/37. **21** Henry Summerfield, *That myriad-minded man: a biography of G. W. Russell - 'Æ', 1867-1935* (Gerards Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1975), p. 35. **22** *Ibid.*, p. 36. **23** W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, pp 239-40. **24** T.H. Meyer, *D.N. Dunlop: a man of our time*, trans. Ian Bass (London: Temple Lodge, 1992), pp 33-8. The 'pretty' Sunshine Vegetarian Dining Rooms was located at 48 Grafton street; entry for 23 Mar. 1891, William Johnston's diary, PRONI D/880/2/43. **25** For a biographical note on Ada Johnston, see *CL*, 1, p. 212 n; for Georgiana Johnston, see *CL*, 1, p. 73. Jan. 1889 must have been a bad month for William Johnston the *paterfamilias* who attended church twice on Sundays and was grand master of the Black Preceptory as two of his children became engaged to Irish theosophists. His diary entry of 29 Jan. 1889 reads: 'Georgie astonished me by announcing she intended immediate marriage to Claude Wright. I wish the dear child had been better guided.' William Johnston's diary for 1889, PRONI D/880/2/41. There are several entries recording Georgie and Ina's attendance at 'vegetarian lectures' between 1890 and 1891. *Ibid.*

Ballykilbeg for a time, where W.B. Yeats visited him in the summer of 1891, he left Ireland, first for London and then for New York.²⁶ Five years later, John Butler Yeats reported to his son that Charles had 'become a fervent Celt', and by 1909, a committed Sinn Féin supporter.²⁷

Such activities must have stretched the patience of their devoted father, William, Grand Master of the Black Preceptory, Unionist MP for South Belfast and author of several marching ballads including 'The Orange Standard.' Some indication of his attitude to his children's beliefs is provided by what seems to be a draft copy of a letter dated 6 July 1889, simply addressed 'Sir', and tucked into his diary for the same year. Its substance is a strenuous objection to being misidentified as a vegetarian in a brief notice for 'a fruit and cake conference,' held in Farringdon street Memorial Hall, in the Vegetarian Society's eponymously titled journal.²⁸

I have lately looked at the *Vegetarian* with a desire to see reasons in favour of the diet recommended; and I have seen its columns advocate Socialism and Theosophy. I see a tendency, also, to disparage the Great Sacrifice ... while this is so, I cannot embrace Vegetarianism. Rather I would shun it as Anti-Christian. I believe in Christ; and sooner than give up this faith, which is so made incompatible with the teaching of this new creed, I will antagonise, and not advocate, the strange mixture of diet and diabolism.²⁹

Taking Charles Johnston's colourful trajectory from Orange to Sinn Féin green as an extreme example for this group of Protestant mystics, how are we to explain the dominant narrative of political conversion from unionism to a form of mystic nationalism? What part does theosophy play? More generally, how are we to fit this group of Protestant mystics into our histories of the early Revival? I believe that the answers lie within the cultural history of the Society itself, and its awkward engagement with issues of self-determination and empire as it stretched to appeal to all classes and religions across the metropolitan and colonial societies of England, America, Ireland, India and Ceylon. My more general argument is that

²⁶ See W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Papermac, 1988), pp 43–4. Johnston's transition from Orange 'show-boy' to theosophical dandy greatly amused Yeats. 'Johnston was in the running for Mahatmaship and now how are the mighty fallen ... If you only heard Madame Blavatsky trying to pronounce Ballykilbeg.' *CL*, 1, p. 101. ²⁷ Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper and William Martin Murphy (eds), *Letters to W.B. Yeats*, 2 vols (London and New York: Macmillan, and Columbia UP, 1977), vol. 1, pp 27, 213. ²⁸ According to an entry in his diary, William Johnston did attend the 'Fruit and Cake conference of the Vegetarian Society' on 27 June 1889, perhaps accompanying C.V. Coates, a friend of Charles and Lewis's, whose brothers John and Robert Coates were prominent members of the Dublin lodge. PRONI, D/880/2/41. ²⁹ Manuscript letter on headed notepaper, Ballykilbeg, Co. Down, dated 6 July 1899, enclosed loose in William Johnston's diary for 1889, PRONI, D/880/2/41.

the Dublin lodge, in its own knotted engagement with the dilemmas of individual responsibility within a newly secular democracy, acted as a forum which made possible a liberal dissent from the increasingly narrow, and increasingly sectarian, narratives of identity available in Irish Protestantism, particularly among Dissenting congregations in Ulster. By fuelling this dissent with prophecies of spiritual and racial revival, upheld by the principle of non-sectarianism embodied in international fellowship, and discursively structured by a syncretic approach to world religions, it facilitated the transition to a new Protestant home rule identity through the structures of cultural revival. In this essay, however, I wish to address an argument made by Edward Hagan that theosophy's Aryanism allowed an existing elite to find a substitute belief system for their conservative, anti-Catholic ideologies.³⁰ In answer, I would suggest that theosophy's political inflections are much more varied, complex, and open than are often allowed.

The Society's three aims inscribed on the charter of every lodge were:

The formation of a universal brotherhood, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

The encouragement of studies in comparative religion, philosophy and science.

The investigation of unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.³¹

In the *Irish Theosophist*, Æ explains that the first two aims should be taken together for the old philosophies of the East are an inspiration to 'brotherly action', because their wisdom is to declare the final unity of spirit and matter – a perception broken by the Darwinian competitions of the materialist West.³² This line of thinking is advocated as an applied metaphysics. Æ's desire is to replace the polarities of identity, the 'race, creed, sex, caste and colour' of the first aim, with a holistic humanitarianism that will stress the interdependence of all life. The third aim, he described, as 'pursued only by a portion of members' of the Dublin lodge. The members he had in mind were probably Dunlop, and his

³⁰ Edward A. Hagan, 'The Aryan myth: a nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish will to power,' in Tadhg Foley and Seán Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp 197–205. ³¹ This is the final formulation of the Society's aims as formally adopted in 1896, quoted in Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's baboon*, p. 69. An earlier version is given by Olcott in a letter to the government of Madras in 1883: '(a) To promote the feeling of mutual tolerance and kindness between people of different races and religions; (b) To encourage the study of the philosophies, religions and science of the ancients, particularly of the Aryans; (c) To aid scientific research into the higher nature and powers of man.' Olcott, *Old diary leaves*, vol. 3, p. 4. ³² Æ, 'A word upon the objects of the Theosophical Society,' *Irish Theosophist*, 1:2 (Nov. 1892), p. 10.

occasional collaborator Yeats, who belonged not to the Dublin branch but to the Esoteric Section of Blavatsky's lodge in London.³³

The Secret Doctrine (the 'Bible' of the Dublin lodge) offered receptive Irish readers an idiosyncratic application of Darwinian theory to the spirit world. In essence, Blavatsky promised to reconcile evolution with a version of reincarnation linking the spiritual progress of the individual with that of his or her race. Her two volumes put forward a complex account of man's spiritual evolution through a cycle of seven mythical root races that are further subdivided to explain the differing rates of civilization among present-day peoples. While this system might lend weight to the charge of a fixed hierarchy operating at the centre of Blavatsky's system, her engagement with contemporary race thinking was profound, bizarre and complex, and often, I believe, designed to expose prejudice within an academy from which she felt excluded.³⁴

In 1888, the date of publication, the current era was that of the Fifth Root race, the Aryans, which the Irish theosophists believed began with the death of Krishna in 3102 BC. The choice of Krishna over Christ as avatar of the era dubbed the *Kali Yuga* demonstrates the extent to which theosophy now followed brahmanical orthodoxy in believing that the present age marked the nadir of human development, and that the restoration of spiritual order would only be achieved by returning to Vedic principles.³⁵ The modern-day Celts could welcome this Vedic turn under the framework of a shared, if unequal, Aryan identity. Charles Johnston carefully explained in his opening address that 'the Asiatic Aryans belong to the first branch race, while we, the European Aryans, belong to the seventh branch race of the fifth great race'.³⁶ Under theosophy's special terms of evolution this meant that Europeans were marginally closer to attaining the spiritual purity promised in the Sixth Race. After Blavatsky's death, her successor in the London lodge, Annie Besant, would draw tighter parallels between these two book-ends of the Indo-European family, and her assertion that 'Ireland is to the West what India is to the East' sounds a constant refrain through the Revival.³⁷

33 Ibid., p. 10. 34 Gauri Viswanathan's stimulating analysis of the ways in which theosophical ideas of race revival informed Annie Besant's home rule politics provides the most considered and engaged response to theosophy's complex politics. However, I would suggest that Blavatsky's ideas are leavened with a sharp sense of burlesque directed at the academy (and ignored by her successor) which needs to be taken into account when considering theosophy's cultural politics as a whole. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the fold: conversion, modernity and belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), pp 177–207. 35 Æ explained, 'We are in what Hindus call the *Kali Yuga* or Dark Age ... Humanity is passing through a cycle of evolution during which the brain-intellect is developing at the expense (temporarily) of the direct spiritual intuition of early man.' *Irish Theosophist* 1:4 (Jan. 1893), p. 31. Also see: Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British empire* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp 174–5. I would like to thank Tadhg Foley for lending me a copy of the latter. 36 Johnston, Charles, 'Esoteric Buddhism', *Dublin University Review*, 6 (July 1885), p. 144. 37 Unpublished lecture, quoted in Leslie Pielou, *The growth of the Theosophical Society in*

This kind of thinking left theosophy with one core dilemma – how to fit Blavatsky’s unique mythology of successive racial and spiritual elites to its stated commitment to universal brotherhood. One could reasonably argue along with Hagan and Gauri Viswanathan that a cultural revival stimulated by ethnological arguments which identify the native population with the founding race of Europe writes an elitist narrative into the vanguard of a newly racialized, and implicitly anti-modern, nationalism, both in Ireland and India.³⁸ Aryanism explicitly validated Northern India as the *Aryavarta*, or Aryan homeland, with a concomitant disparaging of the Dravidian South. It identified Indian nationality with Hinduism, particularly animating the brahminical reform movement founded by Dayananda Sarasvati in 1875, the Arya Samaj, which aimed to regenerate contemporary Indian society by rejecting Christian influences and returning Hinduism to its Vedic origins. However, Aryanism was a more contested ideology than these bluntly stated alignments might suggest. Tony Ballantyne cites Aurobindo Ghose and Lala Lajpat Rai as two scholars who attempted to use Aryanism to argue for a more inclusive vision of Indian nationality, while admitting that these attempts were ‘largely unsuccessful’.³⁹ Bal Ghanghadar Tilak, co-founder of the Indian Home Rule League with Annie Besant, and an early proponent of separatism, was another who found in his own interpretations of the *Rig Veda* a vision of a more inclusive national unity.⁴⁰ In the 1870s and 1880s, the political consequences of the Aryan myth were still a topic for debate. The problems faced by theosophy in reconciling its core beliefs mirrored those facing the task of cultural nationalism in India and Ireland.

At the 1996 conference of the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland, Hagan argued that theosophy’s development of the Aryan hypothesis chimed with an Ascendancy who were receptive to its allegedly anti-Catholic undertones, and who found in the myth ‘a new Anglo-Irish “will to power”’.⁴¹ Yet Aryanism in Ireland was not axiomatically anti-Catholic; indeed, it forms one of the chief philological planks on which the case for the Irish language was built by the Very Revd Ulick J. Bourke of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. His book, *The Aryan Origin of the Gaelic Race and Language* was dedicated to Archbishop MacHale of Tuam (further monikered ‘the shield of the poor and the persecuted, the defender of a neglected race’) on the fiftieth anniversary of his consecration in 1875.⁴² Bourke’s explicit aim was to serve

Ireland (Dublin: privately printed, 1927), p. 7. ³⁸ See note 31 above. ³⁹ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race*, p. 183. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 179–81. ⁴¹ Hagan, ‘The Aryan myth’, pp 197–205. The allegation of anti-Catholic bias is based on a lecture by John Rhys, but Aryanism was more commonly used as an Indo-European stick with which to beat the continent’s Semitic heritage. ⁴² Ulick J. Bourke, *The Aryan origin of the Gaelic race and language: showing the present and past literary position of the Irish Gaelic; its phoenesis, the fountain of classical pronunciation; its laws accord with Grimm’s laws, its bardic beauties the source of rhyme; the civilization of pagan Ireland; early knowledge of letters; the art of illuminating, ancient architecture, etc.* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875).

the preservation of the Irish language from linguistic colonization by proving its superiority to other Gaelics due to the deeper 'impress of its Aryan mother tongue'; and 'to reconcile the Anglo-Saxon with the Gael, by pointing out the identity of their Aryan origin, and thus helping to break down the wall of separation between the two races, which had been built up by ignorance, prejudice and religious hate'.⁴³ This may seem like an implicitly pro-union argument, but for Bourke reconciliation between the races and restoration of Ireland's Aryan heritage would be greatly aided by home rule.⁴⁴ Bourke's example suggests that the type of politics into which a newly confident Aryan-Irish spirit of nationality might incarnate is less proscriptive and more complex than Hagan's argument allows. Theosophy, too, needs to be understood as more than just 'a compensation of power, purpose and ideology' for a ruling elite; the paradoxical marriage of social egalitarianism and spiritual and racial hierarchies served a variety of ideological interests, inflected differently across class, religious and gender lines in metropolitan and colonial cultures.⁴⁵

While Blavatsky's writings share features with Orientalism, she persistently mined for paratextual evidence to bolster her claims for the Masters. By the time she came to write *The Secret Doctrine*, she had been made alive to the imperial imprecations of the late Victorian academy by her own experiences in India. Arriving in Bombay from New York in 1879, full of Orientalist desire to see the famed Aryavarta, Olcott and Blavatsky were appalled at the ranks of 'sumptuous bungalows' that blocked out their view of the temple complex of Elephanta.⁴⁶ Harishchandra Chintamani of the Bombay Arja Samaj put them up. The de-anglicization of India was a common objective for guests and hosts alike; however, the latter group pursued an aggressive policy of brahminical puritanism that could not sit easily with theosophy's stated policy of caste reform and non-sectarianism. Within a year, theosophy and the Samaj had parted company amid recriminations over unpaid bills.

As Olcott travelled, his disappointment at the rupture between Orientalist phantasm and the reality of colonized India grew. It reverberates in his memoirs as a hurt that must be addressed by constant committee work and campaigns on behalf of different religious communities, most significantly, Ceylon's Buddhists who were granted equal educational rights partly in response to Olcott's petitions to London.⁴⁷ His many representations to Government House asking the police authorities to lift their surveillance of members is evidence of just how unwelcome this interference in India's internal affairs was to imperial administrators.⁴⁸ Two years after their arrival in India, he advised Blavatsky to 'reconstruct

43 Ibid., pp 193, 7. 44 Ibid., p. 62. 45 Hagan, 'The Aryan myth', p. 204. 46 Olcott, *Old diary leaves*, vol. 2, p. 14. 47 Olcott published his memoirs in six volumes as *Old diary leaves*, republished in Madras by the Theosophical Publishing Society between 1972 and 1975. An account of his campaign on behalf of the Singhalese Buddhists is given in *Old diary leaves*, vol. 3, pp 112-38. 48 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 246; vol. 3, p. 8.

the Theosophical Society on a different basis, putting the Brotherhood idea forward more prominently, and keeping the occultism more in the background ...⁴⁹ This shift in emphasis, from private metaphysical experience to social mission, is vital in setting theosophy apart from spiritualism and gives it an explicitly political character, which was recognized by contemporary observers. A.O. Hume, founder of the Indian National Congress, and later, Annie Besant, president of the Congress in 1919, were two Irish theosophists who would take the brotherhood ideal along rather differing paths towards home rule.⁵⁰

In 1889, Olcott lectured twice in Dublin's Antient Concert Rooms, capitalizing on the success of Mohini Chatterjee's tour five years earlier. In the 1890s and early 1900s, Annie Besant, herself of Irish parentage, was a regular visitor, lecturing on Ireland's destiny as the spiritual leader of Europe.⁵¹ W.Q. Judge, president of the American Section of the Society, and G.R.S. Mead of the Esoteric Section, were two other frequent visitors in the early 1890s who endorsed this message.⁵² If theosophy did in part attract its Ulster Protestant members because of its imperial connections, its place by the mid-1880s lay as much in subverting imperial prejudice because of its early anticipation of, and later participation in, the movement towards home rule. Although it seems that Charles Johnston's return to Europe via Russia was motivated by concerns for his wife's health in a typical display of colonial chivalry, there are sufficient reports in the *Irish Theosophist* on the anti-colonial impetus of Indian theosophy to speculate whether these interests and his wife's contacts led him into the closer engagement with Indian nationalism, as D.K. Chatterjee has done.⁵³ A series titled 'Light from the East', providing quotations from the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in the style of Edwin Arnold, ran through volume two, while in early 1894, Dunlop rapturously recorded the testimony of Professor Charkravarti from the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago that he owed to Madame Blavatsky the ability to see 'the withered and gaunt hands of the spirit of my motherland, ... stretching out across oceans and continents, shedding its blessings of peace and love'.⁵⁴ When Annie Besant, Blavatsky's successor at the London Lodge, went on her first tour of India in 1893-4, the journal recorded with approval the surprise of the Indian crowd at 'her knowledge of their own scriptures'.⁵⁵ In his report of the tour, Dunlop himself quoted from

49 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 294. 50 See Viswanathan, *Outside the fold*, pp 177-207. 51 Olcott's first lecture was on 'Theosophy' and the second on 'Irish fairies'; both were attended by Douglas Hyde to whom Yeats wrote requesting a précis. *CL*, I, p. 194n. 52 Pielou, *The growth of the Theosophical Society in Ireland*, p. 2. 53 The editors of the Yeats letters cite haemoptysis as the official reason for Johnston's home leave. He left the service permanently in Apr. 1892. *CL*, I, p. 238n. In the letter, dated 9 Aug. 1889, cited above, the prospect of 'a permanent breakdown in health' leads him to ask his father to look out for a post in England or Ireland 'during the next year.' See note 18 above. Dilip Kumar Chatterjee, *James Henry Cousins: a study of his works in the light of the theosophical movement in India and the west* (Delhi: Sharada, 1994), p. 153. 54 *Irish Theosophist*, 2:4 (Jan. 1894), p. 43. 55 *Irish Theosophist*, 2:5 (Feb. 1894), p. 59.

missionary descriptions of Hinduism, angrily dismissing them as 'sectarian jargon'.⁵⁶

What becomes clear from reading the *Irish Theosophist* alongside Olcott's memoirs, is that this undoubtedly Orientalist interest in Hinduism as a repository of Aryan wisdom went hand in hand with speculations about the demise of empire. In an interview with D.N. Dunlop, Yeats recollected one Blavatsky prophecy, allegedly obtained direct from 'the Masters', that 'the power of England would not outlive the century'.⁵⁷ In March 1897, 'The Outlook', probably penned by Æ, envisaged the imminent end of the 'dark age'. In explicitly anti-colonial terms, it comparing Ireland and India as 'little' nations who had the wherewithal to upset the great; the latter, like Ireland, suffering famine as 'shillings are being collected on every hand to celebrate the long reign of India's empress'.⁵⁸

In Ireland the excitement over financial grievances has considerably subsided. The people seem to be awaiting the blast of a trumpet which will sound a note more directed to their real needs. When the hour is ripe the hero shall appear full armed. In a quiet mood one can catch the stain of the battle song reverberating through the hills and sleepy hollows.⁵⁹

Æ made a more explicit attack on imperialism in an article called 'On the March' for the *Internationalist*, the successor to the *Irish Theosophist*. Occasioned by the French attack on Madagascar and the continuing 'scramble for Africa', he declared his solidarity with native populations in unambiguous terms: 'our own life is wounded by every blow that is struck at them'.⁶⁰ For James Cousins, who came late to theosophy (in 1908) and served briefly as editor of the *New India* at Annie Besant's invitation (in 1916), theosophy's history in India (as in Ireland) was explicitly part of the process of cultural decolonization:

When life brought Annie Besant to India, and she found that a spurious alien-imposed education had left the school-and-college-going members of the Hindu section of the people a prey to the poison of religious inferiority injected by foreign proselytising agencies, she inspired and led a movement for the restoration of understanding of their ancient faith, and respect for its observances and its vision of human origins and destiny and the technique of individual and social life; and she pioneered the Indianisation of education for Indians in India.⁶¹

These articles and editorials suggest that the Dublin Irish theosophists were aware of, and actively discussing, the intersections between cultural revival and anti-colonial politics.

56 *Ibid.* 57 *Irish Theosophist*, 2:1 (Oct. 1893), p. 148. 58 *Irish Theosophist*, 5:6 (Mar. 1897), p. 117. 59 *Ibid.*, p. 118. 60 *Internationalist*, 1:2 (15 Nov. 1897), pp 35–8, 35. 61 Cousins, *We two together*, p. 274.

To conclude I want to take one last look through the stereoscope. Unknown to the user of his guide, Johnston's tour in fact describes a reverse narrative of his own conversion, from the archetypal Irish emigrant on the Queenstown quayside, to Killarney, a sacred place for the American Section of the Theosophical Lodge which took the foundation stone for its utopian community at Point Loma, California, from the hills above Lough Leane.⁶² That Johnston should choose this spot to reveal the 'power and the fascination of this Isle of Destiny', I suppose, maybe fancifully, is more than tourist convention, indicating the place theosophy holds in his own mind as the keeper of a Celtic spirituality.⁶³ The exile's nostalgia blends indelibly in this text with a theosophical belief in the reality of Ireland's supernatural folk:

Under the brown wings of the dark, the night throbs with mystic presences; the hills glimmer with an inward life; whispering voices hurry through the air. Another and magical land awakens in the dark, full of living restlessness, sleepless as the ever-moving sea ... There is no sense of loneliness anywhere but rather a host of teeming lives on every hand, palpable though hidden, remote from us though touching our lives, calling to us through the gloom with wordless voices, inviting us to enter and share with them the mystical life of this miraculous earth, great mother of us all. The dark is full of watching eyes.⁶⁴

Through the stereoscope, this supernatural population may act as metaphor with a double referent: firstly, to the Irish-American reader who, looking at the unpeopled scenes of the landscape through the viewfinder, may wish to see shadows of his/her own family inviting the spectator to return to his/her ancestral land. Yet, perhaps there are also traces of India in the surveillance of the closing sentence, combined with the unnamed appeal of the 'teeming lives', remote from, yet touching, the traveller, that betray a memory of the author's brief stint in Murshidabad, Bengal, as collector of taxes. The stereoscope, like theosophy, through its double viewfinder allows this colonial discourse to be interpolated by the appeal of a colonized population, which it must answer. In its doubleness, colonially structured but eagerly anticipating the demise of empire with the arrival of the avatar of the next race, I wish to suggest that theosophy's complex, insinuating presence is the ghost discourse of the Revival.

⁶² See Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's baboon*, p. 111. The president of the American section till 1895, William Quan Judge thought that Irish folklore was 'almost undiluted Theosophy in essence', and described Killarney as 'one of the world's sacred places, covered with the invisible records of an ancient and noble civilisation': W.Q. Judge, *International Theosophical Chronicle*, 1:1 (Jan. 1905), p. 12. ⁶³ Johnston, *Ireland through the stereoscope*, p. 227. 1:1 (Jan. 1905), p. 12. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.