

THE LURE OF THE MUMMY: SCIENCE, SÉANCES AND EGYPTIAN TALES IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE ENGLAND

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To mention the name of *Dracula* today is to think immediately of the Irish writer Bram Stoker—at least after one has thought of Francis Ford Coppola or Gary Oldman. Nearly a hundred years after *Dracula's* publication, it is now clearer than ever that Stoker produced the prototype for the modern vampire text—indeed, part of the reason for the novel's cult status amongst Victorianists has been a growing fascination with *Dracula's* relationship to modernity. Since the 1980s, we have seen a rising tide of essays discussing Stoker's bizarre use of natural and social scientific sources in *Dracula*, essays which have sought to provide the novel with new contexts of historical intelligibility, revealing a writer who was obsessed with scientific and para-scientific themes (Blinderman, Greenway, Jann, Pick, for example). On the strength of *Dracula's* sales alone it is hardly surprising that Stoker should have returned to his attempts to probe the outer reaches of contemporary knowledge, to blend scientific and occult ideas into a coherent narrative form. But of course, Stoker's ambitions were shared by many other respected intellectuals of his day, artists and scientists alike. Again and again in Stoker's work, from his tales of horror to his romantic novels, we find a penchant for metaphysical speculation so freely displayed that it is clearly essential to his view of himself as a *serious*, albeit an intensely *popular*, novelist. In this essay I will examine one example of Stoker's predilection for what we might call the *scientific occult*, reading it for the light which it sheds on what the physicist and sometime Spiritualist Sir William Crookes once called "the shadowy realm between known and unknown" with its "peculiar temptations" and promise of "ultimate realities, subtle, far reaching, wonderful" (167)—in short, for the light it sheds on the late Victorian and early Edwardian *episteme*.

In June 1903, Stoker published a second supernatural romance entitled *The Jewel of Seven Stars*. Far less well-known than *Dracula*, this novel has been in and out of print since it first appeared at the turn of the century and, like its predecessor, it subsequently inspired at least two recent horror films, *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1971) and *The Awakening* (1980), the former title signalling the book's Egyptological preoccupations. At the end of November 1903, Stoker received a highly enthusiastic letter from the Scottish writer J.W. Brodie-Innes, to whom he had sent a complimentary copy. "I think you have in some measure

surpassed yourself," Brodie-Innes told him. *The Jewel of Seven Stars* "is not only a good book—it is a *great* book." A little mysteriously he added: "When I see you again there are various questions I want to ask you about it. It seems to me in some ways you have got clearer light on some problems which some of us have been fumbling in the dark after for long enough" (n.p.).

What passed between these two men when next they met we do not know. But Brodie-Innes deserves a better introduction. An Edinburgh lawyer, Brodie-Innes was also the author of several supernatural romances, one of which, *The Devil's Mistress* (1915), he dedicated to Stoker's memory after the author's death in 1912 (Farson 207). As these literary interests suggest, Brodie-Innes was hardly an orthodox Christian, despite his having been a familiar figure in the city's polite society—he was a friend of the Bishop of Edinburgh, for example. In fact, Brodie-Innes was—together with William Peck, the city's Municipal Astronomer and head of the Edinburgh Observatory—one of the leading members of that haven of occult practices, the Amen-Ra Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Founded some time around 1893, the Temple grew very rapidly between 1895 and 1896 when its annual number of initiations began to rival that of the Isis-Urania Temple in London. Throughout the Edwardian period the Golden Dawn was plagued by internal dissension and Brodie-Innes was at the centre of these disputes, becoming a senior figure in one of the breakaway temples in 1912.

It has often been assumed that Stoker himself belonged to either the Golden Dawn or one of its offshoots (Roberts 133, Farson 207). Yet, although a number of his friends and acquaintances were connected to the magical Order, there appears to be no good evidence to support the claim that he was actually a member (Howe 285).¹ Perhaps this was simply too heretical a move for the rather conventional Anglo-Irish Protestant whose authorial voice was often charged with a Smilesian evangelicalism, a voice which can be heard most directly in his less sensational fiction like *The Man* (1905) or in his occasional essays on censorship in the arts. Nevertheless, Stoker was clearly gripped by the symbiotic worlds of psychical research and spiritualism, subscribing to the *Hibbert Journal*, one of the rare theological publications to feature popular articles on such topics, and he corresponded with Sir Oliver Lodge, whose controversial writings on immortality appeared in its pages. *Dracula* is notorious for its close concern with such life and death issues and the figure of Professor Van Helsing who is part-magus and part-physician would seem to be an excellent candidate for membership in the Society for Psychical Research. When Stoker was casting around for likely characters, his draft notes for the novel show that he envisaged not only a detective (named Cotford) and a German professor (Max Windshoeffel), but also a "psychical research agent" called Alfred Singleton (Frayling 308). And in *The Lady of the*

¹ In the light of Brodie-Innes's important role in the dissident Alpha and Omega Temple, Farson (207) suggests that Stoker was probably a member of this group; however, since Brodie-Innes only became Praemonstrator to the Temple in the year of Stoker's death this claim would seem to be extremely unlikely.

Shroud (1909), a novel which starts out as a kind of sequel to *Dracula* (though it quickly moves into very different territory), the hero, Rupert Sent Leger, is a roving psychic imperialist, an adventurer who roams the world investigating strange native practices for "The Journal of Occultism": "He dares not only wild animals and savage men; but has tackled African magic and Indian mysticism. The Psychical Research Society has long exploited his deeds of valiance, and looked upon him as perhaps their most trusted agent or source of discovery" (53).

This is the side of Stoker's imagination which is uppermost in *The Jewel of Seven Stars* with its elaborately ritualised staging of the resurrection of a powerful Egyptian queen who had lived some twenty-five centuries before Christ. If the climactic scene of the novel resembles nothing so much as a grand séance, the subsumption of modern scientific discoveries under the rubric of ancient knowledge provides a bridge to the more arcane beliefs characteristic of an occultist like Brodie-Innes.

The Jewel of Seven Stars begins when a young barrister, Malcolm Ross, is awakened in the middle of the night by a summons to the house of a young woman he has recently met, after an attempt has been made on her father's life. Though he hardly knows her, Ross is already deeply in love with the heroine Margaret Trelawny—so much so that he has been dreaming of her when he hears her servant knocking and ringing at his door. At first the narrative seems like a variant of the locked room mystery associated with Poe and Conan Doyle: Abel Trelawny, Margaret's archaeologist father, has been found lying unconscious in front of his safe, evidently having been dragged bleeding from his bed. Trelawny's attackers have failed to open the safe, but there are no signs to indicate how a break-in could have taken place. If the police are baffled, so too are the doctors. For it quickly becomes apparent that Trelawny's comatose condition has been caused neither by his injuries nor by a blow to the head and, when he fails to recover, his physicians suspect that he may have been drugged or hypnotised, though they have no proof of this. However, as Ross watches by Trelawny's bedside he realizes that there is some strange connection between the victim's coma and the Egyptian curios and relics which he has devoted his archaeological career to collecting. As the story unfolds we learn that Trelawny is more than merely an obscure Egyptologist: Faust-like, he is engaged in the dangerous pursuit of magical power over life and death, attempting to recover the old Egyptian arts and knowledge by bringing back to life one of the adepts of the ancient lore, Queen Tera, a "woman skilled in all the science of her time" (210). Once Trelawny has returned to consciousness, as mysteriously as he was struck down, he continues in his obsessive quest, drawing his daughter and her suitor into the venture as his assistants. *The Jewel of Seven Stars* concludes with a "great experiment" (288) in which Queen Tera does indeed return from the dead, but at a terrible cost: at her resurrection everyone is killed except for Malcolm Ross, the sole survivor who is left to recount his cautionary tale.

The novel is saturated with Egyptiana but, except for two travellers' tales—one from a book by a seventeenth-century Dutch explorer, the other recounted by Trelawny's collaborator Eugene Corbeck—the reader never sets foot in Africa. In fact, the bulk of the story takes place inside Trelawny's impressive home in London's Notting Hill, its rooms so full of mummies that Margaret Trelawny confesses that "I sometimes don't know whether I am in a private house or the British Museum" (35). With its grand scale and fine architecture, this residually domestic setting functions primarily as a kind of necropolis or mausoleum, where midnight vigils and enigmatic comings and goings are ordinary occurrences, a sealed interior world subject to its own peculiar laws and transformations. The drawing room or study comes to serve as a magical force-field, a site upon which powers old and new are agonistically engaged in a struggle over the very nature of good and evil. This fusion of domestic and sacred space has distinctly cabbalistic overtones, recalling the Golden Dawn's active interest in the Egyptian mystery religions and the elaborate ceremonies that were staged behind closed doors in Marylebone and Camden Town. Yet while *The Jewel of Seven Stars* invokes the beliefs and practices of cultic mysticism, it is marked by an anxious rationalism, its narrator constantly worried that the uncanny events of his tale might somehow undermine the certainties of modern Western science. Far from being a carefully coded piece of occult propaganda, Stoker's novel is, within the generic conventions of Edwardian Gothic writing, exploratory in tone, at times quite hopelessly unsure of its ground. In a narrative riddled with epistemological gaps its characters desperately strive to ward off their doubts and fears by dreaming of a new cosmology.

In essence, the Egypt that figured in the imaginations of both Stoker and fully-fledged members of the Golden Dawn like Brodie-Innes can be construed as a protean or liminal zone within which some of the most potent Edwardian fantasies could be given free rein. As Antonia Lant has persuasively argued, Egypt tended to hold a tantalisingly indeterminate position within the complex of European orientalisms, an empire that had failed, yet one whose achievements continued to baffle and provoke the scholars and administrators of a later and increasingly insecure imperial age. If, as Hegel once claimed, Egypt should "be considered as a stage in the movement of the human spirit from east to west" (190), the precise nature of that stage and the lessons it might hold for those in the West who were its world-historical successors were still controversial matters. It's worth noting, however, that the glory that *was* Egypt tended to fare relatively well in comparison to its present-day incarnation, a place that was often portrayed as a vulgar pseudo-western territory in which different races and religions promiscuously mingled, a disordered and disorderly "point of interchange between Europe and Africa, the Middle East, and beyond" (Lant 98). *The Jewel of Seven Stars* makes this same discrimination between past and present. For, however sinister the forces of ancient Egypt might be, they occupy an entirely superior plane to the modern Arab. As Eugene Corbeck says at one point in the novel, to recognise "a band of Arabs"

one can trust is merely to identify those Arabs whom one does "not distrust as much as others" (154).

A moment ago I noted the heightened feeling of interiority, the closed inner world evoked by Stoker's narrative, its occlusion of the outer world and its relegation of external factors to the status of extraneous noise, "the far-away echo of whistles and the rumbling of trains" (41). This withdrawal into a shadowy inner space has its full complement of psychological correlates, and one could almost describe the book as a succession of disturbed or distracted mental states, running from dreams and reverie through hypnotic trances and cataleptic fits, and ending in "unspeakable terror" (310). In some respects, Stoker's writing draws quite conventionally upon nineteenth-century empiricist psychology—for example, William B. Carpenter's popular notion of "unconscious cerebration" crops up at key points in several of Stoker's texts (*Dracula* 88, 322, *Athlyne* 126, for example). But, as I have argued elsewhere, Stoker also tends to move away from or beyond such conceptual models, as in his constantly shifting deployment of the idea of "unconsciousness" itself, a term which runs the gamut of meanings and registers in *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (Glover 997). When the injured Abel Trelawny cannot be brought round after his attack, his doctor bemoans the fact that "his unconsciousness does not resemble any of the many cases of hypnotic sleep which I saw in the Charcot Hospital in Paris" (31). Stoker's fugitive and polymorphous concept of the unconscious is definitely non-Freudian, yet it does conspicuously overlap with psycho-analytic thought, particularly in its straining towards spatial or topographical metaphors for the mind.

Uniquely in Stoker's work, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* does explicitly present an extended theory of human personality, but one that is occult Egyptian rather than secular European. This complex many-sided representation of the self is based upon a "division of functions, spiritual and bodily, ethereal and corporeal, ideal and actual" and cedes to "the gifted individual" the possibility of movement through time and space (219-20). According to the noted Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge, whose authority Trelawny cites, this doctrine maintains that the soul dwells in a person's "Double" and has "the power of becoming corporeal or incorporeal," allowing it not only to come and go from the tomb but also to bring the body back to life "and hold converse with it" (219). Such a belief is, Trelawny carefully stresses, "an accepted fact of modern mysticism" which "had its rise in Ancient Egypt" (219). The emphasis on the "modern" is crucial, for the wisdom of past ages is here being authenticated through an appeal to contemporary forms of knowledge. This is ancient Egypt as seen through the lenses of Wallis Budge *and* the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an Egypt of the mind that also belongs among the misty psychological provinces explored by the Society for Psychological Research. When Frederic W.H. Myers gave his classic account of "the multiplex and mutable character of that which we know as the Personality of man," his opening paragraph emphasised "the practical advantage which we may gain by discerning and working upon this as yet unrecognised modifiability" (496). But he

closed by speculating that our "web of habits and appetencies, of lusts and fears" was perhaps only "the cloak which our rude forefathers have woven themselves against the cosmic storm." Should it "slip from us in the sunshine then something more ancient and more glorious" might for a moment come into view (514).

In the face of this widely-heralded mutability and multiplicity, occult teaching proposed that the various orders of the self could be traversed and perhaps even held together through a rigorously cultivated exercise of the will. As Trelawny notes in his elaborate exposition of ancient Egyptian beliefs, the many divisions inherent in a person's being suggest "all the possibilities and capabilities of corporeal transference, guided always by an unimprisonable will or intelligence" (220). In its nineteenth-century occult version Egyptian magic was always a far more systematic and a far less fatalistic form of knowledge than that which figured in the scholarly controversies of contemporary Egyptology (Carlton 209-10). But if the chief lesson that practitioners of the occult drew from Egyptian necromancy was the primacy of individual will-power, it needs to be stressed just how truly Victorian this lesson was. As more and more of human behaviour was shown to be explicable in purely physiological terms—as in David Ferrier's localization of the functions of the brain or in Burdon-Sanderson's work on the electrical impulses of the heart (both specifically mentioned in *Dracula*)—the will seemed to be the last safeguard of personal autonomy (one might even say of liberal individualism), the point beyond which no materialistic science could ever go. Small wonder, then, that new developments in physics and chemistry, developments which seemed to point towards "the unseen, 'spiritual' aspects of nature and experience" found a varied and enthusiastic audience (Wynne 176).

By mobilizing a wealth of speculative associations, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* seems to offer something for everyone. For occultists like Brodie-Innes the novel could be read as a modern vindication of the arcane cosmology to which he and his friends were committed, a saga of the abiding power of magical practices, while for the more scientifically-inclined investigator into spiritual and spiritualist questions, Stoker seems to provide a way of linking the lore of the past with the experimental data of the present. The use made of Rider Haggard's *She* by Madame Blavatsky or Aleister Crowley's references to Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* suggests that occultists were quite ready to read such tales of the supernatural against the grain in order to legitimize their own magical explorations (see Basham 187-94, Owen)—and it seems likely that the Stoker/Brodie-Innes connection may have been a similar case. At one point in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, Abel Trelawny anticipates that humankind may be on the brink of a new age, having reached "that stage of intellectual progress in which the rough machinery for making discovery is being invented," allowing us to embark on "the true study of the inwardness of things" (234-35). Hypothesizing that "the time may not be far off when Astrology shall be accepted on a scientific basis" (234), Trelawny imagines that work on the Röntgen Ray and the properties of radium, the work of "the Curies and Laborde, of Sir William Crookes and Becquerel" will all converge

with "Egyptian investigation" to produce a new understanding of the importance of light (236). Yet, the advances promised by these inspirational passages are never realised; for, as I suggested earlier, the novel remains deeply divided against itself, caught between the competing attractions of ancient and modern knowledges, unable to achieve the forward-looking vision it bravely tries to conjure up. The source of the difficulty lies, as so often, in the insistent question of femininity: what does the woman want? (Or rather, what does Stoker think she wants?)

Margaret Trelawny first appears in the text as a "young girl" in a dream (1), a dream which is disturbed by a call for help from the real Margaret. This awakening is depicted by the hero as a kind of token of the Fall, for he sees it as a denial of the possibility of "perfect rest," observing that "even in Eden the snake rears its head among the laden boughs of the Tree of Knowledge" (2). Symptomatically, Margaret's own vivid presence seems to move between the real and the uncanny. In one early description she is indelibly linked to the occult through the "mysterious depth" of her eyes which, on the one hand, are "as black and soft as velvet," yet in the very next breath are likened to "a black mirror such as Doctor Dee used in his wizard rites" (28). Over the course of the novel this antinomy hardens into a "strange dual existence" (263) as Margaret's old self becomes increasingly submerged under a marked aloofness and reserve, and she begins to display a disquieting prescience regarding all matters Egyptian, as if she were a medium for the ancient queen. We never see the living Queen Tera—though the men taking part in the experiment marvel at the beauty of her unclothed body after they have removed her from the mummy's wrappings—but it is clear that Margaret is Tera's double and that, prior to her resurrection, Margaret is speaking and acting as the queen's agent. By the end of the novel Margaret's eyes are blazing "like black suns" (306). In the original 1903 text she is sacrificed so that the queen may live.

Queen Tera's final violent onslaught has had many harbingers. In addition to the attacks on Abel Trelawny in his London home, the two accounts of earlier visits to Tera's Egyptian tomb both grimly describe her bloody revenge against Arab grave-robbers. More obliquely revealing is the comment by the seventeenth-century Dutch explorer as he gazes at the fabulous blood-red jewel of the novel's title, hidden beneath the queen's unwrapped, severed hand which lies across the mummy. He is reminded of "that fabled head of the Gorgon Medusa with the snakes in her hair, whose sight struck into stone those who beheld" (142-43). Though Trelawny dismisses the suggestion, Malcolm Ross is perfectly correct to see the "great stake" of the Egyptologist's experiment as "the resurrection of the woman, and the woman's life" (267), rather than the recovery of the long-lost ancient sciences. Queen Tera's power and position are quite singular—as Trelawny impresses upon Margaret when he insists that "they didn't have women's rights or lady doctors in ancient Egypt, my dear!" (293). And this pointed reference directs us towards Stoker's own ambivalence regarding the changing status of women in an era of growing feminist agitation. Instructively, Queen Tera

gives us the triumph of womanhood in a world of men: "though a Queen," she has "claimed all the privileges of kingship and masculinity" (162). To borrow from Freud's interpretation of the Medusa's head, we can say that the function of the Egyptian queen is to isolate the "horrifying effects" of femininity (as female genitalia) from "their pleasure-giving ones" (273-74). Similarly, when Stoker revised the novel towards the end of his life to meet a publisher's request for a more optimistic ending, he no longer had the destructive Tera return to life but instead has her merge with the "spiritual" figure of Margaret (29), who finally marries Malcolm and becomes his queen. But each of these representations of woman bleeds into the other and there is no real contrariety here, for as Jacqueline Rose has observed in another context, "the idealisation and the aggression are the fully interdependent and reverse sides of the same coin" (151).

Likewise, one can find a parallel to this oscillation between paired extremes in the juxtaposition of Trelawny's buoyant vision of scientific progress with Malcolm Ross's gloomy, virtually Manichean ruminations, which stand back-to-back in the same chapter. Where Trelawny sees his experimental work as reconciling Biblical narrative with scientific knowledge, Malcolm wonders whether there is "room in the Universe for opposing Gods," and, if there is, whether such an "opposing Force would tend to the weakening of His own teaching and designs?" (233). Trelawny's "scientific or quasi-scientific discussions" temporarily divert Malcolm's "mind from brooding on the mysteries of the occult," but, of course, Trelawny's project is largely inspired by these same "mysteries" (238). By the final pages of the novel we have come a long way from "the region of fact" (45) to which Malcolm's dry legal intellect was initially committed. But not so far that the names of scientists like Sir William Crookes or Sir William Ramsay sound either anachronistic or out of place. The séance-like atmosphere surrounding Trelawny's "great experiment" alerts us to Spiritualism's role as a site of mediation between Edwardian religion and science, or at least those more speculative branches of modern physics. Perhaps this was only to be expected. In his often caustic survey *The Victorian Aftermath* (1933), Esmé Wingfield-Stratford records that by the early years of the twentieth century "evolution" had ceased to dominate popular perceptions of science. Instead, its place had been taken by less tangible phenomena such as Radium and the X-ray. As "the solid and simple cosmos of the Victorian Rationalists" dematerialised, he writes, Edwardian scientists came to resemble "the revellers in *The Masque of the Red Death* pursuing the ghostly intruder from room to room, and finally cornering him and tearing off his mask and robe," and finding "beneath them—nothing" (130-31).

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