

read books describing them, and in this volume he brings most of the gargantuan together. There is, for example, the two-story outhouse which no doubt resulted from the folklore of the same accommodation—or did the folklore result from the reality? Anyway, for the two-story accommodation as folklore, see my article “The Seat of Democracy: The Privy Humor of Chic Sale,” *Journal of American Culture* 3, Fall 1980, 409–16. But perhaps the greatest revelation is the origin of “I think; therefore, I Spam.” Of course Descartes came along and rewrote the useful observation to his own purposes. But we must give credit where credit is due. And this book deserves a lot of credit. It is devoted to the gargantuan. Undoubtedly the author will turn next to the tiny. Anyone wanting to help out should get in touch with him at ericdregni@yahoo.com.

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**Modern Occult Rhetoric:
Mass Media and the Drama of
Secrecy in the Twentieth Century
(Rhetoric, Culture, and Social
Critique Series)**

Joshua Gunn, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

How many taboos can a scholar violate before being permanently assigned to publishing limbo? Judging from this book, quite a few! Joshua Gunn, assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Texas–Austin, treats the seldom analyzed (because disreputable) territory of the occult, typically understood to include

phenomena such as fortune telling, astrology, black magic, Satanism, and channeling dead spirits. He wishes to show how “individuals use language . . . secrets, creating groups of insiders and outsiders” (xv). Gunn reveals that his investigation was launched by a “smugly” framed insult tossed at him in a graduate seminar; another student publicly chastised him for his ignorance of “Lacan on desire” (235). Perhaps reflecting the emotional sting of that classroom humiliation, he risks offense to many respectable colleagues in a first chapter that begins with a babbling satire of the French postmodern stars, Deleuze and Guattari.

Such a ruse momentarily suggests his sympathy with Alan Sokal, who hoaxed the journal *Social Texts* a decade ago with famously “fashionable nonsense.” But after this deliberate linking of occultism’s obscurity with that of postmodern critical discourse, he goes on to offer a qualified apology for both. While he does not defend the truth claims of either, he argues instead for the legitimacy of their shared purpose—to disclose previously unknown truths conveyed through language that is by necessity exploratory. As he works out parallels between the popular and the scholarly occult, Gunn develops a subtle, original analysis that helps us understand “the poetics of obscurity” and how it functions to create appreciative audiences.

In addition to this philosophical strand focused on meaning, the argument of the book is framed historically, encompassing ancient origins of the occult tradition, its suppression by the early Christian church, its revival during the Renaissance, and its period of greatest vitality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the church’s social authority to forbid what it called “magic” declined.

For the American aspect of Gunn’s analysis, principal figures covered are H. P. Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, and Anton LaVey. And just as the spiritual authority of the church diminished, Gunn sees a downward path from a period of earnest seeking after secrets to a period of occult

commodification dominated by scary images rather than esoteric language.

Blavatsky was a world traveler from Ukraine who, in 1875, formed the Theosophical Society in New York; she circulated as a spiritualist celebrity who commanded special insights and powers based upon her study of assorted world religions. The Society still exists today and her works such as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), although denounced by some of her contemporaries as “rubbish,” are still in print today, remaining important to the theosophical strand of New Age religions. Her rhetorical style, which was repetitive, list-laden with citations, and filled with imported terms (especially from Sanskrit), helped Blavatsky cultivate the aura of authority among her devoted, though often bemuddled followers. Her justification for the peculiar language was that it could transport her readers to the theologically “ineffable,” the more-than-ordinary spiritual reality that lay beyond the references of definite, ordinary, or scientific language. It was the promised access to secrecy, despite the obscurity, that held her readers.

Aleister Crowley was a sojourner of a different kind. An Englishman of independent means, he presented himself variously as the revealer of secrets from ancient Egyptian gods and as a satanic prankster who encouraged witchcraft, child sacrifice, and complete sexual freedom. In Gunn’s reading, Crowley encouraged his readers to make a kind of erotic fetish of their experience in reading *The Book of the Law* (1904; Appendix 2 reproduces the full text). Continuing with scholarly analogues, Gunn sees Crowley’s self styling as master of text-with-secrets in relation to the academic star system, with its “masters of interpretation” who carry the pretense of perceiving the meaning of important texts directly, without the taint of preconceptions. This tendency is identified in the older New Criticism movement and the newer “intrinsic criticism” stance in the field of rhetorical studies. Yet another dimension of Crowley’s performance

was an antithetical irony toward himself as expert and, even worse for his reputation, participation in pranks reported in the popular American and British press as openly criminal or sacrilegious. Crowley’s attitudes and behavior could survive among a quietly anarchic elite but were fiercely denounced when more widely known. Without the trappings of Crowley’s “wickedest man in the world” label, America’s hermeneutic elite has also suffered in the exposures of postmodern vocabulary and political stances to popular scrutiny.

Anton LaVey represents the low point in the evolution of the search for and dissemination of secrets. In Gunn’s accounting, LaVey is more publicist and marketeer than inquirer. His Church of Satan (founded in 1966) and *Satanic Bible* (1969) are really about demystification and the assertion of a secular life orientation. The book, which remains in print, was cobbled together from diverse sources (including Crowley) and thus lacks any kind of rhetorical or philosophical coherence. LaVey most succeeded in staging “Prince of Darkness” images that were repeatedly consumed and repeated by Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo Rivera, and other pulp journalistic venues that magnified the impression of satanic ritualism in America. LaVey himself did not believe in Satan as a spiritual reality any more than he believed in a Christian God. Gunn’s analysis of how the imagery became the substance of alarmist journalism is enlightening, as is his discussion of the Polanski films *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Ninth Gate* (1999).

This book is a worthy addition to a university library. Its muscular, abstract arguments on many points make it a difficult slog for many undergraduates. But it is a rewarding book for anyone who wants to think about the deep appeals of obscure language and the challenges of interpretation posed by it.

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