

Book Review

Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth-Century by Joshua Gunn. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xxix + 340 pp.

More than a decade ago when, as a new doctoral student, I first 5
encountered the writing of Judith Butler in a graduate seminar on
critical theory, I found it strange, almost ghastly in its elusiveness.
Most of the words in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* I could, at a
basic denotative level, comprehend, but their particular combinations
made them more like jangling, epiphanic coins I could not yet trade, 10
and so they accumulated, with each painstaking chapter, into a big
pile of gleaming metal. Which is why, when I needed to *write* about
these words, I, a nonsmoking athlete who has always preferred to
write at my desk in the bright lucidity of morning, waited until well
after midnight, lugged my laptop and a dorm burner lamp onto the 15
balcony/perch of my grad apartment and wrote my way through an
entire pack of cigarettes trying anything to get that pile of words to
do something for me. In the end they did something all right: by the
time the sun rose, I had a wicked nicotine hangover and a seminar-
length paper. And yet I still felt as if I did not quite have those words; 20
instead, the words themselves, with their strange, lurid pull, somehow
had me.

On one level, my eerie, non-rational, quasi-alienating encounter
with Butler's words is what Joshua Gunn's book, *Modern Occult*
Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth 25
Century, is about. And yet while the analogical—indeed, intellectual—
connection between academic writing and Occultism counts as one of
the book's compelling arguments, the book is about much more. The
book, at base, as Gunn puts it in the introduction, is about the “conflict
between representation and ineffability” (xxi). It's about the realms in 30
which the paradoxes of ineffability are most intensely experienced.
And no realm is better acquainted with—indeed, constituted by—
ineffability than the Occult, its very name indicating that which is hid-
den, esoteric, secret, concealed. The Occult is frequently associated
with the supernatural—that which we can not by definition thor- 35
oughly know, of which we can only catch a bleary if stunning glimpse.
Such association prompts Gunn to develop a new term, “the occultic,”

in order to broaden the purview, to show how the shimmering mysteries of esoterica simultaneously attract and exclude in other realms. The Occult, then, becomes the smaller term restricted to discernible traditions of hidden knowledge, the most readily accessible example these days being *The Da Vinci Code's* portrayal of The Priory of Sion, with its closely guarded narratives, sacred lineages, and fetishized puzzles. In order to help rhetorical scholars better understand the occultic, Gunn sets out to understand occultism itself as a tradition, and most importantly for readers of *RSQ*, as rhetoric.

Gunn's book is as tight as it is thick. Together, the first two chapters, "What is the Occult?" and "Toward an Occult Poetics," stand as the first extended analysis of the Occult from a rhetorical perspective. The first chapter, after reviewing the most common "origin narratives" of the Occult reaching back to the medieval period, moves to that which is distinctly rhetorical about this book: a dissection of those narratives' formal features—namely, their claims to revelation, the frequent use of neologisms, and their saturation with irony (18–26). The first chapter, that is, lays bare the rhetorical mechanisms of secrecy itself. Chapter two then presses further, examining the occultic relation between ineffability and discourse. It is a relation that, as Gunn demonstrates, bears importantly on rhetoric's obsession with the distinctions between speech and writing. Called "Toward an Occult Poetics," the second chapter is one of the book's most wide-ranging, for it packs away analyses of thinkers as varied (or so we think) as Plato, the modern Russian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff, Jacques Derrida, Martha Nussbaum, and Judith Butler, folding them into solid stances on presence, the speech/writing problem, and the still-echoing debates about the difficulty of academic discourse. All of this winds into an extended meditation on the basic paradox of occultic discourse: how attempts to "reveal" discursively only further obscure. Gunn's account of occultic poetics, complete with a theory of invention he terms "imaginative dialectic" whereby language is turned on itself to heighten awareness, is (perhaps ironically) quite lucid. Gunn plainly argues: "All theory is occultic" (52). All the more reason, then, for rhetorical and critical theorists to engage Gunn's analysis of occultic discourse's proliferation in the twentieth century.

Subsequent chapters examine the esoteric language of Theosophist leader H. P. Blavatsky's and the controversial Aleister Crowley. I want to dwell on Crowley because the Crowley-function organizes not one but three chapters and an interlude, an eerie account of Gunn's youthful first encounter with images/sounds of Crowley at none other than a Christian revival. Methodologically, the Crowley chapters are perhaps best cast as a trilogy. The first (chapter 4) offers a close reading

of Crowley's *The Book of the Law*, keeping in play two arguments, one examining the ethos-production of esoteric language, and the other counting as a form of textual occultism the methods of close textual analysis, known in rhetorical studies as "intrinsic criticism." The next two chapters then respond to that critique, modeling a more expansive 85 kind of reading that resists what Gunn calls the "gravitational pull" exerted by the text (104) and moves into matters social and historical. And the payoff of this critical dialectic is no less than Gunn's central historical argument: the third chapter in the trilogy, chapter 6, "The Death of the Modern Magus: 'The Masses' and Irony's Other," traces 90 Crowley's movement of occultism into the mainstream, and with it the unraveling of the occult as a coherent tradition, or what Gunn cleverly calls Crowley's "death by publicity" (169).

In the resulting socioeconomic history Gunn discerns that in becoming an object of mass mediation, the occult changed hands from elite 95 intellectuals to the less economically empowered U.S. youth (171), yielding what Gunn calls "Prime-Time Satanism," also the pre-colon title of chapter 7. Chapters 7 and 8 then, bring the book as close to the present as possible, examining multiple social forms of the occultic, including the rampant popularization and commodification of vampires 100 and sorcerers (think Buffy and Harry), and the sheer fascination with the unknown—aliens, witchcraft. Of course the very idea of witchcraft, along with the not-so-distant initiation rituals of fraternities and sororities have long occult traditions, all well pre-dating Crowley and even Blavatsky, but Gunn nonetheless argues convincingly 105 that a major shift has occurred in how these figures and practices inhabit the popular imaginary, if not in their exclusionary effects. As a—gasp—Harry Potterless reader, I feel such exclusionary effects every time I fail to "get" a cultural reference such as the bumper sticker that reads "George Bush is a Muggle," and yet 110 the very fact that I recognize this as a reference to Rowling's wildly popular series, as something that I am excluded from, is a remarkable feat of mass media.

If it's not already clear by now, I believe Gunn's book stands as a major contribution to studies of the occult, along the lines of work 115 (and work-in-progress) by literary scholar Gauri Viswanathan. Even more impressively, it provides tantalizing glimpses into the oftentimes paradoxical workings of rhetoric as a practice, as well as (and as distinct from) rhetorical studies as a critical practice. The layers of arguments—the incisive asides on such topics as the sublime, on authorial 120 intent, on the age-old debate about speech versus writing, on so many of the terms that motivate poststructuralism itself—document the concerns or anxieties of rhetorical studies and offer new theoretical

commentary that would interest any rhetorical scholar. Gunn unflinchingly and by necessity uses fraught terms like transcendence and truth, always with critical and historical specificity. *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is a work of methodological rigor, complete with a self-reflective commentary that parlays arguments about the history of occultism into arguments about the critical methods of rhetorical studies. It seems almost trite at this moment to label the work performative, and so I will leave the term out there while moving onto one of the book's surprises. 125 130

Modern Occult Rhetoric is a very funny book. Gunn has the rare ability to turn a prank into a serious critical point (see the book's opening for a compelling, even shocking instance). In doing so, he reminds us that levity is not just the mystical overcoming of gravity's earthly force, but can also keep buoyant even the most dense of academic arguments. At times the humor takes the form of a parenthetical remark, like one assigning Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* status as an "occult classic" (89) or another lamenting Gunn's own inexperience with Tantric sex (93). The little jokes often leap out of nowhere, as when I was lazily consulting the index to help me re-locate Gunn's treatment of Gurdjieff. I noticed right above Gurdjieff an entry for Gunn's own name, but rather than page numbers indicating the usually insistent self-citation, the entry lists only a cross-reference. It reads: "Gunn, Joshua. See Fool, the figure of" (333). The Fool, whose Tarot card image appears on the book's cover, is the lead figure for the book's epilogue. Through the figure of the Fool, the epilogue finally approaches what has until that point only flickered at the edges of Gunn's book: the ethical issues raised by attention to rhetoric's occultic side. To offer one's self as a fool, ever subject to a prankster like Sokal (232–233), a fool who gives in to the lure of the secret, who at times uses obscure language in a book that dissects such language, is to perform a rather brave act of humility. 135 140 145 150

It is thus with humor and critical appreciation that *Modern Occult Rhetoric* helped me to see anew my earlier awful (awe-full) grad school moment—more than a decade, and dozens of readings and teaching of Butler's work, later. The night I spent smoking Marlboro Lights to try to see more clearly what Butler meant was a kind of subjective induction into a ritualized world of secrets, the workings of language itself, and a lesson that "meaning" is about so much more than reasoned understanding. As Gunn puts it, Butler is something of a "modern day-Gurdjieff" (52), and so too, to some degree, are we all. 155 160

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