Occultism and the Ambiguities of the Modern

The newly imagined self proposed by fin-de-siècle occultism was formulated in relation to some of the leading dilemmas of modern existence. The inadequacies of a life stripped of any meaningful spiritual component, the perceived threat to individual and aesthetic autonomy posed by a developing mass culture, the dependence of modes of modern rationality on a particular characterization and positioning of the irrational: each worked to engender a resistant—but also, in key respects, accommodating—version of occult subjectivity. One of the central arguments of The Place of Enchantment is that this occult subjectivity was located at the interstices of disenchanted preoccupations and modes of inquiry. As such, it called upon secularized strategies of self-construction in pursuit of spiritualized goals. At the same time, although occultism was predicated on the belief that it is possible to uncover and codify the laws that govern human existence, it also questioned the kind of rationality that such a codification might be assumed to require. The fin-de-siècle occult was born of and integral to a broader European cultural climate in which a newly forged “breath of spirit” sought an uneasy alliance with emerging critiques of rationality. Occultists refused to understand the relationship between reason and reality in conventional terms, arguing instead that in their post-Enlightenment incarnations both concepts were fatally flawed. And, as we have seen, occultism was caught up in a series of ambiguities. Not least of these was that it was implicated in a critique of the autonomy of reason even as it reaffirmed a nineteenth-century faith in both reason and progress.

So if Holbrook Jackson’s classic formulation of the 1890s as the decade that witnessed “the beginning of the revival of mysticism” has withstood the test of time, as I suggest at the outset of the previous chapter, to what extent was he right to couple this “revival” with “the beginning of the revolt against rationalism”? Was the “revival,” as Jackson suggested, synonymous with such a “revolt”? The short answer is “yes,” if by rationalism we understand a commitment to the strict application of empirical methods and requirement of scientific proofs in relation to the phenomena of religious experience. Those involved with the “mystical” revival abhorred the brutal interventions of an unheeding positivist coterie in delicate questions of the soul or Higher Self. At the same time, though, occultists adhered to a system of belief entirely regulated by reason. Occult cosmology was itself highly systematized, and the practical occultist’s skill lay in the ability to understand, negotiate, and control these other realms. Occultism was often represented as a science, and occultists played by the straightforward rule that specific magical procedures produce predictable and specified results. This is what characterizes magic, even the fin-de-siècle psychologized magic conducted in modes of higher consciousness.

Where occultists parted company with positivism was in its formulation of reason. It argued for the creative partnership of intuition and reason, acknowledging the role of imagination in practical magic and pushing the boundaries of the real beyond anything that might be empirically verified by the noninitiate. All of this meant that, while occultism blurred the distinctions between “rational” and “irrational,” occultists themselves epitomized an unbending faith in rationality worthy of any Victorian proponent of scientific naturalism. They argued for the rationalist modernity of a theory and practice that refuted the concept of the supernatural and looked instead to the natural world for explanations of all things nonrational: “Whatever forces may be latent in the Universe at large or in man in particular, they are wholly natural... the superhuman, Yes; the supernatural, No.”

In this sense the occultists at the turn of the century were the children of late nineteenth-century modernity. They were in thrall to an Enlightenment insistence on the supremacy of human reason even though they challenged dominant definitions of reason, and were similarly sympathetic to the possibilities of a worldview in which religious superstition is abandoned for a reasoned if spiritually enlightened self-knowledge. Theirs was a thoroughly modern project, albeit one with presentiments of the postmodern critique of reason. It is just this critique, of course, that is generally associated with the central ethos of postmodernism. In the work of Michel Foucault it takes the form of a historically based argument in which he suggests that the knowledge we have come to call the human sciences, and the systems (juridical, penal, medical, and so on) through which it is institutionalized, produces the very human subject that it purports to investigate and represent. This argument is underwritten by Foucault’s insistence on the historicity of the En-
lightenment concept of autonomous reason, and his rejection of reason’s claims to universality and thus objectivity. Elsewhere postmodernism is characterized by Jean-François Lyotard has summed up as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” It is this “incredulity” towards the great overarching story lines of the Enlightenment project—be they organizational concepts such as “society” or “class,” or value systems based on universalizing assumptions like “truth” and “justice”—that lies at the heart of a postmodern dedication to undermining the certainties (some would add: colonizing tyrannies) of what is “known.”

And this, in spite of certain similarities, is what distinguishes the postmodern position from that of turn-of-the-century occultists, who subscribed without hesitation to the idea of ultimate truths that can be known as well as the concept of an objectively verifiable real, and whose beliefs were formulated around a highly structured narrative of spiritual organization and purpose. It is also what distinguishes a postmodern intellectual standpoint from that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century innovators in the human sciences. Max Weber and Sigmund Freud, to take two such leading exemplars, were acutely aware of the ironies of the Enlightenment project and exposed to severe scrutiny its promises and assumptions. Similarly, they were each in their different ways concerned with the relationship between cultural formation and the distinctively modern concept of reason as subjective self-consciousness. But even as they explored the relativism of the Western rational order (Weber) and undermined the notion of the stable subject upon which that order depends (Freud), they held fast both methodologically and conceptually to a belief in the ultimate authority of reason. It is this acceptance of the Enlightenment insistence on the sovereignty of reason that distinguishes those great modernists from postmodernists, who insist that because the modern concept of reason is itself contingent its operations are necessarily compromised. The struggle today over whether or not an acknowledgment of cultural relativism implies the acceptance of cognitive relativism is being fought out on the terrain of postmodernism, but this debate has necessitated a return on both sides to the promulgators of modern thought at the turn of the century.

Critical to this return are the related issues of the self-contradictions of the rational subject and the apparent failure of reason to provide a universal basis for moral-value judgments. It is in particular the palpable failure of Enlightenment reason to ensure human emancipation, and its inability to provide the ultimate grounding for societal values and norms, that so exercised Max Weber. For Weber, the Enlightenment’s faith in the progressive potential of science and rationality was misplaced. He argued that far from the liberation envisaged by Enlightenment thinkers, what has been bequeathed to the modern era is the imprisoning straitjacket of a “societality,” purposive or instrumental rationality. This characterization of the apocryphal Enlightenment reason was itself bound up with what Weber called “rationalization” and the related emergence of specific cultural values. Weber uses the concept of rationalization in a variety of different ways throughout his work, but in general it relates to the ways in which different modes of Western rationality came to be expressed in and through the organization of social and cultural life. Weber viewed rationalization as a self-perpetuating process that is intrinsic to modernity and encompasses everything from the emergence of the modern state, with its attendant bureaucratic structures, to the development of specific conceptual modes in the fine arts. Most important, Weber argued that instrumental rationality and the rationalization of society has created a fearful “iron cage” of bureaucratization, which incorporates its own logic of authority and repression. More broadly understood, the triumph of reason and “progress” has been achieved at terrible cost.

Weber’s analysis of modernity has become the focus of commentary throughout the twentieth century. Susceptible to appropriation by both conservative thinkers and Marxist intellectuals, his ideas about the systematization of rationality and the rationalization of authority proved influential across the political spectrum as well as central to much American interwar social science. Weberian theory was refined and modified during the course of its application in different domains, but within the revisionist Marxist Frankfurt School Weber’s assessment of the Enlightenment legacy was revisited with particular urgency as the European events of the 1930s and 1940s unfolded. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that there could be no social freedom without enlightened thought, but equally considered that the Enlightenment contained within itself its own seeds of destruction. In the face of Stalinism and the rise of fascism, European society seemed the very antithesis of all that was rational—and yet for Horkheimer and Adorno totalitarianism, like anti-Semitism, was simply a playing out of the internal dynamics of Enlightenment thought and values. Each represented an elaboration of the Enlightenment’s underlying logic of domination, whether of “man” or nature. Horkheimer and Adorno referred to this as “the self-destruction of the Enlightenment.” In a message that anticipated the self-critiquing argument of Jürgen Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno stressed that “the Enlightenment must consider itself.” At the root of these theories of modernity as they emerged during the first half of the twentieth century, then, was the idea
that the unreflective purposive-instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment project was ultimately self-defeating. This was summed up at many levels by Horkheimer and Adorno when they noted tersely that the "program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world." 11

The reference to "disenchantment" was a direct acknowledgment of Weber's pessimistic assessment of the modern age. According to Weber, the disenchanted modern age is one in which an all-embracing metaphysical or religious worldview falls victim to the same process of rationalization that had earlier created it. Furthermore, this has cognitive as well as ethical implications. Disenchantment implies the emergence of a particular structure of consciousness developed in accordance with the secularizing logic of the rationalizing process. This modern consciousness is characterized by an instrumental reason that can only disavow that which does not accord with its own conceptual dictates. As Weber's Marxist interpreters put it, what "appears to be the triumph of subjective rationality, the subjection of all reality to logical formalism, is paid for by the obedient subjection of reason to what is directly given." 12 So that in a desacralized modern age the principle of transcendence and the ontological realities of a religious worldview are exchanged for a subject-centered immanence and the realities of a rational-scientific universe. By this reckoning, scientific rationality becomes simultaneously the only legitimate means of interpreting the world and the sole arbiter of objective world meaning. It is for this reason that Weber regarded science not as the antithesis of religion but as itself a religion. 13 Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that in its efforts to free the world of fallacy and superstition the Enlightenment has succeeded only in replacing one myth with another. Instead of an all-powerful God, an enlightened world assumes the sovereignty of "man." This sovereignty in turn consists of "man's" power to know and thereby control nature. But herein also lies a great paradox: "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant." 14

This paradox was in part what Adorno and Horkheimer took on in their idea of the "dialectic" of the Enlightenment. Freedom from the thrall of religious superstition merely substitutes one form of power relations for another. The domination of the natural world by "man" is simultaneously an alienation from nature and a dehumanization of the ways in which we conceive of ourselves and relate to others. It is this dehumanization that Georg Lukács had earlier referred to as "reification," and Habermas suggests that Marxists from Lukács to Adorno consistently interpreted Weber's theory of the rationalization of society as a reification of consciousness. 15 One way of putting this was to say that pre-Enlightenment animism "spiritualizes the object, whereas industrialism objectifies the spirits of men." Further, that

"with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men—even those of the individual to himself—were bewitched." Thus, in an enlightened rationalized society the powerful spirits of an earlier age have given way to demons of a different kind. Human relationships and subjective consciousness have assumed a "demonically distorted form," one ruled by the principles of reification and domination. The kind of power dynamic inherent in magic and superstition has been transposed into "the indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment" and the slide of "mankind... into a new kind of barbarism." 16

The hope, at least as Horkheimer expressed it during the final years of the Second World War, lay in the reconciliation of "objective reason" (the kind of rationalization and associated ethical values expressed in traditional religious worldviews) and the instrumentalized "subjective reason" closely identified with self-interest and privileged by Weber in his analysis of modernity. In an argument to which Habermas has returned, Horkheimer insisted that the reconciliation of these seemingly oppositional concepts of reason relies on the readiness of reason to critique itself. It equally involves an acknowledgment of the "trend to domination" inherent in subjective reason and recognition of the ways in which this gets played out through an antagonistic and alienated relationship with the natural world. Horkheimer stressed the impossibility and undesirability of repressing the tendency of the self (his term) to aspire to "the idea of something transcending the subjectivity of self-interest," and proposed the relevance of the idea that "an all-embracing or fundamental structure of being could be discovered and a conception of destiny derived from it." He seems to come remarkably close here to a religious formulation, and was later to comment on the underlying religious theme in the Frankfurt School's materialism. Horkheimer was enough of a Marxist, however, to view this principle of transcendence, "structure of being," and "conception of destiny" in social rather than explicitly religious terms. Drawing on a philosophical tradition of objective reason, with its claims to the concept of objective truth, he had in mind the ultimate reconciliation of transcendence and subjective self-interest in a "supra-individual order, that is to say... social solidarity." 17

Horkheimer's proposal for the reconciliation of objective and subjective reason as a solution to the problem of disenchantment stressed the complementary importance of instrumental reason and the kind of unifying worldview that Weber associated with traditional religion. He argued for the apotheosis of self-critiquing reason as a subjective calculating rationality with ultimate reference to the transcendent truth of "an all-embracing... structure of being." For all this apparent appeal to a religious sensibility,
though, neither Horkheimer nor Weber sought to press the claims of traditional religion in a modern age. Indeed, both were suggesting in their different ways that modernity is characterized by the impossibility of getting that particular genie back into the lamp. For both men the problem of disenchantment is bound up with the history of modern consciousness, whose very structure now militates against the possibility of shared and unquestioning religious belief. It is the dominance of an instrumental rationality in conjunction with the rationalizing process that first created the kind of subject-centered Protestantism which so interested Weber. But by dint of the same logic these processes have been instrumental in replacing a unifying religious worldview governed by a divine transcendental principle with a freecfating, subject-centered order in which there are no socially integrative moral and ethical guarantees. According to the dictates of instrumental rationality, faith has in the modern age become a question of subjective belief without external referent or claims to truth.

The problem of disenchantment as identified by Weber and Horkheimer was discussed by them within the framework of the dominant model of modern subjectivity, and indeed both men were representative of the modern disenchanted subject they described. Both Weber and Horkheimer accepted the Cartesian model of reason as rational self-consciousness, and Horkheimer elaborated on the theme of instrumental reason as intrinsic to the structure of modern consciousness. Neither man thought that a return to an archaic enchanted world was possible or acceptable, and Horkheimer looked instead to a philosophy of consciousness for answers. If the problem is the modern subject, the argument runs, the resolution must lie in adjudicating the rational self-consciousness through which that subject is constituted. This is the point at which Habermas parts company with the Frankfurt School, but the validity or otherwise of the prescription is not at issue here.18 What is important is that the model of subjectivity to which Weber and the early members of the Frankfurt School subscribed, and the deep-seated ambivalence towards the rationality of the self-authentifying modern subject that their analyses disclose, are themselves emblematic of the crisis of subjectivity as it was experienced at the turn of the century. Although it was not conceived in this way, or under precisely the same historical circumstances, the contradictions disclosed by modernity towards the end of the nineteenth century produced a similar set of anxieties about what it means to be human in the modern world. This was the climate, after all, out of which Weber’s work emerged. For many, the final decade of the old century seemed to mark the moment at which the modern subject was fi-

nally cut adrift from its traditional moorings and the aporias of modernity as we know it were born.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the world-historical process of modernization that Weber called rationalization had apparently secured the emergence of a secular subject within a largely secularized culture. While this did not necessarily mean the erosion of individual religious faith per se, it did signal the accomplishment of a modern separation of reason and faith, the appearance at the heart of intellectual life of a self-enlightened critique of religious belief, and a serious decline in the power and centrality of organized religion. Intrinsic to these developments was the rise of positivism, a continuation of Enlightenment thought that discounted traditional theology or metaphysics as mere speculation and insisted instead on a model of rational discourse and of reality itself characterized by the systematized standards of the positive sciences. Weber argued that these processes in turn suggested the demise of a shared religious worldview with its transcendent ideals and associated ethical values, and pointed instead to an increasingly subject-centered moral universe. Much of this added up to the now-familiar picture of Weberian disenchantment with its central figure, the rational secularized subject. This was an individual whose religious proclivities and ethical attitudes, while related to cultural norms and subject to social sanction, were nevertheless increasingly a matter of private conscience. The range of available conventional religious beliefs remained broad, but the individual response to the claims of religion could no longer be assumed. Belief had become intensely personalized, and for some had disappeared altogether.

Rationalism and its attendant concept of reason played the dominant role in this shift. In its Enlightenment incarnation, particularly as expressed in the evolutionary and scientific perspective of nineteenth-century positivism, it was no longer possible for reason to engage as it once had in the production of religious knowledge. Faith was (as always) a requirement of belief, but faith was now a deeply subjective personal domain largely evacuated by reason in its knowledge-producing, proof-demanding empiricist mode. During the second half of the nineteenth century many thousands of women and men became spiritualist believers precisely because spiritualism did not demand faith, but instead offered actual demonstration and thus objective “proof” of its claims. Occultism, and particularly magic, operated in a similar vein. Alternatively there were those whose beliefs slipped quietly away, unmourned, a logical consequence of reason’s seemingly superior sway. Others abandoned altogether the traditional concerns of metaphysics and theology and instead sought fulfillment in a positivist Comtean religion.
of humanity and reason. Still more undoubtedly held in some measure to orthodox religious beliefs, if not explicit celebration of them, while acknowledging that this was a question of faith rather than a position arrived at through rational calculation. But common to each of these positions was the separation of reason and faith that characterized the modern subject, and the related implied acceptance of the “natural” dominion of reason as manifested in the nineteenth-century interpretation of both the rationalist and nonrationalist traditions.19

There were, however, different currents at work towards the end of the century that both confirmed and undermined the sovereignty of rational subjectivity; and while these developments did nothing to dent the status of rationality as the sine qua non of the normative human being, they did constitute an adjustment to an Enlightenment model of rationality and autonomous rational “man.” H. Stuart Hughes has argued in Consciousness and Society that the 1890s saw the beginning of an “intellectual revolution,” which had at its heart “the problem of consciousness.” Hughes was primarily concerned with the issue of subjectivity in the human sciences, and the book deals with what he identified as the revolt against “the cult of positivism.” He suggests that the positivism against which certain writers directed themselves was broadly taken to mean “the whole tendency to discuss human behavior in terms of analogies drawn from natural science,” and proposes the 1890s as “the period in which the subjective attitude of the observer of society first thrust itself forward in peremptory fashion.” In Hughes’s analysis, the final decade of the century constituted a pivotal moment in the development of social theory. It was the decade during which a creative generation of social thinkers began to attack the accepted notion of “an identity of view between actor and observer in the social process,” and first recognized the significance of “subjective ‘values.’” Hughes argues that the acknowledgment that human behavior is influenced by more than simply “logical considerations,” that this applies equally to the social actor and scientific observer, and that it has clear ramifications for the study of society led to “an enormous heightening of intellectual self-consciousness—a wholesale re-examination of the presuppositions of social thought itself. Seeing through”—probing in depth—these are the hallmarks of early twentieth-century thinking.20

In one sense what Hughes calls “the new self-consciousness” raised the stakes for rationality by further elevating the concept of the autonomous human subject as the supreme source of meaning and value. Equally, however, the probing of a “recently recognized disparity between external reality and the internal appreciation of that reality,” which for Hughes characterized the new intellectual trends of the 1890s, disclosed deep-seated contradictions surrounding the issues of rationality and the self-conscious modern subject.21 For at the very moment that the triumph of rational subjectivity was finally secured, as exemplified by the Weberian disenchanted figure, questions were raised about the ontology of human consciousness, the place of the nonrational in human action, and the authenticity of reason’s effects. And it was in this same moment that the irrational, or that which refuses the logic of rationality, emerged as an object of study and a cause for either concern or celebration. Here, at the turn of the century, it was proposed that there is an irrational dimension to human consciousness and existence that it is the task of rationality to systematize and understand—if only to point up the ultimate frailty of rational understanding.

Towards the end of the century, then, a select group of European social theorists, medical psychologists, and philosophers began to turn their attention to the seemingly irrational realm of human ideas and impulses that defy the dictates of rational intent and conscious organization. The 1890s were the years during which the coherence and rationality of the “ego,” the “I” of personal consciousness, were increasingly called into doubt. At the same time, a renewed social critique leveled at the dehumanization and standardization of life in advanced industrial society drew in diverse and complex ways on the irrationality of advanced capitalism as promoted by Marx and his later interpreters. So, too, as we have seen, a European Lebensphilosophie connected with men like Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Henri Bergson emerged, which constituted a modern reworking of the Romantic tradition, and stood in stark contrast with the presumptions of abstract rationalism and the disillusionment of disenchantment.22

A European “philosophy of life” can be understood (as Horkheimer was later to argue) as an outraged response to the anemic of modern life, but it equally constituted a reasoned rebuttal to the strictures of positivism.23 What these very different understandings of the irrational—as the unconscious and its motivations, the internal inconsistencies of modern social and economic systems, and irrationalism itself—have in common is that they each seem to point to a perceived disjuncture between the Enlightenment assumption that rationalism speaks for all that is human and necessary and a new sense that the irrational is intrinsic both to modernity and the modern subject. The new engagement with the irrational signified an acknowledgment of the dilemmas of modernity that was itself coterminous with a new understanding of subjectivity at the turn of the century.

The optimistic claims for rationality made by the Enlightenment philosophers, and the model of autonomous subjectivity upon which those claims
were predicated, now seemed to be thrown into doubt. It was this doubt, and perhaps in particular a sense of the alienation of consciousness from itself, that was to become synonymous with what it means to be undeniably "modern." So that in this moment of high modernity at the close of the century, reason was subjected to a critique that foreclosed certain Enlightenment assumptions about its purchase and potential even as its normative capabilities were reaffirmed. Indeed, while rationality retained its normative connotations, the new intellectual trends of the day assumed a rather different human subject from that imagined by Enlightenment thinkers, and presented the irrational in a modern rationalized light. But the last reduct of unqualified Enlightenment reason, the association of religion with myth and superstition, seemed secure. If individual women and men retained their religious beliefs, they apparently did so at the behest of faith alone. Religion might be assigned a social value but safely consigned to the domain of the irrational without fear of rehabilitation.

Here, though, is where a problem presents itself. For in the realm of religiosity, too, the concept of reason was critiqued, reformulated, and given new value by a generation of occultists intent on claiming reason in its knowledge-producing mode as the necessary counterpart to a spiritual experience that did not rely upon faith alone. In particular, the upsurge of interest in heterodox spirituality at the end of the century was intimately bound up with a new envisaged modern subjectivity, one that acknowledged the place and importance of the personal irrational, and represented a reworking of the idea of reason that was both a response to and a measure of a Weberian disenchanted modernity.

By Holbrook Jackson's reckoning, "the unsatisfied spirit of the age" looked beyond established moral codes and the restrictive practices of rationalism for answers to ongoing questions about life's meaning and purpose. The solutions proposed by occultism were contradictory. They involved a fully fledged engagement with consciousness in all its dimensions that was symptomatic of but did not reproduce the concerns of the human sciences, and the elaboration of a modern subject-centered immanence that nevertheless relied for its legitimacy on a rationalized cosmology and assertion of an objectively verifiable (if spiritualized) real. Occultism in fact represented the apotheosis of the sovereignty of the self—a self that did not recognize the relativism of its own self-reflexivity, and that could therefore confidently assume its rightful place as lord of the universe. In so doing, occultism, and especially practical occultism, took an Enlightenment imperative to know and thus control the natural world to new heights. Not only was personal consciousness in all its complexity posited as knowable, it was also deemed

the route to knowledge of and power over the great occluded dominions of nontemporal reality. Similarly, the lucid cognition of the boundless "kingdom within" was a mere hair's breadth from an assertion of personal divinity. The ambitious reach of the occult endeavor was fantastic, perhaps even frightening. The will to power that Adorno and Horkheimer associated so closely with Enlightenment rationalism is implicit; the threat to personal integrity, particularly if the safeguards were not observed, manifest. Both were writ large in the career of Aleister Crowley. The unexamined problem that lay at the heart of fin-de-siècle occultism is that it rewrote the rules of engagement with the self. Occultism opened up the unconscious to rational self-exploration in an attempt to know the unknowable in a way that exemplified the logic of Enlightenment reason and its dynamic of colonization and control.

At the turn of the century, when occultism in Britain was often closely tied to progressive politics and a benign spiritual worldview, the problems implicit in occult rationalizations lay in abeyance. For the moment the occult goal of creating a new "race" of "supermen" who would work towards the "regeneration" of the planet seemed harmless enough. There were warning signs, but nothing yet to suggest that "the fully enlightened earth" might radiate "disaster triumphant."24 H. Stuart Hughes, however, writing four decades after Holbrook Jackson, could not be so sure that fin-de-siècle "mysticism" did not carry with it connotations of a destructive irrationalism. Throughout his discussion of what he called the recovery of the unconscious, Hughes tends to elide the terms unconscious and irrational, arguing that "the problem of irrational motivation in human conduct" in a broader sense marked the work of "the major intellectual innovators of the 1890s." "They were obsessed," he states, "almost intoxicated, with a rediscovery of the nonlogical, the uncivilized, the inexplicable." This characterization of the intellectual project of the 1890s is in itself revealing, but Hughes's explicit agenda was to defend the "great" social theorists with whom he was concerned (and Freud and Weber undoubtedly headed the list) against charges of "irrationalism." They were, he insists, "concerned with the irrational only to exorcise it . . . to tame it, to canalize it for constructive human purposes." Furthermore, Hughes felt obliged to dispense with the view that a preoccupation with unconscious or irrational motivation might signal an incipient "neoromanticism or neo-mysticism." Such categorization, he suggests, fitted only a very few "minor figures" like Charles Péguy or Carl Jung. Hughes argues that the sociologist Émile Durkheim was more representative in protesting (possibly with Bergson in mind) what he called the "re-enactment mysticism" among social theorists.25
Hughes's discussion, of course, was shaped by his own position as a postwar scholar. Writing during the 1950s, he was highly sensitive to what he saw as the perils of the “new self-consciousness” and suggested that there are potentially tragic political ramifications to thinking “with the blood.” But intellectually, too, Hughes was driven by “an awareness ... [that] the subjective character of social thought” could easily slide into a denial of “the validity of all such thought.” His discussion of “the problem of consciousness” anticipated some of the criticisms currently leveled against postmodernism, and he characterized his own intellectual position as “quite consciously eighteenth century.” I believe that we are all to a greater or lesser extent children of the Enlightenment.” While disassociating himself from “the cult of positivism,” Hughes nonetheless implicitly accepted the tenets of twentieth-century logical positivism in its more diffuse midcentury form. When he argued that the innovators of the 1890s had shifted the focus of inquiry from “the apparent and objectively verifiable to the only partially conscious area of unexplained motivation”; when he suggested that “psychological process had replaced external reality as the most pressing topic for investigation”; and when he stated that it “was no longer what actually existed that seemed most important; it was what men thought existed.” Hughes was himself acknowledging the existence of an objectively verifiable “external reality.” Furthermore, he implicitly accepted that rational inquiry—even into the uncharted waters of unconscious motivation—must be guided by the precepts of objectivity. And for him objectivity is only possible if there is some independent, nonsubjective guarantor of meaning.26

Thus, for Hughes, the greatest thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were those who “while fighting every step of the way to salvage as much as possible of the rationalist heritage decisively shifted the axis of that tradition to make room for the new definition of man as something more (or less) than a logically calculating animal.” The rationalist heritage involves keeping a firm grip on subjective interpretation or what might now be called self-reflexive analysis. Taken to extremes, as Hughes argued in the case of Georges Sorel, a preeminent subjectivity could indeed slide into “a kind of sociological mysticism.” The danger for Hughes as well as for Émile Durkheim, then, was that the “self-consciousness” of the new social theory, particularly among those who “welcomed the advent of the irrational,” could presage an assault on the dominion of rational objectivity and the emergence of a “renascent mysticism.” This is why it was so important for Hughes to insist that among the “greatest” social thinkers a fascination with the irrational was not synonymous with becoming an “irrationalist.” And it explains his harsh treatment of Carl Jung—startlingly dismissed as a minor figure, and characterized as a betrayer of all that was most rational and radical in Freud’s thought. Jung, who argued for an inward-looking spirituality as intrinsic to “self-realisation,” was dismissed as “a frank intuitionist and irrationalist.” More, he was vituperatively written off as “a mystagogue.”27

Conversely, and revealingly, Hughes did not object to Bergson’s “philosophy of intuition,” and sought to rescue Bergson from the ranks of the irrationalists to which (within the context of his own study) he believed only Péguy and Jung rightfully belonged. But why, when it was Bergson and not Jung who explicitly argued in the nonrational tradition for intuition as the key to the apprehension of reality, did Hughes seek to demote Jung? Why is it, Jung (who, as Hughes acknowledges, thought of Bergson as “having broken a lance in defence of the irrational”) whom Hughes characterized as the “Intuitionist and irrationalist”?28 And why, when Hughes tells us that “the Bergsonian metaphysics was unique in having frankly mystical aspects,” was Jung the “mystagogue”?29 The answer lies in Jung’s “mystical” proclivities. Bergson, while favoring “the intuitive approach” that came close to an occult argument for the complementarity of intuition and reason, did not embrace occultism. Jung, on the other hand, like Freud, was fascinated by the occult, but unlike Freud did not fear its influence. Hughes’s condemnation of Jung—for that is what it is—turns upon Jung’s application of occult insights to the study of the human psyche. Jung argued for the relevance of Eastern, mystical, and occult teachings for understanding the full dimensions of a deeply spiritualized concept of the self. In fact, as we know, he drew for his interpretation of the human psyche and particular idea of self-realization on elements of the occult tradition that were central to fin-de-siècle “mysticism.”

Hughes, however, thought that Jung’s “dabbings in the history of alchemy, his experiments with symbolic artifacts and the drawing of dreams, betray a restless imagination in search of new stimulation.” According to Hughes, Jung “added virtually nothing to what the mystics have always known—and which ... is not really communicable.”30 But an interest in alchemy, symbolic systems, and states other than that of waking consciousness were far less divorced from an engagement with “the problem of consciousness” than Hughes might have supposed. They were intimately bound up with a particular occult exploration and understanding of the self and self-consciousness at the turn of the century, and were part of a communicated occult tradition dedicated to imparting the “secrets” of the old wisdom. Hughes’s “dabbings” of a “restless imagination” reflects neither Jung’s interpretation of hermetic symbolism and its relevance for human conscious-
ness nor the disciplined study and focused imaginative practice of the dedicated occultist. Nevertheless, Jung’s investment in occultism was sufficient to mark him out for Hughes as a “mystagogue . . . in the incongruous guise of a man of science.” It was the “mysticism” that Hughes could not stomach; Jung the “irrationalist.”31

Charges of irrationalism inevitably rely upon a historically specific understanding of what constitutes “the rational.” Rationality, after all, is itself a convention. In a post-Enlightenment modern age, irrationalism has been clearly understood to refer to ways of seeing and experiencing the world that do not accord with empiricist precepts and rationalist paradigms of explanation. In particular, at least when used to characterize the ideas of otherwise sane and thoughtful individuals, irrationalism has often had spiritual or “mystical” connotations. This, however, defines the limits of consensus. For while both Holbrook Jackson and H. Stuart Hughes dichotomized “rational” and “mystical,” they did so to different ends and with different effects. For Jackson, the “revolt against rationalism and the beginning of the revival of mysticism” had to do with a fin-de-siècle despair over the obvious follies and failures of conventional morality and the rule of reason. A “decadent” “soul-sickness,” heir to Romantic aestheticism, was epitomized by that earlier movement’s “revolt of the spirit against formal subservience to mere reason.”32 The antidote, as Jackson saw it, was mysticism. In Jackson’s analysis, spiritual desire was closely linked to the turn inwards and to the development of the self-consciousness that marked a fin-de-siècle conclusion to neo-Romanticism. “Mysticism” is here aestheticized and given a positive reading.

For Hughes, it was a related but different issue. In discussing “the problem of consciousness,” he examined an innovative intellectual trend towards the recognition of the subjectivity of cognition and perception which, when held within the bounds of reason (or a Weberian “intellectualist rationalization”), could be liberating. Hughes was at pains to point out that a “critique of the Enlightenment was one of the central tasks that the major social thinkers of the early twentieth century set themselves,” but he equally argued that “the new self-consciousness” had the potential to undermine what he considered best in the Enlightenment project. The valorization of subjectivity suggested precisely that Romantic blurring of the distinction between object and subject that put the lie to claims for the possibility of rational objectivity. The result of such blurring, Hughes suggested, was “sociological mysticism” and ultimately, in the case of Bergson and Sorel, “a kind of social mysticism.”

Hughes concluded that the “question of rationality is the crucial one.”

The work that had stood the test of time is that which managed to take what was best from the eighteenth-century intellectual tradition while avoiding the subjective slide into the “future errors of unreason.” This, he argued, was what the best of the intellectual innovators at the height of their powers had managed to achieve. They had kept to “the narrow path of faith in reason despite and even because of the drastic limitations with which psychological and historical discovery had hedged it.” For them, as for Hughes, “reason alone remained the final control and arbiter.”33

Here, then, the irrational—or, more accurately, irrationalism—is equated with a departure from “the narrow path of faith in reason,” which in turn is read as a transgression that leads directly to the “future errors of unreason.” And this points to a further underlying concern and dimension to Hughes’s argument. For Hughes, there were two categories of criticism of the Enlightenment. First, as exemplified by “loyal” critics like Freud and Weber, there was a probing of the problem of human motivation and the structure of society, which reworked the Enlightenment tradition “in terms that would carry conviction to a skeptical generation.” Second, there was a “disloyal” class of criticism, which constituted a conscious attack on “the humane values of the West.” Hughes placed himself in the intellectual trajectory of the “loyal” critics. As a self-proclaimed child of the Enlightenment, he saw himself as heir “to a humane tradition more than two centuries old.” And he judged this “humane tradition” as the “standpoint” from which “civilized members of Western society . . . almost necessarily judge the political and social movements of their own time.” Thus, for Hughes, writing with a knowledge of twentieth-century world events that Holbrook Jackson did not have in 1913, there was a particular urgency to disassociating his “greatest” social theorists from charges of “romanticism,” “mysticism,” and irrationalism— from thinking “with the blood.” He stood by the Enlightenment tradition as ultimately “humane” even as he acknowledged an antithetical “disloyal” resistance to it that counteracts the “civilizing” mission of the past two hundred years. Hughes came close to recognizing that dialectic of Enlightenment for which Hölderlin and Adorno had argued only a decade earlier, but in the end stood by a dichotomized rendition of reason and “unreason” with the latter representing all that is uncivilized and barbaric.34

And here is the rub. For while “mysticism” proposed just that reconciliation of objective and subjective reason proposed by Hölderlin as a solution to the problematic heritage of the Enlightenment—offering an all-embracing worldview and associated principles of moral value and spiritual purpose—it also relied on a philosophy of consciousness for which there is no apparent nonsubjective guarantor of meaning, and which can all too easily trans-
late into a romanticization of the shadowlands of subjectivity. The self-consciousness that marked the extreme modernity of occultism opened up the possibility of a mutually reinforcing valorization of the "errors of unreason." If occult truths had reference only to the sovereignty of the initiated self, these truths, by definition, were a movable feast. The "egoistical" assertion "I am" and the terrible cry "I am I" of Alistair Crowley's nemesis, Choronzon, are too closely related for comfort. There was ultimately nothing in the self-reflexivity of occultism to secure the meaning, for example, of "regeneration," just as there was nothing to guarantee the kind of political mobilization that might occur in the name of W.B. Yeats's "great memory" or Jung's collective unconscious.

Indeed, the idea of a common racial memory, a phylogenetic unconscious, becomes problematic when it is linked to notions of racial superiority—as Jung's detractors claim to have occurred in his case. When Ernst Bloch denounced Jung as "the psychoanalytic fascist," he was referring to just that evocation of "the magical collective layers of the race" that H. Stuart Hughes called "thinking with the blood." Furthermore, this type of race-thinking was not specific to occult elaborations of the unconscious. It was equally evident in the twentieth-century development of Theosophy's specification of hierarchical "races," and the potent mix of völkisch elements and Aryan mysticism that featured in the Nazi account of German origins and national destiny. If this is the irrationalism to which mysticism can fall prey, then the fruits of a subjectivized "unreason" require the same careful patrolling as their Enlightenment counterparts. It is not so difficult to see the kind of distortions that Bergsonian vitalism underwent during the interwar years, or the ends to which a Romantic valorization of intuition and fantasy can be directed. Thinking this through in the context of current debates, we might say: if "unreason" is the postmodern sublime, then let the dark side of that exalted state be figured into the equation.

In *Consciousness and Society*, H. Stuart Hughes makes an admirable argument for Max Weber's work. Weber, he suggests, recognized the power of the irrational in human affairs but, like Freud, sought to curb the romanticism he discovered within himself. What Weber crucially understood, of course, is that the desire and search for meaning is central to human experience. His social theories suggest that for cultures where traditional religious or metaphysical belief systems have been eroded, as in the modern "disenchanted" West, the major challenge is to generate a new coherent worldview and concomitant sense of ethical place and purpose. Indeed, as current commentators note, the creation of new meanings "out of the resources of the self" has become one of the strategies for "dealing with the modern hu-

man condition." It was in part this idea of the self as ultimate creator and arbiter of meaning that H. Holbrook Jackson recognized as characteristic of the 1890s. What is significant about Jackson's analysis is that he associated the "idea of self-realisation" that lay "at the root of the modern attitude" with a morally and spiritually progressive "revolt against rationalism." And, indeed, for many of those closely involved with it, the engagement with "mysticism" was synonymous with a commitment to social justice. Furthermore, all occultists believed that an attack on positivism and opposition to the dichotomization of reason and "unreason" could only contribute to the sum of human fulfillment. The new "mysticism" at the turn of the century was dedicated to a reworking of the idea of reason through a radical engagement with self-consciousness as the necessary route to an interiorized encounter with the divine. Holbrook Jackson's "mysticism" predicted the world events that might call into question its moral compass.

This, then, marks its historicity. If the fin-de-siècle occult anticipated aspects of the twentieth-century critique of the Enlightenment project, it also had its flowering before the tragic events that largely gave rise to such concerns. The Great War had not yet happened. Although some occultists subsequently viewed the events of 1914-18 through the lens of a mysticism dedicated to cyclical renewal and regeneration, it was impossible to ignore the terrible human cost of war waged on such a scale or the message it seemed to convey. After all, Horkheimer's proposed reconciliation of subjective and objective reason represents a response to the problem of disenchantment as elaborated by Weber under tellingly similar historical circumstances. Both men were articulating the "program of the Enlightenment" as "the disenchantment of the world," and both were speaking towards the end of catastrophic wars in which Germany played a leading role; moreover, each man was immersed in a "German" intellectual tradition grounded in Kant and Hegel. The self-destructiveness of the Enlightenment, the release of differently configured demonic powers that it implied, and the new kind of barbarism it heralded seemed clear. But for occultists at the turn of the century, these events, although foreshadowed by apocalyptic signs and portents, lay in the future. For them, "mysticism" signified precisely that occult goal of "seeking the light" that underwrote the Rosicrucian promise of a new spiritually enlightened age. It was the light, not the dark, to which the great majority of occultists aspired.

I have argued throughout *The Place of Enchantment* that fin-de-siècle "mysticism" was a thoroughly modern project—albeit one that sought to confound the modern distinction between reason and the irrational. Occultism constituted an attempt to rehabilitate the irrational via a reworking of the
idea of reason in the “mystical” domain, but this was a rationalizing endeavor dedicated to piercing the veil of the unknown rather than a spiritualized celebration of a terrifying “unreason.” In other words, this was not the recuperation of “unreason” in Hughes’s sense, but a project that sought to access and understand the great secrets of the universe through an “intellectualist rationalization” and all-encompassing knowledge of the occluded real. In fact, those involved with “mysticism” held as fast to the ethic of an objective (although different) reality as Hughes’s “greatest” thinkers. They adhered to a belief in a hidden and transcendental real, sought it in a variety of occult practices, and refused all suggestion that this real might be reducible to the merely subjectivized realm of personal interiority. Conversely, “mysticism” taught that interiority is the gateway to the real. This was a sensibility that was intrinsically bound up with the reconciliation of the rational and irrational, but one which recognized that reconciliation in a fully elaborated “self-realisation.” In the name of spiritual enlightenment, the new “mysticism” taught its adherents a rationalizing metaphysics that promised knowledge of and control over Weber’s archaic “mysterious incalculable forces.” In so doing, it called on a premodern magical tradition and assumed those eternal truths and values that Weber argued had been diminished in the modern age. But the magic of the “mystical” revival was equally the magic of high modernity. It both presented a grand narrative of the universal order and sought the answers to the age-old questions about truth, meaning, and human destiny in the far reaches of human consciousness and a newly psychologized self.

At many levels, “mysticism” was representative of a crisis of the disenchanted Weberian subject. The new “spiritual movement of the age” confirmed the authority of rational self-authenticating subjectivity and at the same time spoke to the inadequacies of a worldview that did not include the possibility of living with God. Born of the desire for answers, meaning, and purpose in an increasingly disenchanted world, fin-de-siècle occultists drew on Enlightenment precepts and an apparently inimical wisdom tradition while shifting the focus and play of both. Integral to this shift was a differently conceived relationship between the imagination and reason. Advanced occultists remained deeply enamored of what they believed to be the ultimate morality of a properly developed and understood reason, and assumed that this reason exercised in the service of the imagination constitutes the key to a supreme self-realization. At the heart of the project lay a newly imagined self—an occult subjectivity formulated within the context of secularized modes of inquiry but dedicated to a spiritualized understanding of the “I.” These occultists, heirs to Enlightenment certainties, sought the infi-
the summer and autumn of 1919, and these have been published as Letters from Russia 1919 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

33. Katherine Mansfield was already desperately ill with tuberculosis when she arrived at the institute in October 1922, and she died there in January 1923. See J. H. Moore, Gurdjieff and Mansfield (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).


38. Cited in ibid., 287.

39. See, for elaboration of this theme, Mark A. Schneider, Culture and Enchantment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

40. In an interesting if anecdotal twist, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park situate their influential Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750 (New York: Zone Books, 1998) in the same trajectory and credit their “shared childhood love of E. Nesbit’s The Story of the Amulet, both for our choice of history as a vocation and marvels as an avocation” (11). Edith Bland, who wrote as E. Nesbit, was an early member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She dedicated her Edwardian tale of magical time travel to E. A. Wallis Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, a man who was rumored to be more than sympathetic to the Golden Dawn. See E. Nesbit, The Story of the Amulet (London: Fisher Unwin, 1906). As briefly mentioned earlier, Rosamund Sharp, the daughter of E. Nesbit’s husband (a daughter raised by Nesbit as her own), joined Gurdjieff in France in the 1920s.

41. The self-styled new cultural history operates at the boundaries of social and intellectual history and builds on the concerns of those fields to ask somewhat differently posed and contextualized questions about the ways in which individuals have historically understood themselves and the world. For formative discussions of the parameters of the new cultural history, see Roger Chartier, Cultural History: Between Practice and Representation (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988) and Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

Chapter Eight


4. Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xi; originally published under the title Le condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979). I follow general practice here in using the terms postmodernism to refer to a contemporary posture which is closely identified with the leading tenets of poststructuralism. Lyotard's formative discussion of "the postmodern condition" is largely concerned with issues of epistemology, but these equally have clear and acknowledged cultural and sociostructural implications. As Fredric Jameson notes, "postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured" (ibid., foreword, vii). By "a rather different moment" Jameson means what is variously referred to as twenty-century "mass culture," "media society," and "consumer society"; also, confusingly, "postmodernity." Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), makes the case for a separation of the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. He argues for the usefulness of postmodernism when referring to "aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity" (artistic or literary movements, for example), as opposed to postmodernity which he takes to refer to "the trajectory of social development [that] is taking us away from the institutions of modernity" (pp. 45–46).

5. There is a problem in assuming the stability of "the project of Enlightenment" and Enlightenment thought that my own reference to an Enlightenment concept of reason tends to reproduce. For the purposes of the following discussion, however, I necessarily hold to the familiar idea of an Enlightenment commitment to the authority of reason and science without pursuing the complexities of the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emphasis on experience and reason.

6. Jürgen Habermas has emerged as the champion of the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment project, although his interest in recuperating the radical self-criticizing promise of Enlightenment thought predates his engagement with poststructuralism. For collections that explore the ramifications of Habermas's work and his dialogue with poststructuralism and the postmodernists, see Richard J. Bernstein, ed., Habermas and Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) and M. Passerin d'Entrèves and S. Benhabib, eds., Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).


11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) (New York: Herder and Herder, 1979), xiii, xv (original emphasis). Habermas was greatly influenced by Adorno, whose assistant he became in 1958.

12. Ibid., 3.


18. Habermas picks up and revises the Frankfurt School's engagement with the subject while distancing himself from a Marxist perspective and developing an argument that moves outside what he sees as the conceptual limitations of a "philosophy of consciousness." See, particularly, Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2.

19. I refer here to two traditions with long roots in the history of Western thought, and indeed that of some non-Western cultures. Broadly speaking, the rationalist position is characterized by the contention that the seemingly nonrational can always be explained within a paradigm of rational analysis (and thus dismissed); nonrationalists conversely hold that there are certain aspects of human existence that defy reductionist rationalist explanation. The nonrationalist tradition as it developed out of the eighteenth century was strongly associated with Germany (particularly Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher) and was closely related to the development of German idealist philosophy. The rationalist tradition, on the other hand, was associated with the rise of positivism in France and utilitarianism in England.


22. Romanticism swept through Europe and was influential in American culture between about 1775 and 1820. It emphasized interiorized experience and the intuitive and emotional, and constituted an alternative to the more formal propensities of Enlightenment reason.

23. For Horkheimer's discussion, see "Zum Rationalismusstreit in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie," *ZfS* 111, no. 1 (1934), and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.


26. Ibid., 17, 27, 66.

27. Ibid., 17, 176, 17, 156, 160.


30. Ibid., 159–60 (original emphasis).


34. Ibid., 28, 29, 27. Hughes cites Georges Sorel as 'the obvious example' of a 'disloyal' critic of the Enlightenment (29). He might also, however, have seen Carl Jung in this light.


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