Of Mahatmas and *Chelas*: Theosophy and the "Cartography of the Supernatural" in Richard Marsh and F. Anstey

Shuhita Bhattacharjee

Abstract

The essay examines the way F. Anstey's *A Fallen Idol* (1886) and Richard Marsh's *The Mahatma's Pupil* (1893) dramatise the relationship between a Tibetan Theosophical mahatma and a western disciple through the use of cartographic imagery that ultimately subverts colonial hierarchies and exposes western religious anxieties. The novels are characterised by a "cartography of the supernatural" that derives from nineteenth-century scientific and occult ideas of spatiality, that is, both from new fin-de-siècle communication technologies connecting the mainland with colonies, and from the contemporary radical theorisation of occult communication between the east and the west. I argue that the novels effect a radical socio-political restructuration by building on this underlying cartographic imaginary to achieve subversive spatial re-mappings for a western audience. A crucial aspect of this narrative manoeuvre can be seen in the way the novels establish a parallel between the disciple's spatial bafflement surrounding the geographical remoteness of Theosophy and the western failure at grasping the spiritual depths of this colonial faith. The novels therefore ultimately offer a commentary on the desiccated state of western religiosity and the alternative templates of the miraculous offered by the colonial occult.

Keywords

occult; Theosophy; Richard Marsh; F. Anstey; cartography of the supernatural; communication technology.

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Of Mahatmas and *Chelas*: Theosophy and the "Cartography of the Supernatural" in Richard Marsh and F. Anstey

Shuhita Bhattacharjee

F. Anstey's *A Fallen Idol* (1886) and Richard Marsh's *The Mahatma's Pupil* (1893) represent a hilarious but tense and hierarchical relationship between a Theosophical eastern mahatma (master) in Tibet and a western *chela* (disciple) in London through cartographic imagery and metaphors of spatiality. The novels' "cartography of the supernatural" derives in part from new nineteenth-century communication technologies connecting the mainland with colonies, and in part from the contemporary radical theorisation of occult communication between the east and the west (Connor 2004: 258). The novels' persistent preoccupation with scientific and occult ideas of spatiality – rapid transport over vast distances, the shrinking of geographical polarities, the difficulties of intercontinental connection, and the materialisations of remote objects and people out of thin air – offer a commentary on the desiccated state of western faith and the alternative templates of the miraculous offered by the occult. Harking back to Gauri Viswanathan's observation that "the otherworldliness of the occult offered alternative possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a hierarchical framework," I argue that the novels effect this radical socio-political restructuration by building on their own underlying cartographic imaginary to achieve subversive spatial re-mappings for a western audience (Viswanathan 2000: 2). While there are several works of secondary scholarship that deal with nineteenth-century literary representations of the occult including *The Victorian Supernatural* (Bown *et al*. 2004), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Spiritualism and the Occult* (Kontou and Willburn 2017), and *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (Ferguson and Radford 2018), little sustained scholarly attention has been paid to fictional cross-cultural Theosophical mahatma–*chela* relationships. My essay aims to remedy this scholarly gap by examining two under-researched novels that deal with the peculiarities, challenges, and failures of the mahatma–*chela* relationship, especially through the rhetoric of spatiality.[1] The essay also brings together two authors who both use the occult to represent fin-de-siècle anxieties but who have not often been paired together in secondary scholarship.[2]

[1] These two novels form a part of a much larger spectrum of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction that represents a Theosophical worldview or betrays Theosophical influences. A far-from-exhaustive list would include novels by Theosophists such as Helena Blavatsky, Mabel Collins, Franz Hartmann, Alfred Sinnett, and others including Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Marie Corelli, Florence Marryat, and Algernon Blackwood. The two novels that form the subject of this essay are distinct because of their use of spatial metaphors to dramatise the cross-cultural mahatma–*chela* relationship.

[2] See Bhattacharjee (2018) for a discussion of colonial idols in fiction by Anstey and Marsh.

A Fallen Idol by F. Anstey (pseudonym of Thomas Anstey Guthrie, 1856–1934) tells the story of the disgruntled idol of a Jain *tirthankar*,[3] mistreated and denigrated by Indians in the seventeenth century, which makes its way into nineteenth-century London. The idol lands into the possession of the painter Ronald Campion when his beloved, Sybil Elsworth, gifts it to him. The vindictive influence of the idol soon causes mayhem in Ronald's professional and personal life, distorting his paintings, ruining his professional reputation and creating grievous misunderstandings with Sybil. A happy conclusion is made possible when the idol is sent away on astral currents, albeit somewhat ineptly, by Nebelson, a Theosophical *chela*, who advises Ronald on occult ways of dispatching the evil object. The subplot surrounding Nebelson is at the heart of my analysis of the novel. We first meet the Norwegian-German Nebelson at a fashionable society party hosted by Mrs Staniland, Sybil's aunt, who offers her guests occult entertainments. Nebelson's parlour tricks, however, fail grievously. He wrongly predicts the appearance of a pair of lovers, and the expectation of a letter from the Tibetan mahatma on astral currents only attracts a hoax reply from Ronald's friend, the mischievous Lionel Babcock. Heartbroken, Nebelson nearly renounces the Mahatma but recovers, clumsily dispatches the idol through occult magnetic currents after causing it partially to explode, and takes his departure, seemingly to search for the real mahatma and true religion.

Anstey, a famous satirist of his times who was especially notable for his work for *Punch*, has been studied mainly for his humorous novels, and particularly for his contribution to nineteenth-century children's literature in *Vice Versa* (1882) – perhaps his best-known work, in which a boy and his father magically swap outward forms while retaining their personalities. Although Anstey's works address with repeated insistence the socio-political, colonial, and religious (occult) anxieties of the fin de siècle – indeed critics have tended to regard *Vice Versa* as distinct from contemporaneous children's literature because of its "persistent fantasy element" and its engagement with the occult (Petzold 1992: 34) – he remains under-researched. Recently, Claudia Nelson (2012) and Sarah C. Alexander (2018) have noted the subversive tendencies of Anstey's fiction in discussions of age inversion in *Vice Versa* and time travel and finance capitalism in *Tourmalin's Time Cheques* (1891). Anstey's engagement with Theosophy, however, remains neglected.

In *The Mahatma's Pupil* by Richard Marsh (pseudonym of Richard Bernard Heldmann, 1857–1915), a similar disorder is unleashed in London by Mr Pye, an impecunious, lower-class Englishman trained in the ways of Theosophical magic by an eastern mahatma. However, Pye's inadequate command of his learning disrupts the entire Redford household, which has given him shelter in return for a promise of beneficial and entertaining magic. At a séance organised by the credulous spiritualist Miss Thomas, Pye's magic fails miserably, causing stinking packages of tattered old clothes to come crashing down on the Redfords and their neighbours. At the end of the novel, the eastern mahatma appears in London to express regret that the English should be unsuitable for Theosophical learning and swear never again to choose an Englishman for a disciple. However, the mahatma also displays his true Theosophical powers by electromagnetically transporting a first declaration of love from Mr Redford's daughter, Nelly, to Bertie Wickham, who is aboard a ship thousands of miles away. The mahatma's proven occult

[3] The 24 Jain *tirthankars*, believed to grace each half of the cosmic time cycle, and deified and worshipped (in the form of images or idols) in Jain temples, are teachers who preach and lead the followers from the cycle of worldly life to *moksha* (liberation).

powers and honourable wish to compensate for the damage caused by Pye establish his moral superiority and indirectly shame the English reader.

Marsh has been relatively better researched than Anstey, with particular focus on *The Beetle* (1897) and on the author's contribution to popular fiction and the genre of the Victorian Gothic.[4] Pertinently for my purposes, Minna Vuohelainen's monograph emphasises the subversiveness of the "spatial logic" underlying Marsh's Gothic fiction. Examining a whole range of Marsh's works including his Gothic novels, crime fiction, and ghost stories, Vuohelainen notes how his work, replete with "spatial tropes and … actual locations" and "set against starkly modern" and often "realist urban and domestic backdrops," displays a "significant degree of ideological ambivalence towards hegemonic culture and dominant modes of identity construction" (Vuohelainen 2015: 17, 13). Vuohelainen's study draws on Robert T. Tally Jr's argument that the "otherworldly spaces of fantasy" help readers "imagine different spaces," offering them a "literary cartography, [or] geography" (Tally 2013: 7, 154). This is significant for understanding Marsh's works that are dominated by an element of fantasy such as *The Mahatma's Pupil* which offers, as I will show, an alternative cartography. Embedded in the genre of the Gothic and embodying elements of the occult or the "otherworldly," Marsh's novel therefore calls for an extended analysis of the way in which its inherent cartographic imaginary propels a radical contestation of fin-de-siècle racial and religious hierarchies.

The novels' engagement with Theosophy is complicated by their sometimes crude commentaries on questions of class and Englishness and their volatile generic mixture of humour and the occult. A fascinating aspect of both novels is the way the disciples are presented as lacking not only in the sophisticated but also grammatical knowledge of English. Pye, "a wretched, unwashed, uneducated creature," is portrayed as a class Other, a "People's Magician" (Marsh 1893: 122, 8) who associates with the impoverished Redford family, and whose Cockney English aligns him with the uneducated working-class population (Chapman [1994] 2014: 42–5). Mr Redford describes Pye as "not a master of expression" and without "a knowledge of the English grammar," while his "handwriting … suggest[s] the unpractised scribe" (Marsh 1893: 117, 8). By contrast, the audience hoping to experience Nebelson's Theosophical tricks represent elite society, but the disciple appears woefully out of grips with the English language and therefore also the English social space that requires elegance and competence. In this case, however, his linguistic inability is likely a fallout of his Norwegian-German origin. The text adopts what is at least partially a xenophobic approach to Nebelson, often exposing him as ignorant and undeserving and describing him as speaking English with a Germanic intonation and "with an amount of fluency that rendered him occasionally unintelligible" (Anstey 1886:

[4] *The Beetle* has received extensive attention from critics interested in anxieties surrounding issues of gender, race, animalism, monstrosity, eugenics, and cross-dressing (Hurley 1993; Margree 2007; Allin 2015; Jones 2011; Stuart 2018; Harris and Vernooy 2012). Höglund (2013), Vuohelainen (2015), Margree *et al*. (2018b) and Bhattacharjee (2019) address a wider variety of Marsh's fiction. One recent perspective is from the field of Thing Studies, and attempts to understand the charge and significance of objects in Marsh's works (Pittard 2009; Granata 2014; Bhattacharjee 2018; Pedlingham 2018; Allsop 2018). The circulation of Marsh's popular fiction in a newly emerging literary marketplace in the aftermath of the 1870 Education Act is studied by Vuohelainen (2013 and 2014), Margree (2016), and in the editors' introduction to *Richard Marsh, Popular Fiction and Literary Culture, 1890–1915*, which argues that Marsh, a prolific professional novelist and journalist, was "one of the motors behind the thriving, commoditised fiction industry of the fin de siècle" (Margree *et al*. 2018a: 1).

160). Raymond Chapman notes that foreign speakers of English are represented with very little subtlety in nineteenth-century fiction as "minor persons in the plot, comic or sinister," who reflect the "British view that imperfect speaking of English shows inferiority of character" (Chapman 1994 [2014]: 34). Thus, access to, interest in, and failure at Theosophy on the part of the western disciples becomes a function of either their nationality or class.[5]

Closely associated with this representation of the *chelas* as blundering fools is the issue of narrative tonality. Both novels present the disciples' failed attempts at occult magic as performances in buffoonery and encourage the readers to laugh along. Humour functions as an effective medium for portraying linguistic incompetence based on class, nationality or race and supporting a sense of English racial and cultural superiority. The nineteenth century was replete with racialised colonial narratives about the superiority of the English language and the supposedly hilarious effects of native incompetence at English-acquisition. One of the most visible and satirical stereotypes was the western-educated Indian "Baboo," implicitly floundering and ridiculous, which came to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century (Lahiri [2000] 2013: 92–5). Anstey ventures into this category of writing with the novel *Baboo Hurry Bungsho Jabberjee, BA London* (1897), initially serialised in *Punch*, in which the protagonist speaks unidiomatic and bookish "Babu English" (Raley 1999: 74).[6] These inflections, though distinct in many ways from the particular kinds of linguistic flailing displayed by Pye or Nebelson, still provide a crucial backdrop against which mordant humour and hierarchical discourses of class and race interact to produce a charged atmosphere of satire. However, what will become clear from my reading is that humour in the novels – the failures of Theosophical tricks and the clownish spectacle they provide – offers a subversive space where hierarchies are destabilised and dismantled as mirth presents a radical challenge (Bartlett 2017: 267–8). The humour surrounding the failures of the Theosophical disciples in these novels provides a register in which dominant socio-political and racial hierarchies are overturned through the narrative use of a spatial critique.

The Cartographic Challenge: The Supernatural Space of the Late Century

The novels explicitly reconfigure space by engaging with the popular interest in religio-occult energies and scientific discoveries that had enabled the bridging of geographical extremities through the use of the railways, telegraphy, telephone, or photography. Steven Connor notes that "questions of space, place, shape, position and location seem to nag with a particular intensity in Victorian dealings with the supernatural," to the extent that not only did "different kinds of spaces and places start to develop occult potential" but "space itself started to become a haunted

[5] An exception appears in Marsh's short story, "Staunton's Dinner" (1901), which tells the tale of an upper-class Englishman who has in fact acquired the highest expertise in Theosophical knowledge and is able to work real miracles in full view of the friends he invites to dinner. After a prolonged display of his powers whereby he makes a full dinner spread, furniture, and himself appear out of nowhere, Staunton declares his final decision to release himself from his body for the sake of *nirvana* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) and disappears altogether at the end of the text. This tale contrasts fundamentally with the Cockney disciple's dismal failure in *The Mahatma's Pupil*.

[6] In his Notes to *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900), George Bernard Shaw recognises Anstey's creative contribution to the literary portrayal of the Cockney in his work for *Punch* (Shaw [1900] 2000: 346).

category" (Connor 2004: 259).[7] Focusing specifically on Theosophy, the predominant religious apparatus for the novels under study, Mark Blacklock notes that at the heart of "Theosophy's theory of space" was the appearance of "phenomena" that "frequently transgressed standard spatial constraints" through the Theosophical process of "precipitation" (Blacklock 2018: 138). The "'precipitation' or 'apport' of physical objects, their apparently spontaneous appearance in, or disappearance from, a location, was a feature of mediumistic practice" and was known to cause matter to "pass through ... [the] rarefied [Theosophical] space, like a cloud or mist, [and] to recongeal elsewhere, becoming rain of a typically communicative order" – even allowing "for the translocation of matter across continents" (Blacklock 2018: 138). This theosophical process of spatial communication is directly referenced in Marsh's later novel *The Goddess: A Demon* (1900) when Edwin Lawrence, speaking of the occult influence exercised over him by an Indian idol, concludes that this goddess "precipitated herself, as the occultists have it" into his mind, enabling him to "hear her so plainly" even though she is locked up "in the cupboard on the other side of ... [the] dressing room" (Marsh 1900: 278–9). The novels are replete with incidents where, premised on this Theosophical understanding of space, objects and people appear inexplicably, often after crossing vast inter-continental distances.

This supernatural mapping of space also draws from contemporary discussions in the field of geometry – by Edwin A. Abbott, Lewis Carroll, and C. H. Hinton among others – that challenged the standard Euclidean template in favour of a "fourth dimension," which allowed natural geometrical spatial norms to be transgressed. Connor notes that the "new non-Euclidean geometry made suddenly and heart-stoppingly evident the presumptuousness of the [Euclidean] views of space, according to which 'the Universe was a known thing', which had held sway for over 2000 years" (Connor 2004: 264). It also "provided metaphorical resources for thinking and writing about the supernatural" by "religious and supernaturalist believers," including Theosophical writers such as C. W. Leadbeater (Connor 2004: 262, 265). Blacklock notes that an "uncritical and extra-academic tradition of mystical geometry blossomed in the late 1870s and 1880s," which formed the subject of discussion "in parlours, at meetings, and at séances, and particularly in Blavatsky's Theosophical Society" (Blacklock 2018: 137–8). Theosophical space was conceptualised variously as "higher space" or as "hyperspace," with the idea of the fourth dimension being used to reflect on "the permeability and interpenetration of different spaces," while humans were perceived as "partially four-dimensional creatures" able to "conceive of higher dimensions" than their own (Connor 2004: 269–70). As Rosemary Jann observes, the concept of the fourth dimension "furnished many believers with new ways of urging the reality of the supernatural" (quoted in Connor 2004: 272). This is the nature of the spatial challenge offered by the supernatural in the novels that I will examine.

While both novels foreground the Theosophical mahatma–*chela* relationship, they also evoke a full spectrum of contemporary religious "Otherness," including established eastern religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism and alternative hybrid eastern occult religiosities such as Theosophy, astral travel, spiritualist séances, magic and mystical societies of ritual magic such as the Golden Dawn. A "broad pan-European and American movement loosely dedicated to a variety of unorthodox spiritual beliefs," the nineteenth-century occult revival encompassed a "broad spectrum of beliefs, ideas, and practices" including early-century mesmerism, mid-century spiritualism and late-century occult (Owen 2004: 19). Anstey and Marsh demonstrate familiarity with this occult spectrum. Both novels frequently borrow

[7] Connor draws on Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny*.

concepts from the ritual magic of the late nineteenth century, referring to the mahatma as an "adept" and to evil spiritual forces as "elementals," and referencing astral travel, currents and light to describe spiritual communication.[8] *A Fallen Idol*, a novel that begins by portraying an ancient Jain *tirthankar*, refers to the idea of Buddhist hell (Avichi) and to central Buddhist concepts (shared by Hinduism) such as karma and incarnation, and references the occult white-versus-black magic binary.[9] At the same time, however, both texts also poke fun at British consumption of occult spectacles, for example when Babcock prepares the audience for Nebelson's performance by promising them "the materialisation of an esoteric pudding in an astral hat" (Anstey 1886: 205)

The novels' spectrum of eastern religious traditions and the occult is suffused with spatial tensions and reconfigurations familiar from occult movements. In the Golden Dawn, for example, ritual magic required the adepts to explore the higher realms of their consciousness and spatialised these introspections by presenting them as processes of astral travel through cosmic realms. After progressing to the Second Order, adepts were taught to produce "a materialized replica of an embodied self, which left the temporal body of the occultist and journeyed at length in astral realms" (Owen 2004: 128). The adepts formulated their own Sphere of Astral Light, which replicated their person, and then supposedly travelled in astral light using astral currents. Controversially, Theosophy theorised these questions of geographic connectivity and tension by claiming that letters from eastern mahatmas had been electromagnetically communicated to western disciples, drawing on contemporary understandings of scientific and technological communication to narrativise its own processes of transmission. Joy Dixon (2001) explains that the central Theosophical principle of precipitation posited electromagnetic communication as the basis for the transportation of letters between the cartographic extremities represented by the mahatma and the disciple, a scientific premise that the Society for Psychical Research was in 1882 founded to explore.[10] Dixon and Marlene Tromp study the role of material evidence in the

[8] The well-trained Theosophist is referred to frequently as an "adept" in *A Fallen Idol*. Nebelson informs Mrs Staniland that his "guru" or "Mahatma" was the "wise and well-educated adept whose occult title is Shang Gasba" (Anstey 1886: 161). Owen notes that a body of core Theosophical texts known as the Flying Rolls described the magical experiments carried out by members of the Golden Dawn to dispatch troublesome elementals (Owen 2004: 12). Nebelson refers to these evil presences when analysing Ronald's chaotic existence: "[Y]ou are being molested by one of those semi-intelligent greatures of the astral light which we call 'elementals' whom you haf attracted into your neighbourhood" (Anstey 1886: 181).

[9] Nebelson explains that he cannot "interfere with the oberation of Karma" or the Buddhist law of reincarnation (Anstey 1886: 167). Later, he advises Ronald to refrain from Black Magic in order to avoid "Avitchi," the lowest level of Buddhist Hell (Anstey 1886: 179). The distinction between white and black magic was crucial for Theosophists. Owen observes that Theosophists such as Madame Blavatsky railed against the "black arts" into which "the high aspirations of an Order such as the Golden Dawn could metamorphose" (Owen 2004: 187).

[10] In her essay "Precipitation," printed in the *Theosophist* in two parts in December 1883 and January 1884, Blavatsky refers to the controversy surrounding the Theosophical Society and the letters that Alfred Percy Sinnett claimed to have received from mahatmas living thousands of miles away in the East. Blavatsky explains the "mysterious production of letters," quoting the mahatma: "Bear in mind these letters *are not written but impressed, or precipitated*, and then all mistakes corrected ... I have to think it over, to photograph every word and sentence carefully in my brain before it can be repeated by *precipitation*. As the *fixing on chemically prepared surfaces of the images formed by the camera* requires

debates surrounding Theosophy, while Pamela Thurschwell and Jill Galvan note that the late-nineteenth-century occult was often represented in terms of contemporary technological channels of communication. Galvan observes that "with the advent of both the transatlantic spiritualism craze and several communication technologies ... human-mediated exchange became especially visible as a category of communication"; the occult borrowed the technological language of communication – from the railways, the postal system, the telegraph or the telephone – and in turn "informed visions of technologies for writing or communicating" (Galvan 2010: 16).

These dual currents, with their shared vocabularies and mixed energies, become evident in the novels as they lay out cartographic metaphors and describe spatial transport. In *A Fallen Idol*, for example, Nebelson explains the delay in the arrival of the mahatma's letter, which led to his failed parlour tricks, by saying that such fractured transmissions were also common in other communication technologies: "That to-night I obtained only a few phenomena makes nodding ... [T]here will be agsidents and breakdowns – shust as on a railway line" (Anstey 1886: 215–16). Later, Nebelson likens the precipitation of material objects to telegraphy: "[T]his ledder I broject for myself by the occult telegraph" (Anstey 1886: 322). Elsewhere, Nebelson explains the physical process of occult communication by fusing it with the electromagnetic: "I am going to write to my Mahatma in Thibet ... I shall next place it [the letter] on a magnetic gurrent, and it will instantly to Thibet transported be" (Anstey 1886: 212).

The parallels between spiritual and technological communications are further reinforced in both novels through an implicit juxtaposition of the *chela*'s floundering at Theosophical miracles with technological breakdowns, most notably a malfunctioning postal system. In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, all Theosophical communications, including the letter Bertie receives mid-ocean, bear a meticulous postal address, and yet the actual postal system frequently misdelivers packages. These examples simultaneously demonstrate the possibilities of Theosophical transport and the failures in western communication technology, whether occult or physical. In *A Fallen Idol*, the occult miscommunication between the mahatma and Nebelson is similarly echoed in the postal failure to deliver two letters from Ronald to Sybil. Anstey's novel also draws a parallel between occult miscommunication and the failure of the electromagnetic system of telegraphic transmission, when Nebelson passes to Ronald the mahatma's advice to return the malevolent idol to "the hand" from which it came (Anstey 1886: 194). Since Ronald had received the idol from Sybil's "hand," the mahatma's advice leads to an estrangement between the lovers. Later, however, Nebelson clarifies that the mahatma had most likely suggested that the idol be returned to "the *land*" from which it came, a message that had likely been obfuscated because of Nebelson's linguistic incompetence – a significant factor about the disciples that I noted at the start of the essay:

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a previous arrangement within the focus of the object to be represented, for, otherwise – as often found in bad photographs – the legs of the sitter might appear out of all proportion with the head, and so on – some have to first arrange our sentences and impress every letter to appear on paper in our minds before it becomes fit to be read" (Blavatsky 1883–4: 20; emphasis added). Blavatsky further explains "precipitation" as a process of electromagnetic communication where the mahatma's thoughts were "clothed in word" and transmitted along "astral currents" to the recipient into whose "nerve-currents" they would pass while his hand would rest on "magnetically prepared paper" (Blavatsky 1883–4: 21). Since this process of communication is electromagnetic, Blavatsky notes that errors arise as they do in telegrams (Blavatsky 1883–4: 22).

> The message, you know, was through the Babu Chowkydaree Loll, by occult means precipitated, and it struck me all soddenly that either by a want of goncentration of the Mahatma, or because the Babu was not just then attending, an *h* was quite possibly along the astral current by mistake for an *l* brojected.
>
> (Anstey 1886: 285)

Electromagnetic channels break down, astral currents fail, telegraph-like communication flounders, and spatial extremities remain infusible physically and spiritually. Rooted in this cultural space, the novels represent the mahatma–*chela* relationship as a spatial and cartographic connection, imbuing it with the dual suggestiveness of the occult and the technological.

Indeed, in each text, the European *chela* is confused by the sheer logistical incomprehensibility and spatial excess that characterise his mahatma. The novels reveal the *chelas*' ignorance of and inability to comprehend the geographical rift that separates the familiar London landscape from the remote location of the mahatma. Pye's attempt to explain the Theosophical landscape to Mr Redford reveals his lack of education: "A Mahatma is a Indian party what lives – I don't rightly know quite where, but somewhere over in them there parts" (Marsh 1893: 11–12). He also represents the Mahatma's astral journey across the spatial expanse separating Tibet and London in terms of literal locomotion: "[T]he coloured gentleman [the Mahatma] ... came to me that night ... He came the next night, and the next, and the next, he came every night, as soon as I was in bed, to teach me this here magic" (Marsh 1893: 16–17). In *A Fallen Idol*, Nebelson wishes to find his mahatma in order to apologise and retract his resignation from the Theosophical faith, but the difficulty is in actually being able to find the mahatma "far away in Thibet" – "for Thibet you know is large and my Mahatma a leedle – what you call, shy – I may haf to hunt a long while" (Anstey 1886: 322). This Theosophical cartographic space with its occult charge and unmappable coordinates is a realm altogether beyond the comprehension of the western characters and disjunct from the familiar rational space of everyday western life. When Ronald, Sybil and their friends ask Nebelson to use his Theosophical powers to send the evil idol away along "magnetic currents ... for immense distances," the ill-tutored *chela* tells them that he is not trained enough and the idol could instead "fl[y] off into trackless Gosmic space-regions" (Anstey 1886: 314). Sybil's response indicates that she considers the occult realm to exist at a remove from the familiar: "But that wouldn't matter to *us*! ... [I]t would be all the better – he [the idol] couldn't do any harm in trackless space!" (Anstey 1886: 314). Ronald chimes in with a reference to geographic locations considered remote from his western perspective: "Why, you can project him [the idol] where you like – to Fusi-yama, Chimborazo, the North Pole, anywhere – and if he goes off the track, why, that's *his* affair!" (Anstey 1886: 314). The characters' myopic materialism, selfishness, and bafflement reveal that Theosophy is to them, and to those gathered to witness Nebelson's tricks, primarily a source of frivolous entertainment that can, occasionally, trigger religious conversions at a time of western religious crisis.[11] However, the western characters' lack of comprehension of

[11] Mr Redford calls Pye "a veritable magician, a *lusus naturae*, a weaver of spells, a worker of miracles, such as we read of in 'The Arabian Nights,' and such as have not been heard of since the hour in which those tales were written until this day" (Marsh 1893: 117). Babcock describes Nebelson as "a bit of a humbug" who nonetheless "amuses" him, "a cross between a rather clumsy foreign conjuror and a half-trained performing canary" able to offer "an element of quiet fun, without vulgarity" (Anstey 1886: 44, 204). Even when the disciple is understood to be propagating an alternative faith-option that could culminate in conversion, the western approach remains patronising, transactional, materialistic, and lacking in spiritual depth, and Theosophy is discussed as a fad, a business venture, and a source of

sophisticated eastern spatial metaphors and their self-centred approach towards remote geographical locations are also indicative, I argue, of the religious challenges faced by the west and of the spiritual uncontainability of the alternative colonial faith-system.

Intermeshing Mysteries in an Age of Unbelief: The Spatial and the Spiritual

A number of critics have explored the popularity of alternative faiths in late-Victorian England. J. Jeffrey Franklin studies the British fascination with Buddhism in the 1890s, while Peter Van der Veer discusses the popularity of Theosophy in Britain, Madame Blavatsky's travels to India, and her subsequent encounters with both Hinduism and Theosophy. Dixon focuses on Theosophy, Tromp on spiritualism, Alex Owen on spiritualism (in *The Darkened Room*) and on late-century magic (in *The Place of Enchantment*), Karl Bell and Alison Butler on ritual magic, and Geoffrey A. Oddie on Hinduism and its appeal over the century.[12] Several of these authors emphasise the complex challenge that these alternative faiths posed to mainstream Christianity at a time when new scientific and geological discoveries, historical scholarship and Biblical higher criticism, and the spread of the discipline of Comparative Religion had already unsettled the socio-cultural position historically occupied by Christianity. Personal narratives agonising over religious dilemmas circulated widely and cultural reflections that declared the age to be one of unbelief proliferated. This widespread contemporary perception of a nineteenth-century British (and generally western) "crisis of faith" has led to an association of modernity with secularisation in later scholarship.

However, a significant body of scholarship – by Charles Taylor, Jeffrey Cox, Owen Chadwick, Peter Van der Veer, Callum Brown, Graham Ward, John D. Barbour and Timothy Larsen among others – has sought to reinscribe the Victorian Age as a deeply religious one, with eastern or occult spiritualities challenging Christianity, enriching the western spiritual landscape and presenting alternatives to Eurocentric thought and western rationalistic interpretations of religiosity. Jayawardena connects "anti-systemic and heterodox [nineteenth-century religious] movements" such as spiritualism and Theosophy with nationalistic impulses in the colonies (Jayawardena 1995: 107–8).[13] Franklin observes at length that the figure of Buddha and the Buddhist ethical system were received in late-nineteenth-century Britain as attractive alternatives to the figure of Christ and the Protestant moral code (Franklin 2005 and 2008). Van der Veer

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drawing-room entertainment. Mrs Staniland expresses a fashionable desire to sample and encourage alternative faiths: "I like to keep up with all the new movements, and when I find one that deserves a little encouragement, I'm only too glad to do anything for it" (Anstey 1886: 160). After Nebelson's magic tricks fail, the audience's disappointment is summed up thus: "Nobody had a good word to say for a faith which was not even able to entertain them for a single evening" (Anstey 1886: 214). The novels, therefore, offer an implicit critique of western materialism and ignorance.

[12] Other scholars who have contributed significantly to this field include Charlotte Despard, Tatiana Kontou, Kumari Jayawardena and Sarah A. Willburn.

[13] Jayawardena notes that Spiritualism was "[o]ne of the manifestations of … [the] reaction" to the "crisis of faith" and the developing "curiosity about religions of the non-Christian world" (Jayawardena 1995: 112–13). The Theosophical Society, which rejected the "universalist claims of Christianity," developed connections with "those Hindus, Buddhists and free-thinkers in India and Sri Lanka who were opposing Christianity and the proselytizing and educational activities of missionaries" (Jayawardena 1995: 119, 116–17).

explains that "spiritualism, and Theosophy in particular, played a significant role in the development of radical, anticolonial politics both in Britain and India" and that "in doing so it enunciated an anti-Christian rationality" (Van der Veer 2001: 57–8). He also notes that a "comparison with the colonized world religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism" which seemed "sufficiently different from colonizing Christianity" was "an important element in anti-Christian rhetoric" at the time (Van der Veer 2001: 58). This occult challenge to orthodox Christianity is spatialised in the novels through explicit images of spatial disruption and physical dislocation, as crystallised by the mahatma's promise to Pye in *The Mahatma's Pupil* to "teach [him] how to place Westminster Abbey on the top of St. Paul's Cathedral in less time than the flashing of a second" (Marsh 1893: 15). In *A Fallen Idol*, Theosophy is shown to represent, if not a direct threat to Christianity, then a complete overturning of the western way of life with its conventional space–time continuum. When Nebelson's western audience express surprise at his claim that he could exchange letters between London and Tibet within ten minutes ("Sharp work to and from Thibet in ten minutes!"), Nebelson responds: "There is no time and no space for the true adept" (Anstey 1886: 213).

Crucially, however, such religious disruptions also functioned as deeply spiritual alternative templates for nineteenth-century religious expression. The popularity of alternative faiths testifies not to a disengagement from religiosity but a pursuit of alternative spiritual experiences by a populace that was growing increasingly disillusioned with the desiccated rationalism of a post-Enlightenment Christianity. As Owen observes, the "skeptical climate and the declining attractions of Christian orthodoxy undoubtedly contributed to the formulation and appeal of the occult," which was ultimately "a manifestation of and response to … the reconfiguration of faith at the turn of the century" (Owen 2004: 12). Therefore, despite a perceived decline of religion in the Victorian era, the "new 'spiritual movement'" was itself "indicative of the continued relevance of spirituality for many thousands of people" (Owen 2004: 12). In Anstey's and Marsh's novels, the failures of the western *chelas* therefore simultaneously demonstrate western spiritual failings and suggest alternative possibilities for spiritual resuscitation available through the figure of the eastern mahatma. Importantly, this spiritual dilemma is spatialised through the use of cartographic metaphors and geographical language, the novels simultaneously "spatialising the spiritual" and "spiritualising the spatial" (Connor 2004: 262).

The novels present Theosophy as a competing faith that could be turned into a marketable commodity. In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, Pye describes the Mahatma as a frivolous tradesman with a gimmick: "He's a regular dab at hankey-pankey, a Mahatma is. A dealer in magic and spells; a wizard quite – quite in a wholesale kind of way" (Marsh 1893: 12). In *A Fallen Idol*, Mrs Staniland's represents her party as a commercial opportunity for Nebelson: "[Y]ou know this is a great opportunity for you; some of the people here to-night would be real acquisitions to *any* religion, and quite open to conviction, too" (Anstey 1886: 199). Babcock, similarly, explains that "there's a very good opening just now for a new faith, but naturally people want to be sure it's a going concern before they invest in it" (Anstey 1886: 162). While foregrounding Theosophy's marketability, such possible conversions nonetheless also suggest that Theosophy could in some ways be preferable to Christian orthodoxy, and the novels reference several well-known staples of the "crisis of faith" debates. Sybil's request for miracles, for example, reveals a profound yearning for a benevolent God:

> It isn't such a happy world surely ... that there is no one in it to be saved from danger, or temptation, or misery of some sort. If you can read the future and see forces at work that we can't see, you might do so much to warn or help people, if you chose!
>
> (Anstey 1886: 166–7)

The novels also refer to the knowledge–faith binary that lay at the heart of the post-Enlightenment rationalistic demand for empirical "proof" of religious claims, when both *chelas* explain that the mahatma would not deign to offer evidence. In *A Fallen Idol*, Nebelson reveals that the "brothers" (that is, the Theosophical Brotherhood in Tibet) "dislike to show themselves off" and "haf no wish to gonvince the Western World," for "Arcane Knowledge addresses himself at Faith and not at Reason" (Anstey 1886: 162). When Mrs Staniland patronisingly describes Theosophy as a "new movement" in need of western encouragement, Nebelson responds "stiffly" that "[T]heosophy is not at all in need to be, as you say, upon the back smacked" (Anstey 1886: 157). In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, credulous Miss Thomas, rapturous at meeting Pye whom she believes to be a "spiritualist" and "an original," laments "the incredulity of this sceptic world" and confides in the members of the Redford household: "I believe most fervently in everything. I do not know much about it, but I am not one of those who believe that knowledge is necessary to belief" (Marsh 1893: 85, 76–7).

The novels also refer to the religious possibility of the impossible, the western inability or unwillingness to recognise or comprehend the miraculous (Caputo 2001: 6), when Babcock wishes that Nebelson would "bring out his best miracles" (Anstey 1886: 197). The miraculous workings offered by the alternative faiths are presented in spatial terms. Nebelson, the western *chela* who is as yet capable only of "*[m]ild* miracles" (Anstey 1886: 44, emphasis added), is pinned down to a narrowly and almost claustrophobically domestic realm, far from the Tibetan wild inhabited by the mahatma. Babcock terms Nebelson a "parlour prophet" who "[g]oes out to dinner and pecks a little rice all the time," "has a trance upstairs over his tea-cup," and is "learning to manage his astral body, but he daren't let it outside the door yet" to perform the miraculous intercontinental spatial transport that was the hallmark of late-nineteenth-century Theosophy (Anstey 1886: 44). The *chela* in *The Mahatma's Pupil* similarly blunders through all his attempts at transporting gift-filled packages to the Redfords.

The true miracle of Theosophical transport is offered by the eastern mahatma and not the western disciple. In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, Pye is completely baffled by the sudden appearance of the mahatma from Tibet, his equally inexplicable vanishing into thin air, and the mahatma's invisibility to everyone else, even while he showers tortuous blows on his incompetent disciple. Bertie, initially ecstatic after reading Nelly's letter declaring her love for him, remarks with awe and gratitude: "It seems that a great miracle has been worked on my especial behalf," only to pray for another: "If only the miracle would go just one step further, and if I might be allowed to see – my darling's face" (Marsh 1893: 193–4). A true worker of miracles, the mahatma once again shrinks space to materialise Nelly's image so that Bertie's "eyes me[e]t hers in one glad look of bewildered recognition" (Marsh 1893: 194). In a novel that often ridicules spiritual aspirations, this culminating episode voices beyond the shadow of a doubt the intense western longing for the miraculous in an age fettered by the secularising narratives of science, scholarship and religion.

The implicit geopolitical and explicit religious challenges of Theosophy are central to the subversive message of the two novels. Blacklock and Viswanathan both reflect on the politico-cultural hierarchy inherent in the relationship between the eastern mahatma and the western

disciple. Referring in particular to the works of C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant, Blacklock observes that the Theosophical writings of white disciples ultimately appropriated the voice of the eastern mahatmas in a case of western "intellectual land-grab[bing]" which "described new spaces in order to gain authority over them, and by extension, over [the] ... Theosophical brothers and sisters" (Blacklock 2018: 141). Viswanathan, however, notes that ultimately the eastern masters "guided initiates into unseen phenomena, which remained the uncolonized space resisting the bureaucratic compulsions of colonial management" (Viswanathan 2000: 3). The novels, ultimately, underscore the mahatmas' superior spiritual powers by impressing upon the reader the western disciples' inability to grasp the full charge of eastern religiosity – a failure that is literalised through spatial metaphors.

This unmappable Theosophical geography with its bewildering occult transmission offered an obvious geopolitical challenge to Britain's imperial interests and technological channels of communication. As Christine Ferguson, Richard Noakes and Jill Galvan, among others, imply, the occult with its technological séances, materialisations and electromagnetically transmitted letters was so scientific-technological that it could almost be seen as secular.[14] The novels layer this interest in communication technology, whether scientific or occult, with a pervading western sense of religious doubt and a realisation of the need for spiritual resuscitation through contact with alternative spiritualities, for which the west may not be ready. In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, the Mahatma expresses his regrets over his disciple's spiritual ineptitude in a letter written in perfect English and accurately precipitated electromagnetically to Mr Redford:

> It had not occurred to me that I should experience difficulty in imparting the hidden mysteries ... I have only succeeded, after many trials, and the infliction of frequent whippings, in beating into his head, parrot fashion, certain formulas, which he does not understand ... Never again will I select a pupil from among the English-speaking peoples.
>
> (Marsh 1893: 216)

The novel ends on this note of disappointment and melancholy at the west's lack of spirituality, but also offers the possibility of vigorous and meaningful religious renewal through the spatial and spiritual approximation of the eastern occult even if such a promise is initially beyond the capacity of the West to comprehend or master – a significant departure from most fin-de-siècle narratives of intercultural communication where eastern spirituality and culture are often represented primarily as a threat. *A Fallen Idol*, by contrast, concludes with uncertainty over Nebelson's destiny, since no one knows "whether he is still stalking his somewhat farouche Mahatma in the mountain fastnesses of far Thibet" (Anstey 1886: 323). The *chela* may have embarked on a brave cartographic exploration of the challenging and mysterious eastern terrain – a spatial journey that inevitably suggests a parallel spiritual immersion in occult spirituality. In *The Mahatma's Pupil*, Mr Redford suggests the need for a similar *geographical* exploration of the unknown spiritual mysteries represented by the colonial occult that are closed to the western rationalistic modernity when he ruminates over Pye's Theosophically inspired magic, however unsatisfactory it may be, and ultimately concedes over wine:

[14] Kontou and Willburn comment in the introduction to their edited collection on the nineteenth-century occult that nineteenth-century "spiritualism was scientific, and even, perhaps, a type of secularism" (Kontou and Willburn 2017: 1).

> *There are more things . . . in heaven and earth*, than are dreamt of in our philosophy . . . It is quite conceivable that there may be, in nature, forces to which man, in a general sense, has lost the key, and yet of which the key may be in the possession of a solitary individual [mahatma] here and there.
>
> (Marsh 1893: 75, emphasis added)

Having drawn on the subversive energies of occult spatial metaphors, Marsh and Anstey map the bafflement and failures of western rationalistic modernity, dismantling the western imperialist privilege of knowledge in the face of colonial religious alterity.

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