

OCCULT FEELINGS: ESOTERICISM AND QUEER RELATIONALITY IN THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

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Occult Feelings: Esotericism and Queer Relationality in Nineteenth-Century US Literature uncovers the esoteric investments central to American Transcendentalism to analyze how authors used the occult to explore new, and often erotic, relational possibilities. I reveal the different ways that authors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott, employed the occult to reimagine intimacy. To this end, my project studies literary representations of occult practices like alchemy and spirit contact, as well as the esoteric philosophies of writers like Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Böhme that fascinated authors in the nineteenth-century. Authors of American Transcendentalism—with their depictions of an esoteric correspondence between embodied and disembodied subjects, celestial bodies, plants, and inanimate objects—envisioned relationality as hidden, mystical, and non-dyadic. As such, the occult became a way to find more open and dynamic modes of relation beyond direct interpersonal contact. For example, reading alchemy in Hawthorne, I reveal how an obsessive interest in creating and then suspending homoerotic intimacies allows for queer modes of relation. In Fuller, I illustrate how her mystic intimacy with flowers highlights affective connections while insisting on an ever-present distance with objects. For Bronson Alcott, I demonstrate how his esoteric investments transform his relation to divinity. These authors, by refusing dyadic and concrete relations, offer what I call queer relationality: that is, a mode of relation that allows for queer forms of intimacy and affiliation while also queering relationality itself. I use the world queer both to highlight

that writers often thought of relationality as erotic, while also underscoring that these re-imagined forms of relation can invigorate debates in queer theory. At its most ambitious, my work speaks against a critical tradition that has tended to consider relationality as being wholly social or anti-social, melancholic or optimistic, normative or non-normative, succeeding or failing. *Occult Feelings* augments the conceptual language scholars use to describe intimacy and desire both in the historical period of the nineteenth century and within current critical debates. While my project shares other scholars' fascination with the inchoate nature of desire and sexuality, ultimately, I attend to a wider range of possibilities for relationality that are not wholly circumscribed by categories of interpersonal intimacy or sexual desire.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brant Torres was born in Garden City, Kansas in 1982. He received a B.A. in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder. At Boulder, he completed his thesis “Dystopia and Displacement: Colonial Horror in de Léry’s History of a *Voyage to the Land of Brazil* and Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*” under the direction of Nan Goodman. Before coming to Cornell for his Ph.D., he received his M.A. in English from The Pennsylvania State University-University Park, where he completed his Master’s Thesis, “‘Sick at Heart’: Queer Melancholy in Walt *Whitman’s Franklin Evans*.’”

For Devon and Alexa. Our childhood adventures always made the world mysterious. You both have filled my life with love, imagination, and humor—reminding me that there is always a place for magic and enchantment.

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INTRODUCTION: INVISIBLE WORLDS

Literature makes invisible worlds visible. Whether they are interior states, clandestine intimacies, imagined afterlives and utopias, or mystic relations with divinity—literature often becomes our best means of charting these unseen worlds. And while the phrase “invisible worlds” might lead us in any number of directions, this project focuses specifically on the invisible world of the occult in the American nineteenth century—a world of esoteric knowledge, mystic experience, and strange feeling that would (while always part of American religious and cultural life) inundate literature and popular culture in the 1840s. For the authors of this period, the occult would open up new forms of relation to unseen forces, as well as create a means of articulating an unseen, but intensely felt, correspondence among bodies, objects, and divinity. These forms of occult relation (made possible by investments in esoteric philosophy both in popular culture and by writers of American Transcendentalism) would create new modes of religious feeling and thought that were not circumscribed by what we might now recognize as religious life. Instead, a commitment to occult paradigms and esoteric philosophy gave birth to a host of possibilities for relationality—sometimes erotic, sometimes divine, and more often both. Exploring these modes of relation, their nuances, and their literary representations, both enriches and challenges the way we currently think about relationality and its emotional possibilities, both in the nineteenth century and within current critical debates.

Before elaborating on what the occult means for the nineteenth century, however, it is useful to remember that some of the most well known moments of American history focus on the power of occult and invisible worlds. Long before the American nineteenth century, the

relationship to the unseen (especially as an occult force with magical power) is perhaps the most vividly displayed in Cotton Mather's 1693 text, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. In it, Mather defends his role in the now infamous Salem witchcraft trials, but beyond his explanations, Mather's text offers insight into how people in the seventeenth century related to a world of occult influences—a mode of relation that would find iterations well into nineteenth-century American literature. He writes:

And here, what shall I say? I will venture to say thus much, That we are safe, when we make just as much use of all Advice from the invisible World, as God sends it for. It is a safe Principle, That when God Almighty permits any Spirits from the unseen Regions, to visit us with surprizing Informations, there is then something to be enquired after; we are then to enquire of one an-other.¹

Readers familiar with the period will recognize that Mather is arguing for the use of spectral evidence in the courtroom at Salem during the witchcraft crisis—a moment that would quickly become an embarrassing one for the New England colonists. While reliance on spectral evidence would bring chaos and death to Salem, many Americans through the nineteenth century would end up taking Mather's advice that “we are safe, when we make just as much use of all Advice from the invisible World.” Such “advice” would, in its most popular form, be voiced through the Spiritualist movement. But the “surprizing Informations” of the invisible world for Americans in the nineteenth century would, while dealing with the ghosts of loved ones, have much broader implications. For Americans in the nineteenth century, the occult would become a means of accessing multiple invisible worlds, each offering new possibilities for relationality. For many, these worlds would deal with the unseen forces in and potential of inanimate objects (like

¹ Cotton Mather, “The Wonders of the Invisible World. Observations as Well Historical as

alchemy, talismans, or gemstones); for some it would have to do with a mystic intimacy with unseen divine forces found in nature; still for others the invisible world would mean an imminent utopia that could be called into being through esoteric knowledge and occult practice.

While the occult presents itself as giving access to the unseen and as *itself* being a hidden form of knowledge, the paradox of the occult is that it's not all that hidden. In fact, it was fairly out in the open and central to religious life, popular culture, and literature in nineteenth-century America. What *is* occult about occultism and esoteric philosophy are the forms of knowledge and modes of relation each purports to give one access to—types of knowledge and connection that are so spectacular and wondrous that they are often experienced as magical or numinous.

Many aspects of religious life and popular culture in America fell under the rubric of the occult. Each of these different practices and philosophies, from Spiritualism to alchemy, however, shared specific commitments central to esoteric philosophy and occult practice. Writing about what she calls “metaphysical religion” (what I separate into the categories of esoteric philosophy and occult practice) Catherine L. Albanese describes this “long and winding tradition” that includes Spiritualism, but also which makes room for practices like alchemy, astrology, divination, and mysticism.² While diverse, each of these facets of the occult shares a central commitment: “beliefs about correspondence, resemblance, and connection;” Albanese elaborates that these beliefs in correspondence:

include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and its relatives such as “revelation” and “higher guidance.” Here versions of a theory of correspondence between worlds prevail. The human world and mind replicate—

² 3, McGarry. I agree with McGarry when she writes. “Albanese’s magisterial remapping of American religious history is more complex than I can do justice to here and should change utterly what historians call “American religion” (178).

either ideally, formerly, or actually, a larger more whole and integrated universe, so that the material world is organically linked to a spiritual one. In this version of “as above, so below,” metaphysicians find a stream of energy flowing from above to below—so powerful and constitutive of their realities that they discover themselves to be, in some sense, of the same stuff.

What that “stuff” is, as well as the possible connections it creates, becomes central to occult practice and esoteric philosophy. In other words, the occult is most often an esoteric connection with invisible worlds that allows for deeper insight into one’s relation with the world more generally, while also allowing for new modes of feeling in relation to things that are not circumscribed by direct interaction, dyadic formations, or attachment.

Importantly, these occult feelings and correspondences manifest in ways that offer an alternative mode of relationality, both in terms of *how* one feels about certain affiliations and *what* forms of affiliation are possible. One example of this occurs early on in “The Custom-House” introduction of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Most often “The Custom-House” introduction is remembered as a meditation on disconnection, with Hawthorne’s descriptions of his time at the customhouse leading to the now famous declaration, “I am a citizen of somewhere else.”³ What that “somewhere else” is and why Hawthorne frames his relation to it in terms of citizenship has been fodder for much criticism. However, there are forms of the “somewhere else” that manifest *within* the customhouse itself and which, though indirectly, offer a new means of relation. When meditating on the possibilities of the romance, especially as it transforms a space into a “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land,” Hawthorne

³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (New York: Penguin, 2009), 40.

concludes, “Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.”⁴ For Hawthorne, all it seems to take to relate to ghosts differently is moonlight, which makes things “so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect.”⁵ Hawthorne’s description of objects becoming “things of intellect” recalls Albanese’s point that the occult includes reason and intellect, but moves “beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and its relatives such as ‘revelation’ and ‘higher guidance.’” In this scene, moonlight reveals a hidden, occult quality within objects that transforms the narrator’s relationship to them. Suddenly, there is a strange correspondence between his own intellect or imagination and the objects that surround him. More than this, however, objects do not just become “things of intellect”; they become a *queer* aspects of it. The moonlight in this scene gives ordinary objects “a quality of strangeness and remoteness.”

And so we have two transformations occurring at once: in one way, objects become more intimate to the viewer because they seem to be mere projections of his intellect. Yet in another way, this transformation, rather than creating a sense of familiar intimacy with this world, gives the viewer a sense of “strangeness and remoteness.” Following Hawthorne’s logic here, if these two transformations are both occurring, then what is strange and remote is the viewer’s intellect itself. That is to say, the imagination does not necessarily reveal a hidden world that we feel intimate with but (in shifting object perception) it reveals our inner world—one that we feel is strange and distant, but which also emanates from us. Compounding this is Hawthorne’s statement that “Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.” In other words, this sense of “strangeness and remoteness” rather than creating a disconnect and making us feel like we are “a citizen of somewhere else” allows us to feel the strangeness and remoteness of our own intellect,

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., 32-33.

which in turn allows for an intimacy with specters who *are* somewhere else. By entering into a space that places the real world and the fairy world in a relation of intimate, yet remote and strange correspondence, Hawthorne finds a queer possibility, “Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us”—that is, we can find new modes of relation with invisible worlds—both within our own minds and manifesting externally. In this opening scene of the novel, that which would otherwise haunt, no longer does. The external and internal become conflated in a corresponding relationship of intimate strangeness. We find ourselves in a world of occult correspondence with strange, queer possibilities. It only seems to require the right lighting.

Of course, other than Hawthorne’s mentions of a fairy land and ghosts, this scene does not explicitly announce itself as occult, but if we look back into “The Custom-House” we soon find that it is inundated with occult language and images that anticipate Hawthorne’s happy haunting. Describing a cobwebbed room in the customhouse he writes, “this is a sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access.”⁶ Later he references “the martyrdom of the witches” and spells.⁷ When speaking of the other customs officers he notes that “they had evidently some talisman or other that kept death at bay” and makes reference to astrological correspondence when he writes that they must endure lives which, “their evil stars had cast them.”⁸ In his lengthy and highly erotic descriptions of the General, he concludes that he had, “an eye that saw through all complexities, and a faculty for arrangement that made them vanish, as by the waving of an enchanter’s wand.”⁹ And then there is, of course, the scarlet letter itself, the needlework described as representing “such mysteries”

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

⁸ Ibid., 12, 15.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

of “a now forgotten art” and as a “mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself.”¹⁰ All of this leads to Hawthorne’s description of the “cold spirituality of the moonbeams,” which then moves him to attempt to write the story of scarlet letter.¹¹ But he only encounters success obliquely as an imminent transformation in the literary form, which he figures through alchemical language when he writes “ At some future day, it may be, I shall remember a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs, and write them down, and find the letters turn to gold upon the page.”¹²

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the occult isn’t hidden but sits of the surface of the text. That said, what it makes possible, however, has as much to do with the occult as a topic of romantic imagination as it does with one of the most central commitments of esoteric philosophy—occult correspondence. For Hawthorne, it is not that the occult *makes* correspondence magical, but that correspondences themselves are so full of esoteric possibilities that he turns to occult language to describe the modes of relation they create. Again, in *The Scarlet Letter* we begin to get a sense of this in his description of the General, who has an esoteric insight into the world, “an eye that saw through all complexities, and a faculty for arrangement that made them vanish, as by the waving of an enchanter’s wand.” And Hawthorne will return to these magical powers of shifting correspondence, or of arrangement, in his later romance, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Readers of the 1851 gothic romance often remember the text for its dark explorations of guilt and retribution, and remain haunted by its occult intimations and suggestions of witchcraft. While Hawthorne uses his novel to allude to what he calls the “dark arts,” he also offers another view of the occult. When the novel’s ever-cheerful and always beautiful Phoebe first settles into the famously seven-gabled house, she sets about to rearrange her room, and the results are

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 34.

magical. Hawthorne writes, “Little Phoebe was one of those persons who possess, as their exclusive patrimony, the gift of practical arrangement. It is a kind of natural magic, that enables these favored ones to bring out the hidden capabilities of things around them”; he goes on, “a homely witchcraft was requisite, to reclaim, as it were, Phoebe's waste, cheerless, and dusky chamber.”¹³ Phoebe’s insight into the “hidden capabilities of things,” becomes a “homely witchcraft” whose magic stems from her almost mystic understanding of the world’s unseen relational possibilities. In turning to the language of the occult, Hawthorne again suggests that there are hidden, even magical, qualities in objects— that there remains wonder in an invisible world.

Occult Feelings: Esotericism and Queer Relationality in Nineteenth-Century US Literature, argues that closely attending to the esoteric influences and occult undercurrents in nineteenth-century America provides a richer understanding of relationality’s emotional complexities. To illuminate some of the intricacies of relationality, this project analyzes the literary representations of occult language and esoteric philosophies that nineteenth-century American authors themselves use to conceptualize new modes of relation beyond direct, interpersonal interactions.

As I have begun to illustrate, occult paradigms often emphasize a doctrine of hidden correspondence whereby one enters into a relation of intimate interdependence with everything from disembodied lovers and family, plants, celestial bodies, the divine, or even inanimate objects like gems and talismans. My readings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott demonstrate that these nineteenth-century uses of occult paradigms urge a

¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Project Gutenberg, August 1, 1993, 77, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/77/77-h/77-h.htm>

rethinking of relationality beyond its dyadic formations among human subjects to its more expansive, complex, and dynamic manifestations as a web of correspondence.

In its reframing of nineteenth-century intimacies, *Occult Feelings* augments the conceptual language scholars use to describe intimacy and desire both in the nineteenth century and within current critical debates. At one level, this project shares other scholars' fascination with the inchoate nature of desire and sexuality, and I actively highlight how strange, ephemeral, and queer the parameters of sexuality were in nineteenth-century America as well as how embedded they were in religious life. More than this, however, I ask that scholars consider an even wider spectrum for what counts as desire, intimacy, or sex in this period. Often the forms of relation my project explores do not immediately appear purely erotic or religious because they cannot be fully circumscribed by these categories. Instead, I argue that the occult offers a new language of relation that refuses to settle into binaries of erotic or platonic, human or non-human, animate or inanimate.¹⁴ To this end, I use the term *queer relationality* to make room for different

¹⁴ While authors would openly turn to esoteric philosophy and occult practice to envision new erotic possibilities, this did not mean that the occult was met without suspicion. Often the occult (even when it finds a more pristine expression as esoteric philosophy) carries darker implications for the forms of relationality it affords. After all, though the authors I consider often relate to the occult someone abstractly, or relate to aspects of it that would be more palatable to nineteenth-century readers, the occult was, and is, still known as “the black arts.” While mystic states, esoteric theories of correspondence, alchemical transformations, and the Western Hermetic tradition deeply interested many writers, they also knew that these were not too far away from less, for lack of a better word, philosophically immaculate practices like witchcraft, necromancy, mediums, trances, spell casting, and fortune-telling. And so, if the occult opens up the possibility for new forms of relationality, it also opens one up to risk. Many can dabble in occult explorations, but playing with the occult means we can stumble into something more dangerous than originally anticipated. Perhaps more anxious about this than his peers, Hawthorne says as much, and does so at length in *The Blithedale Romance*:

The epoch of rapping spirits, and all the wonders that have followed in their train, —such as tables upset by invisible agencies, bells self-tolled at funerals, and ghostly music performed on jew's-harps, —had not yet arrived. Alas, my countrymen, methinks we have fallen on an evil age! If these phenomena have not humbug at the bottom, so much the worse for us. What can they indicate, in a

modes of relation that express what we might now call queer desire or desire in queer subjects, while asking that we also consider how relationality itself might be queered.

I first want to articulate the terms of my argument and the different scholarly conversations it draws on. First, I will elaborate on what I mean by esoteric and occult. While we can often interchange these terms, each also carries different resonances.¹⁵ I will touch on some of the more popular and well-known types of esoteric philosophy and occult practice, as well as illustrate some of the occult's diversity of expression. I do so not to simply describe practices that were popular in the nineteenth-century, but to illustrate the thickness of the nineteenth century's esoteric ambiance.¹⁶ Second, this project seeks to augment the work of queer theory through close reading. Specifically, my goal is to help expand the enormously rich historical and

spiritual way, except that the soul of man is descending to a lower point than it has ever before reached while incarnate? We are pursuing a downward course in the eternal march, and thus bring ourselves into the same range with beings whom death, in requital of their gross and evil lives, has degraded below humanity! To hold intercourse with spirits of this order, we must stoop and grovel in some element more vile than earthly dust. These goblins, if they exist at all, are but the shadows of past mortality, outcasts, mere refuse stuff, adjudged unworthy of the eternal world, and, on the most favorable supposition, dwindling gradually into nothingness. The less we have to say to them the better, lest we share their fate!

Nevertheless, as suspicious as he was of the occult, Hawthorne would consistently return to these themes not just to decry their danger but also to explore their possibilities. Coverdale's narration expresses a deep anxiety over what the occult makes possible, but that anxiety is part of the nature of possibility; its open-ended nature makes it both dangerous and promising. Coverdale's anxiety in this passage locates itself in the occult arts (specifically spirit-contact), but it is also located in a panic over intimacy, which he figures as not working properly. That is, Coverdale counters the popular idea of mediumship as a way to contact and regain intimacy with the dead not by insisting that it doesn't work, but by arguing that works towards the wrong object. It puts people in a form of *queer relation* with something darker, "goblins" that are "but the shadows of past mortality, outcasts, mere refuse stuff." For Coverdale, mediumship both works and doesn't work: it delivers *something*, but does not give one what they want.

¹⁶ I borrow the phrase esoteric ambiance from Arthur Versluis. See Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

theoretical work on sex, desire, erotics, and sexuality in the nineteenth-century. All that said, I am neither a religious studies scholar nor a historian; my work, as well as my method, draws on these discourses, but does so in the service of creating a more robust toolkit for close reading. I find close reading to be useful because of the ways it both attends to language and draws out productive connections; the occult does not just deserve our attention, it deserves a close attention to the nuances of its language. Only by attending to the language, tone, and structure of the occult, only by careful observation of how authors employed occult and esoteric themes in their own writing, can we truly gain access to the richness it offers. That authors so often turned to occult themes and paradigms to envision new avenues of affiliation illustrates that they must have seen some potential for expanding relational possibility within these modes of thought and writing. Or, at the very least, the occult was so much a part of their imaginary worlds that it could not help but shape the very contours of these writers' intimate relations.

Interlude: A Note on Scope & Method

Such close attention sometimes requires a narrower focus than might seem appropriate, and after demonstrating the vastness of the occult in America, this project may also seem too narrow. That said, by offering extended attention to a very small number of texts, I hope to give a clearer picture of what these writers were doing with the occult, erotics, and relationality than would otherwise be possible in a project that sought to be more wide-ranging, or which attempted to catalogue as many occult moments in nineteenth-century literature as possible. For one, this work has already been done, and done with an exhaustive scope and rigorous scholarship.¹⁷ Second, I believe there is value in projects that have a smaller archive because they can offer a

¹⁷ The most outstanding example of this in terms of American texts is Catherine L Albanese's *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

space for extended attention to textual and theoretical nuance. It allows us to sit with a sentence or paragraph, rather than rushing out to find more examples. In this way, I take Margaret Fuller's advice about exploring the subject:

Sit at home and the spirit-world will look in at your window with moonlit eyes; run out to find it, and rainbow and golden cup will have vanished and left you the beggarly child you were. The better part of wisdom is a sublime prudence, a pure and patient truth that will receive nothing it is not sure it can permanently lay to heart.¹⁸

Occult Feelings takes a theoretical stance that prefers to sit and wait with a text to look back, rather than running out to find more examples. By doing so I do not mean to ignore larger historical or theoretical implications, as these constantly inform the project. Rather, I mean that my dissertation wants to offer the skills of literary scholarship, and the skills of extended close reading as way to “permanently lay to heart” the rich and complex ways these texts open up new possibilities for relationality.

Esotericism, the Occult, and the Academy

The first thing that might come to mind in a project focused on esoteric and occult currents in nineteenth-century America would be ghosts—specifically spirit contact, séances, and Spiritualism. Other than this, the occult might also summon up certain “occult sciences,” specifically mesmerism (with its structures of animal magnetism, energies of the human body, and the mysteries of electricity). In the context of nineteenth-century American literature, these are not unfair focal points of the occult; they were some of the most popular forms of occultism.

¹⁸ Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 1507-1509.

And when it comes to scholarship on the occult and esoteric themes in the United States, the bulk tends to focus on these more popular practices.¹⁹

That is, when it *does* focus on esoteric and occult currents in Western culture, philosophy, and religion, as more often than not scholars either ignore the occult or view it as merely a manifestation of larger cultural forces—marginal and unworthy of scholarly inquiry. This lack of scholarly interest has as much to do with the politics of secularism as it does with a bias towards esoteric subjects. In terms of secularism, Molly McGarry aptly points out:

this resistance [to looking at Spiritualism, for example] has everything to do with the politics of secularism. If secularization is a progress narrative that culminates in the freedom from religion, religion can function only as an anachronistic invasion into public life that logically aligns with conservative and reactionary returns to moral values.²⁰

¹⁹ For examples of Spiritualism and spirit contact more generally, see Dana Lucciao's current work, which will appear in her new book *Time and Again: The Circuits of Spirit Photography*, Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1983), Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), and John Kucich *Ghostly Communion: Cross-cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2004). For some examples of scholarship on mesmerism, see Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), and Samuel Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

²⁰ McGarry, 5.

As to scholarly bias, Wouter J. Hanegraaff has recently done extensive work demonstrating how and why the academy often ignores esoteric and occult philosophy.²¹ In the context of American literature, Arthur Versluis has also made strong arguments for both the abundance of esoteric interest in American literature and culture, as well as for the reasons that something so pervasive is so marginal to scholarship on the period.²² For McGarry, scholars ignore the topic because of the secularization hypothesis (one that has been recently contested by scholars like John Modern).²³ For Versluis (a religious studies scholar) this lacuna does not have to do with a misguided view of the sacred versus the secular, but with how scholars of religion and the history of religion view the occult as not taking part in serious religious discourse.

Hanegraaff argues that the academy's ignoring esoteric aspects of culture and philosophy is part of a fascination with modernization, and in this he is closer to McGarry. His work, however, adds to the understanding of how the esoteric becomes a category in thought, and how it is bound off from other forms of religiosity:

²¹ For an extended discussion of this, see Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²² Versluis argues that the American nineteenth century was especially ripe for a renewed interest in esoteric thought. Although, unlike a scholar like McGarry, he cites other topics of interests besides Spiritualism:

what we find behind what has come to be known as the American Renaissance [is an] efflorescence of brilliant authors in New England, nearly all of whom were inspired by Western esoteric traditions—Alcott and Emerson from Hermeticism, Christian theosophy, and Neoplatonism; Fuller from alchemy and Rosicrucianism; Hawthorne from alchemy Melville and Poe from Gnosticism.

He goes on to argue that the reasons these interests are ignored has as much to do with the views of esoteric philosophy as “superstitious” or “irrational” as it does with the efforts of forming an American canon by scholars like F. O. Matthiessen. See F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance; Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941).

²³ John L. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors : Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Modernization is [. . .] the key to understanding the emergence of Western esotericism [. . .] as a concept or category in the study of Western culture.

Understood in terms of disenchantment, the core of modern post-Enlightenment society and its appointed representatives (such as, notably, academics) *requires and presupposes* a negative counter-category consisting of currents, practices and ideas that refuse to accept the disappearance of incalculable mystery from the world.²⁴

The impulse in the academy that makes occult practice and esoteric philosophy, “the Other of science and rationality,” where it thus becomes “a dark canvas of presumed backwardness,”²⁵ quickly starts to unravel when we realize that for those in the nineteenth century, esoteric philosophy took part in a complex debate with science, sometimes standing in opposition to it, at other times using scientific language to justify its place within the culture.²⁶ That said, the occult, even when popular, maintained a reputation as being dangerous or possibly sinister. Hawthorne’s fiction offers many examples of this view, and even when it came to a popular practice like Spiritualism, which borrowed the language of science and the structure of Christianity, there were those who equated it instead with practices like witchcraft.²⁷

²⁴Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.

²⁵ Ibid. I’m indebted to Christopher McIntosh’s review of Hanegraaff’s work for pointing out these aspects. See Christopher McIntosh, “*Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge and Western Culture* by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (review),” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 2.1 (2013): 92-96.

²⁶ Much more could be said about this. For example, there is the close relationship between the technologies of electricity and mesmerism, and Spiritualism’s table-tapping communication comes into vogue at the same time as the telegraph.

²⁷ The “Spiritual Telegraph,” is a good example of how technology and an esoteric practice like Spiritualism worked in tandem. For example, the Fox sisters (two very famous mediums in upstate New York) came to prominence through the tapping they summoned from spirits, much like the way one would receive a message through the telegraph. See “The Spiritual Telegraph

The link by some between Spiritualism and witchcraft illustrates that the terms esotericism and occultism carried with them certain deviant connotations, no matter how normalized or popular they became. To return to Hawthorne, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, he links a popular practice like animal magnetism with something more sinister. Describing Phoebe's struggle to understand Holgrave, he writes:

As for the daguerreotypist, she had read a paragraph in a penny paper, the other day, accusing him of making a speech full of wild and disorganizing matter, at a meeting of his banditti-like associates. For her own part, she had reason to believe that he practiced animal magnetism, and, if such things were in fashion nowadays, should be apt to suspect him of studying the Black Art up there in his lonesome chamber.²⁸

While there are clearly racial implications of the “Black Art” worth exploring, I bring it up here for other reasons. The occult carries with it connotations of the diabolical, of something hidden away because it is dangerous or evil. Moreover, what makes the occult deviant are the forms of relation it makes possible. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave is depicted as having an ability to impose his own desire on others, an ability Hawthorne aligns with witchcraft. In this text, the occult becomes a vehicle that allows desire to reach its end in ways that violate free will. It becomes an act of magic in this way, and more importantly, magic tied to deviance, which (as Chris Castiglia has demonstrated) opens up possibilities for a queer reading of desire.²⁹ With esotericism, the connotations are somewhat different—having to do with higher knowledge,

and the relation between body and electricity in Spiritualism,” *The Media Fantasy Blog*, <http://mediafantasy.hypotheses.org/114>.

²⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables* (Project Gutenberg Kindle edition <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/77>), 1199-1202.

²⁹ I discuss this at length in Chapter One.

gnosis, and spiritual insight, and to an extent we see this with Phoebe's "homely witchcraft." In the end, however, the problem with the terms esoteric and occult is that they become blurred and intersect so often that any distinctions we may try to draw are soon undone.

Perhaps the best way to clarify terminology is to gain a clearer picture of the philosophical assertions and practices that make up esotericism and the occult.³⁰ The leading scholar on esoteric thought within the Western tradition is Antoine Faivre, and he offers the clearest definition of what counts as esoteric.³¹ Faivre views esotericism as an umbrella term that

³⁰ Another term that deserves mention is found in the work of Catherine Albanese. Albanese has one of the most in depth and comprehensive books on the history of the occult and esotericism in America. She favors the terms "metaphysics" and/or "metaphysical religion" throughout her work over "esotericism" or "the occult." In her introduction to *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* she gives a sustained account of her reasoning, as well as the criteria she uses for her definition. Albanese uses "metaphysical religion" both to emphasize the religiosity of these practices and beliefs, and to juxtapose metaphysics to "the pervasive Baconianism of the nineteenth century" (10).

³¹ However, Faivre's list of qualities of what makes up esotericism has recently been called into question by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and other scholars who do not see esotericism as having any universal qualities that we can point to in order to define something as esoteric, but instead that this is a discursive category that is created within the scholarship that studies these texts. That is, the object of what seems to be esoteric is created by the discourse that purports to be merely describing not creating its object of study:

In this respect, Hanegraaff's frequent assertion that European discourses on 'Western esotericism' produced the very phenomena that they claimed to merely describe is worth indexing. That discourses produce their 'objects' is one of the essential postulations of Foucauldian discourse analysis and one is stunned by the fact that Hanegraaff uses formulations very similar to Foucault's original phrasing. Hanegraaff's interpretation of a large number of authors in *Esotericism and the Academy* indeed shows his de-essentializing, constructivistic approach that finally leads to the claim that "Western esotericism" is an imaginative construct in the minds of intellectuals and the wider public, not a straight-forward historical reality "out there" (377). Accordingly, Hanegraaff reveals the plurality and haziness of historical semantics and thereby reconstructs multiple histories of various singular concepts associated with 'Western esotericism' such as 'magic': the term could mean very different things to different parties (Otto 236).

For more on this discursive analysis, see Bernd-Christian Otto, "Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*." *Religion*, 43:2, 231-240

contains occultism within it. Nonetheless, he also acknowledges that even this can become problematic:

The distinction between esotericism and occultism did not really enter the vocabulary until the middle of the nineteenth century, a time when a need was felt to create this second substantive, which coincided precisely with the appearance of a trivial esotericism [...] the problem in terminology is complicated by the fact that occultism is sometimes used in the sense of esotericism.³²

That said, Faivre does map out important characteristics of esotericism, which Arthur Versluis then takes up in his history of it in the “American Renaissance.”³³ Versluis and Faivre's work is not only useful for gaining a better understanding of esotericism and occultism but also this scholarship further illustrates the ways occultism can fit into the larger discussion of religion in literature.³⁴ Faivre emphasizes four primary characteristics of Western esoteric traditions, which I have listed in “Appendix One.” For my purposes here, we need only focus on the first, which is a commitment to the belief that the world is organized through occult correspondences between humanity, nature, objects, and divinity.

Swedenborg, Occult Correspondence, and (Not So New) New Materialism

If occultism is the practice of esotericism, then what are those practices, beyond spirit contact? Arthur Versluis gives one of the best accounts of what these would be, and though he

³² Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*. [*Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*] (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 30.

³³ Versluis, as well as other scholars in religious studies working on esotericism in nineteenth century America, seem unaware of the problematic nature of the term “American Renaissance.” Versluis even goes on to cite Matthiessen, but says nothing about the critical conversation that has changed our view of American literature since the 1940s.

³⁴ Faivre gives a much more substantial explanation of these terms in *Access* (10-19). Additionally, Versluis gives a more succinct version as to how these characteristics relate to an American context in the second chapter of *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*.

does not necessarily label them as occult, each would become a type of occult practice in America.³⁵ I've given more details on these alternative practices in "Appendix Two," detailing some examples of forms of occultism that have received little critical attention when compared to Spiritualism. For my purposes here, I want to expand upon Swedenborg, as his work influenced American authors' ideas about occult correspondence. By occult correspondence I mean both hidden (occulted) and mystical. That is, when exploring occult correspondence I am speaking about both their formal and thematic manifestations (they are hidden and they often deal with magic, spells, astrological theories of correspondence, alchemy, and mystic relations to nature.) and their affective qualities (they are perceived or felt as mystic, magical, and wondrous). This later sense becomes especially important since my explorations of the occult center on some of its more abstract manifestations in literature. For example, rather than exploring the records of the emerging secret societies that developed esoteric philosophy and occult practice, I will look to how an author like Margaret Fuller figures her mystic relation to flowers as an occult relation that creates a secret, esoteric society.

To return to Emanuel Swedenborg, it is vital that we understand his influence on American esoteric philosophy and occult practice, especially in terms of what his work made possible for the ways authors envisioned relationality and occult correspondence. Versluis rightly states:

without a doubt, the most influential European esotericist for nineteenth-century America was Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) [...] One finds his work central for Emerson, and visible in the works of authors that

³⁵ Versluis, 8-20. See "European Esoteric Currents" in *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*. I borrow from Versluis's list, but I expand upon it here, especially in terms of nineteenth-century American with regards to folk magic and race,

range from Poe to Henry James Sr., as well as in the works of countless popular writers and movements, including communal experiments of nineteenth-century America.³⁶

Swedenborg's work was one of the primary means by which Americans in the nineteenth century gained knowledge of esoteric philosophy and the possibilities of occult practice; these were:

commonplace esoteric ideas like the correspondence of the microcosm and macrocosm, the possibility of seeing spirits and visiting spiritual realms, clairvoyance, and the Kabbalistic idea of the macro-prospos, or the cosmos as a great man. [...] However, most of all, he represented direct spiritual experience.³⁷

Fuller mentions Swedenborg repeatedly in her journals, as does Alcott, and Emerson would write about him in his *Representative Men*.³⁸ Emerson's writing on Swedenborg reflects both the esoteric knowledge of correspondence, as well as the practice of magnetism popular at the time, which Emerson was suspicious of. Describing Swedenborg, he writes,

Swedenborg's system of the world wants central spontaneity; it is dynamic, not vital, and lacks power to generate life. There is no individual in it. The universe is a gigantic crystal, all whose atoms and laminae lie in uninterrupted order and with unbroken unity, but cold and still. What seems an individual and a will, is none. There is an immense chain of intermediation, extending from center to extremes, which bereaves every agency of all freedom and character. The universe, in his

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

³⁷ Ibid, 20.

³⁸ Ralph W. Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008).

poem, suffers under a magnetic sleep, and only reflects the mind of the magnetizer.³⁹

Though Emerson would read Swedenborg deeply, he would never become a practicing esotericist in the way that Margaret Fuller would, and it was precisely these more practical aspects of esoteric philosophy and their occult application that he scorned, and when he did not openly scorn them, he actively occluded their influence in his own thought.

That said, Emerson (for all his apparent criticism) nevertheless does include Swedenborg in his work *Representative Men* along with Plato, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Napoleon, and Goethe (whom, as we see in Fuller's work, was also committed to esoteric philosophy). Emerson's elaboration on Swedenborg's commitment to correspondence illuminates the importance of this concept for understanding how authors imported this into their literary work to articulate new forms of relationality, and it also speaks to the current movement in critical theory towards New Materialism and Object-oriented Ontology.⁴⁰

Understanding the nineteenth century commitment to an occult correspondence between people, objects, planets, and divine forces accomplishes three things. First, it shows that our understanding of New Materialism is not that new. The definition of object oriented ontology (or "OOO"), where objects have the same ontological status as human beings resonates with nineteenth-century commitments to occult correspondence.⁴¹ However, for authors of the

³⁹Ibid., 63.

⁴⁰ Much of this work is being done via open access, blogging, and podcasts. For a strong introduction see <http://re-press.org/books/the-speculative-turn-continental-materialism-and-realism/> and <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/>.

⁴¹ Ian Bogost, a leading scholar and blogger in OOO gives one of the best definitions of the field, Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. Object-oriented ontology ("OOO" for short) puts *things* at the center of this study. Its proponents contend that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally--plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example. In contemporary

nineteenth-century, correspondence—because of their occult (hidden and mystic) nature—offered a new affective space which has not been fully considered by scholars working in OOO, as the nineteenth-century attended to a different set of affective and religious concerns that a post-humanist, secular critical theory tends to ignore. Second, occult correspondence in the nineteenth-century reshapes how we understand the social; the social is not just relations among people: it is a dynamic web of correspondence that is material, ecological, and even cosmological. Moreover, this is a web of correspondence that is a network of occult influences, where human beings are on the same level of influence as gemstones, metals, flowers, mythic goddesses, and planetary bodies. Last, by reshaping how we understand the social, occult correspondence then forces us to entirely reconsider erotic relations, therefore exposing us to new forms of sexuality and erotics that queer theory, in its back and forth between social and anti-social debates, has not attended to.

Again, if we turn to Emerson's description of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondence, we can see how the occult forms a new mode of relationality. He writes:

Swedenborg's system of the world wants central spontaneity; it is dynamic, not vital, and lacks power to generate life. There is no individual in it. The universe is a gigantic crystal, all whose atoms and laminae lie in uninterrupted order and with unbroken unity, but cold and still. What seems an individual and a will, is none.

Emerson's description brings up many questions. How does correspondence create a world that is not vial, but remains dynamic? How does this dynamic nature of the world dislocate agency out

thought, things are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits (scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism). OOO steers a path between the two, drawing attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis), and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much with ourselves.

⁴¹ See, http://www.bogost.com/blog/what_is_objectoriented_ontolog.shtml

of the individual? And if this is the case, how do we then understand something like desire or erotic relations within a world that acts like a giant crystal where objects are reflecting and corresponding with each other? What does this do for the social, or how one understands herself in relation to things? In the chapters that follow, I argue that Emerson's view of Swedenborg, while giving insight into the work of occult correspondence, misses out on the relational possibilities of such a commitment. As I will illustrate in Hawthorne, Fuller, and Alcott, Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondence, as understood in the nineteenth century, presents new avenues for relationality that each author explores in very different ways. Each of these authors finds strange and queer ways to relate to objects, and modes of relation that allow for a non-dyadic, queer relationality.⁴²

Reading Closely, Reading Queerly

Beyond the occult as a discourse, or even a theme (although my chapters address it in these forms) my dissertation is one that reads closely for the occult when it manifests at its most occluded or when it seems to be only on the surface. With Hawthorne, though it would often

⁴² Thus far, I hope to have illustrated that the terms esoteric and occult take part in a diversity of cultural practices but nevertheless share commonalities. While some practices were very popular in the American nineteenth century (Spiritualism, mesmeric trances, and healing) and some were not (mostly the more theologically challenging parts of esoteric philosophy), both informed the culture. Some philosophies and practices are easy to point to as esoteric or occult (magic, astrology) while others are less so. *Occult Feelings* explores this "less so." This project takes as its object of study the more obscure aspects of the occult. To borrow the famous image of Isis behind the veil, *Occult Feelings* seeks to interrogate the structure of the veil itself, to ask what that structure of revelation and occlusion might make possible, how it feels to look through the veil, and what might be erotic about the whole thing. This project will not act as a catalogue of examples of the occult in literature, but instead will pause over moments where the occult *barely* surfaces, or where it seems to be only on the surface. Therefore, the chapters that follow investigate the occult as an undercurrent, as a textual ambiance, as an atmosphere, or as a structure. This is not to say that I ignore more obvious examples, in fact this is where my readings often start. However, the bulk of each chapter is far more focused on the erotic and affective possibilities occult undercurrents make available than it is in documenting their direct influence.

surface as a theme in his writing, it remains absent from his letters and journals. For Fuller, the occult seems radically out in the open; esoteric philosophy and occult practices like the use of stones and talismans, or acts of clairvoyance, are plentiful in her personal writing, and her public writing returns to these themes. However, the most powerful moments of the occult in Fuller are not these more obvious instances, but where it acts as a foundational *structure* for intimacy, opening up new potentialities for erotic relation through isolation, occlusion, and mystic reveries. With Alcott, the occult would literally occupy the center of his life as he collected the most extensive esoteric library in America at the time, full of magical, mystic, and occult books, and a library that would be at the center of his utopian experiment Fruitlands. And yet, when the occult manifests in his work, it does so in a way that flaunts the occluding *structure* of the occult, more than its thematic examples, as a way to open up intimacy and imagine queer futures.

In each of these authors, the occult, fittingly enough, often acts like a specter—but these are happy hauntings. This project examines texts where the occult will seem clear in one moment, then gone the next. Hawthorne will mention alchemy, then go on to repeatedly reference gold, with the philosopher's stone haunting each reference. Fuller will talk about magic and mysticism, then go on to talk to trees and flowers—leaving us to wonder about the ways magic might inform her meditations. Alcott will reference German mysticism and astrology, and then place these under erasure through stylistic flamboyance. In each case, the occult acts as a thematic and formal apparition. This leaves this project with the same predicament of any ghost hunter or medium: how do we give evidence of a phantom? How do we prove the presence of a specter? How do we point to what could only be thought of as a textual eidolon? Again, I believe Margaret Fuller gets at what such a method might look like when she writes, “Sit at home and the spirit-world will look in at your window with moonlit eyes; run out to find it, and rainbow

and golden cup will have vanished and left you the beggarly child you were.” Finding the occult in its most formally occulted forms involves just that sort of sitting still as a reading practice. And so, while this project uses historical scholarship and critical theory, its main approach is most often close reading.

All this might sound, perhaps, frustratingly inexact, but this is due (in part) to my commitment to not letting the project turn into one that relies on a hermeneutics of suspicion.⁴³ While my readings of the texts that follow will return to illustrating the occult as an important structure of each author’s work, I do not believe that it is something (at least in the examples I turn to) that can ever be exposed entirely. My goal isn’t to demonstrate how, say, exposing the occult gives us insight into politics, the nation, the public sphere, ideology, or what was “really” going on with sexuality. I’m more interested in what the occult makes *possible* through non-exposure. I’m invested in thinking through the space that the occult opens up, or closes off, and how that makes room for authors to think through the affective and erotic dimensions of relationality. In other words, as a structure the occult always resists a complete exposure, it demands that something remains covered, that something remains unknown. As much as it draws us in with the promise of esoteric knowledge, it also calls attention to the limits of what cannot be known. Above all, occultism in these texts becomes an *opening up to concealment*. In this sense, it is not a hermeneutics of suspicion, but a repositioning towards that which turns away—it is an orientation towards the unknown which does not seek to uncover the secret so much as it

⁴³ Ricoeur, 30. One moment where Ricoeur articulates this, which is especially fitting for the occult image of Isis and the veil. In when he notes that such a hermeneutics:
begins by doubting whether there is an object and whether this object could be the place of transformation of intentionality into kerygma, manifestation, proclamation. This hermeneutics is not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises.

⁴³See Paul Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

desires to be inside it or even just in a new relationship to it, and find out what is possible in these new orientations.⁴⁴

My focus on the occult means to add to the conversation of scholars working on the nineteenth century who have collectively reimagined, questioned, and expanded the ways we read sex, desire, and sexuality in this period. Specifically, because my focus is a marginal form of the religious experience, I'm drawn towards some of the same questions that Molly McGarry has articulated:

I would like to ask how some varieties of religious experience may have been a marker for an incipient, not yet materialized, sexuality, a sexual dissidence outside the medico-juridical matrix and beyond the expected space of subculture. This past might also reveal alternative secularism alongside alternative modernities, not one secularism but many, incomplete and necessarily so.⁴⁵

Unlike McGarry, however, my project does not look at the occult (a “variety of religious experience”) as a marker *for* a not-yet materialized sexuality, but instead argues that literary uses of the occult were the very means of *creating* new forms of sexuality and erotics. This is not so much a not-yet, as much as it is a form of relation that does not predicate itself on the ability to become something. The forms of sexuality that I explore sometimes manifest as a not-yet, but they also register as decay (Hawthorne), as occultation (Fuller), and as restorations of imagined pasts (Alcott).

⁴⁴ I borrow the language of turning away from Rei Terada's *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009) and the use of orientation to think through both sexuality and phenomenological positions comes from Sara Ahmed's work. See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ McGarry, 157.

Occult Feelings asks that we think beyond texts or discourses being a “marker of” sexuality—even if that sexuality is nebulous or yet-to-be, because doing so often assumes that sexuality is something solid and preexisting that can be marked or signaled by discourse. In my emphasis on correspondence and nondyadic relations, I want to think of how the structures of the occult (alchemical, mystic, utopian, magical, etc.) created forms of erotic desire, or created the potentiality of new forms of desire that may have never surfaced to the level of something that would look like sexuality to us. In this way, I’m attracted to many of the same questions Peter Coviello articulates in *Tomorrow’s Parties*:

How, and in what terms, were nineteenth-century subjects able to imagine the parameters of sexuality [...] What could be counted *as* sexuality? Was it a circumscribed set of bodily practices? A form of identification? A mode of relation? Was sexuality an aspect of one’s identity? Or was it even something an individual could be said to possess? How did it consort with other coextensive and co-elaborated vectors of being, those at once embodied and legally consequential (such as one’s race, one’s gender)? And what, for the matter did this great transformation feel like on the ground, to those who lived through the stages of its unfolding?⁴⁶

While Coviello’s most recent work explores the temporal and affective dimensions of erotic life as sexuality became an identity category in the late nineteenth-century, my investments do not focus on the historical shifts in sexuality and identity, though I do draw from Coviello’s questions about the nature of sexuality and desire. *Occult Feelings* works from a similar set of

⁴⁶ Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 4.

concerns as those Coviello puts forth in order to explore the parameters of sexuality in the nineteenth century.

My aim is to investigate what those limits and possibilities of sexuality were, their occult structures, and how an epistemic commitment to occult correspondence shaped their relational possibilities. In this regard, I also mean “to attend most closely to styles of erotic being that may not rise to the level of ‘discourse’ as it is traditionally understood, but are for that no less telling or worthy of explication,” thus the texts this project explores:

orient us, cumulatively, away from a sense of sex as that which is (as the phrase goes) “discursively constituted,” and towards a differently calibrated regard for the styles of erotic being that exceed, or precede, or fall aslant of, or otherwise escape captivation by the genres, codes, and forms of their immediate surroundings.⁴⁷

In this way, my thinking is especially indebted to the work of nineteenth-century scholars who are challenging the ways we read sexuality in this period, such as Peter Coviello, Jordan Stein, Christopher Castiglia, Sarah Ensor, Dana Luciano and Molly McGarry. This project contributes to the scholarly conversation on nineteenth-century sexuality by illustrating how certain occult articulations of erotics can create new relational potentialities for sex and desire⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Coviello, 11.

⁴⁸ Of course, the questions don’t simply end here. At a panel for the inaugural conference for C19, for example, the moderator, Dana Luciano, put forth a series of questions concerning the ways scholars think about sexuality and queer theory in relationship to nineteenth century literary studies. Among some of the most discussed topics were: “What other strands in queer theory are, or ought to be, central to the study of sexuality in a field still defined (and arguably dominated) by historicist approaches?” “What exactly are the boundaries of ‘sexuality studies’ as such, and how does it intersect with gender studies, critical race studies, affect studies, religious studies, disability studies, and/or other critical takes on the history of the body?” “What new paradigms are suggested by a rigorous engagement with any of these fields?” In addition, a recent collection of essays, *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and

My first chapter, “Gold Rush: Alchemy and the Queer Potentiality of *The Scarlet Letter*,” examines Hawthorne’s use of alchemy as it relates to and illuminates the potentiality of a queer erotics. I focus on the relationship between the ersatz alchemist, Chillingworth, and the troubled minister Dimmesdale, not to show how the occult language of alchemy illustrates homoeroticism, but instead to uncover Hawthorne’s fascination with a *not-yet* quality of queer relationality. Using Ernst Bloch’s *not-yet*, which I locate in alchemy’s shifting between success and failure, the chapter explores how the relation between the two men illustrates sensations of intense suspension that never settle into definable categories. By looking at “failed” alchemical transformations and images of alchemical gold in the text, I show why not-yet-ness is perpetually frustrated in Hawthorne and what is gained through its frustration, or through what I term *floundering*.

Turning from the not-yet and frustrated forms of potentiality that Hawthorne explores, my second chapter, “Distant Worlds of Light: Margaret Fuller, Mysticism, and Intimate Inaccessibility,” expands the concept of queer relationality beyond an erotic link between men, or even between humans. I explore Fuller’s publications in *The Dial* to analyze the complexities of relation that manifest through an affective correspondence with plants, celestial bodies, and female forms of divinity. Fuller insists that the inaccessibility of desired objects creates both a feeling of connection, as well as emotional isolation. Fuller’s work expresses the most powerful moments of intimacy through various forms of mystic isolation, where the subject herself moves into an occult position to experience intimacy with mystic phenomena, a formation I call

Andrew Parker (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) asks, “What is it like to be doing queer theory *still*, to be working today in a tradition that has managed to have acquired a past ” (8)? And even more importantly, “Does the very distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matter to queer thinking, and if so, when, where, and how” (2)?

intimate inaccessibility: relationality that denies attachment in preference of an affective resonance with the distance and isolation of objects.

My final chapter, “No Gem Behind”: Flamboyance, and Divine Intimacy in Alcott’s ‘Orphic Sayings’ and Fruitlands,” opens with Fuller’s critique of Bronson Alcott’s work where she remarks, “the break of [Alcott’s] spirit in the crag of the actual makes surf and foam but leaves no gem behind.” The chapter explores what it means to figure something (here, Alcott’s esoteric writing and utopian experiments) as being “great” while leaving “no gem behind.” Through close readings of Louisa May Alcott’s work, Bronson Alcott’s contributions to *The Dial*, and each of their descriptions of the failed utopian experiment Fruitlands, I argue that Bronson Alcott imagines a utopian space where one experiences a divine relationality that is great (what I term flamboyant), but nonproductive, leaving “no gem behind.” To express this relation, Alcott turns to astrological correspondence and his own “clairvoyant” visions. The queerness of his vision, I conclude, lies in the ways it engages esoteric philosophy in an attempt to invoke and experience a utopian future that can only be perfect if it remains imminent.

My emphasis on literary representations of the occult reveals capacious and queer forms of relationality—modes of affiliation that an engagement with occult paradigms makes possible. While at first these relations may not look like expressions of intimacy or desire, my research reveals how occult representations helped forge new forms of relationality in the nineteenth century, and how they might help us to re-imagine relationality today.

CHAPTER ONE:
GOLD RUSH: ALCHEMY AND THE QUEER POTENTIALITIES OF
THE SCARLET LETTER

What does Roger Chillingworth want? At first, the answer seems simple enough: a name. When he first emerges in *The Scarlet Letter*, Chillingworth requests the name of the man with whom his wife, Hester Prynne, committed adultery. And when Hester refuses to reveal the identity of this man, the aptly named Chillingworth, her estranged husband, informs her that keeping a secret will be pointless. He warns:

I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine!⁴⁹

Sooner or later, he tells her, adultery will out. But Hester's adultery isn't the only secret fated to be exposed. In his admonishment of Hester, Chillingworth begins to reveal that he wants more than a name. More than knowledge of an adulterer's name, he seems to want the man himself when he exclaims, "he must needs be mine!"

It's a queer exclamation: "he must needs be mine." Hawthorne could have had Chillingworth simply say, "I must have him," "I need to have him," or "I must know him"—all expressions which would have still been somewhat ambiguous. Beyond the ambiguities of Chillingworth's desire, the expression "he must needs be mine," also makes who needs whom unclear, leading to even greater ambiguity in this opening scene. It might be useful to pause over

⁴⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 69.

the opacities this expression opens up because it is uncertain who needs what: Does Chillingworth need to possess Dimmesdale: “he must needs be mine”? Or is Dimmesdale the one who somehow needs to be possessed by Chillingworth: “he must needs be mine”? Moreover, between the two men, what does this sense of “must needs” (meaning something necessary or unavoidable) tell us about the desire between them? Even after, or especially after, such a declaration of desire we are still able to ask a basic, but vital, question: What does Roger Chillingworth want? More exactly, we might ask: What sort of wants and desires are so powerful, unavoidable, and necessary for Chillingworth and Dimmesdale that they hang in the air between subject and object, confuse agency between the two men, and cause bodies to tremble and shudder?

This chapter examines what this desire is, how it works out (or fails to work out), what might be queer about it, and how it becomes legible. But answering the question of what Chillingworth wants involves exploring how the text articulates that desire. Before Chillingworth proclaims to Hester, “he must needs be mine,” he warns her that he will attain his desire because he has spent a lifetime doing so. Rather than chasing young minsters, however, he has spent his time pursuing truth and gold—and he sees no difference among the three goals. He tells Hester, “I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy.” While it would be strange enough for Chillingworth to equate the three objects “man,” “truth,” and “gold,” stranger still is that his confidence in seeking out Dimmesdale rests in two virtually impossible tasks: complete knowledge of truth from books and the pursuit of the philosopher’s stone—that evasive alchemical substance capable of transmuting base metals into gold and granting immortality. If Chillingworth is so confident in finding and possessing Dimmesdale, why does he then equate this pursuit with forms of seeking that are notorious for their failure? In

part, the equation foreshadows the difficulty that lies ahead of Chillingworth in his desire to possess Dimmesdale, as well as his eventual failure to do so. But there might be something more to this ambiguous combination. By equating Chillingworth's desire for Dimmesdale to the elusive pursuit of alchemical gold (a goal that is both subject to consistent failure and the renewed possibility of success) Hawthorne opens up a space for thinking about the potentiality of desire before it becomes finalized in success or failure. To elaborate, alchemy and Chillingworth's desire share an investment in transforming the world towards their own ends, as well as a frustration with that world's resistance. Nevertheless, because there is a possibility that things might change, both Chillingworth and alchemical practices keep trying to bend the world to meet desire. Lead might be transformed into gold, Dimmesdale might be found out and changed into Chillingworth's possession, but the results are never perfect, never complete, and never stable. Still, Chillingworth, either as alchemist or lover, flounders towards their ends.

This chapter explores the complexity of Chillingworth's floundering, alchemical and otherwise. Chillingworth flounders in the "might-ness" of desire; he repeatedly returns, as does the novel, to moments where the potentiality of desire manifests as potentiality. In *The Scarlet Letter*, alchemy illustrates and makes legible such potentiality, and it becomes Chillingworth's primary means of transforming a world so inimical to his desires. And like the stereotypical alchemist seeking to turn lead into gold—he fails or, as I will argue, he flounders, but does so marvelously.⁵⁰ By closely attending to both the historical, thematic, and methodological

⁵⁰ I'm drawn to Halberstam's idea of the ability to not just fail, but "fail spectacularly" (5). My argument differs from Halberstam's, however, because I'm not as invested in the end-point that failure necessarily signals. She argues that failing, "is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon 'trying and trying again.' In fact if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards." (3) And indeed it might. However, my work is

dimensions of alchemy in *The Scarlet Letter*, to Chillingworth's blundering search for "gold in alchemy"—his floundering alchemical search for what, in the end, Hawthorne calls "golden love"—I argue that we can gain insight into a queer potentiality in the text.

In thinking through potentiality in the text, and more specifically queer potentiality, I am drawing from Giorgio Agamben's work. The conventional understanding of potentiality comes from Aristotle who places it against actuality, so that potentiality is the potential to be actual, something not yet manifest as an actuality. Agamben wants to break out of this logic of a potential/actual binary to think about a form of potentiality that "conserves itself and saves itself in actuality."⁵¹ This is a potentiality that does not dissipate in, but remains and persists in, the actual world. Since Hawthorne sets up the romance as a genre that illuminates the space between what he calls the "Actual and the Imaginary," it makes a work like *The Scarlet Letter* especially fit for thinking through the complexities of a pure potentiality. Agamben's potentiality, I argue, allows for a more nuanced reading of erotic relations that stops short of identifying Chillingworth's desire as homosexual, or even homoerotic. Instead, by using this concept, I emphasize how we might understand the text's queer potentiality: a more capacious space of erotic resonance in the novel that manifest in everything from Hawthorne's images of gold, to his descriptions of architecture, to his speculations on the afterlives of his characters—all moments

more invested in the moments of indeterminacy, in that space of "trying and trying again" that floundering offers. More than queering failure, the indeterminate space of floundering, where things could go either way, opens up potentiality beyond (before, even after) conventional notions of failure or success. Moreover, failure does not really work for *The Scarlet Letter*, because so much of Chillingworth's desire relies on what is yet to be. As Bersani and Phillips write, "the notion of failure is irrelevant to a life that never really is, that is lived entirely as that which is still to be" (21).

⁵¹ See Agamben. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, 184 Another avenue to take potentiality would be to think of it through a psychoanalytic framework. Bersani and Phillips do this beautifully in a reading of what they call the virtual. While insightful, their notion of potentiality and the virtual is more an exploration of Lacan and the potentiality of the unconscious, which I am not invested in for this reading. See *Intimacies*.

that do not immediately rise to the level of homoerotic legibility. Unlike desire, which is a kind of longing that dissipates upon its realization, queer potentiality between characters allows for an erotic imminence to be archived in the actual without becoming actualized. All that said, in this chapter, potentiality remains—as it does in Hawthorne’s novel—appropriately amorphous, and that is part of its power. However, close attention to Hawthorne’s exploration of this concept in alchemy begins to make its affective and philosophical complexities clear.

While keeping an eye to the broader historical circumstances surrounding alchemy in nineteenth-century America, this chapter necessarily focuses on a single literary representation. When allowed the room to play in fiction, an occult paradigm like alchemy illuminates the phenomenology of potentiality's transformative abeyance. *The Scarlet Letter* pauses over these moments, slowing the reader down to allow her insight into instances where objects, affects, and relations become markers of a potential to be other than what might initially be perceived. Hawthorne's text returns the reader to moments of transformation where (while she can see that something might be changed) it remains unclear if any change has occurred. Instead, the text leaves the reader with a sense that something could be otherwise, with the sense that there is a yet-to-be quality inherent in certain objects, affects, and relations between characters in the text.⁵²

In *The Scarlet Letter*, this transformative potentiality, which the text holds in abeyance, manifests through the extended use of alchemical images. An ever-present theme in Hawthorne’s fiction, alchemy acts as one of the primary subjects he uses to think about the relationship between what he calls the Actual and the Imaginary, between the phenomenological world and

⁵²I’m drawn to Bloch’s work to think through this, especially his idea in *The Principle of Hope* of the not-yet-conscious. However, I want to think of this more in terms of a not-yet-and-never-will-be, that can nevertheless be sensed in actuality without being actualized.

our affective responses to it, and between the interdependent feelings of love and hate central to erotic desire.⁵³ Alchemy's centrality to Hawthorne's thought makes exploring it vital to a reading of the novel.⁵⁴ He uses alchemy for numerous reasons, but most often employs it as a means to engage some of the most difficult aspects of his characters' emotional lives, especially the entanglement of affects that arise out of erotic desire.

Before exploring the theoretical complexity and ambiguity of alchemy in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as the ways it opens up potential affective transformations for some of the most vexed relationships in the text, a more historical understanding of the place of alchemy in the nineteenth century is useful, as *The Scarlet Letter* actively participates in and departs from this context. After a short exploration of alchemy's history and reception in the nineteenth century, I will address how Hawthorne uses alchemy to negotiate the fraught, anxious, and difficult moments between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. In doing so, I want to stress that I am not (as many scholars have done) going to argue that Hawthorne's use of alchemical language automatically translates into a use of alchemical metaphors in the way alchemists employed

⁵³ That said, when using alchemy in his work, Hawthorne was far from literal or consistent with its tropes; either he was invested in exploring its cultural and philosophical ambiguities or he simply used it willy-nilly toward his own ends. Nevertheless, the structural messiness in Hawthorne's (mis)use of alchemy allows it to become more than merely a theme or a trope. Lastly, complicating all of this, in Hawthorne's work, alchemy becomes a literal object of study and a tropologized/allegorized level of analysis. It is both the object being analyzed and the means or structure of analysis itself.

⁵⁴ As critics like Sacvan Bercovitch, Lauren Berlant, and Jonathan Arac have all argued, "to understand *The Scarlet Letter*'s significance for our own day we need to look at conditions in the mid-nineteenth century when it was produced as well as at the seventeenth-century Boston that it fictionally represents" (Thomas 163). What many critics have not focused on, however, is the presence of esoteric practices and philosophies like alchemy in American literature. As Arthur Versluis points out, "Alchemy was virtually omnipresent in England and Europe during the seventeenth century. Certainly this was true in most educated circles in Europe and England, so it is not surprising that one found alchemical work going on as well in the American colonies" (Versluis 30). As I will demonstrate, beyond the colonial period, the nineteenth century had an alchemical ambiance as well.

them. More often, I find Hawthorne's use of alchemical language unclear, troubled, elusive, and that his symbols seem to obscure a referent while opening up ambiguity. In part, the ambiguity of alchemy comes from Hawthorne's use of it at moments where affects (especially those that gesture towards homoerotic desire) are in a state of becoming or possibility. Such affective potentiality is especially illuminating for homoeroticism's transformative potential, because the ambiguity of Hawthorne's alchemical images allows the potentiality of homoerotic desire to become legible while holding the accompanying anxiety this produces in a state of abeyance. Again, while alchemy in the text might look like failed transformation (the lead that never turns to gold), instead it is a means for Hawthorne to think through the incomplete, open, and queer nature of potentiality in erotic desire.

Alchemy and the Nineteenth Century

Understanding the history of alchemy, its links to erotic desire, and its status in the nineteenth century illuminates its potential for a queer reading of Hawthorne. Interpreting alchemy in the nineteenth century, specifically, involves looking at both its religious and scientific dimensions, which in turn means exploring three distinct but interlocking groups of writers interested in the subject: scientists, occultists, and authors of fiction. While many modern readers are unfamiliar with alchemy's history, the mention of it nevertheless still brings up familiar images. Mark Morrison, in his book *Modern Alchemy*, makes the persistence of these images and their connotations especially clear:

For many in the twenty-first century, the word "alchemy" conjures up images of medieval zealots rummaging through ancient books and scrolls in dark hot basements, seeking the secrets of transmutation in the dim firelight of brick furnaces and archaic laboratory equipment with strange names—athanor, horn of

Hermes, cucurbite. The occult wisdom forged by these alchemists was intended to bring them immense wealth, great longevity, and spiritual purification. In spite of Enlightenment attacks upon alchemy as unscientific superstition, or merely the foolish pursuit of the self-deluded, it is now clear that alchemy was a scientifically and spiritually serious pursuit from antiquity through the Middle Ages, with roots in Egyptian metallurgy, Aristotelian philosophy of matter and form, and Jewish, Arabic, early Christian, and Hermetic sources.⁵⁵

While alchemy would lose its purchase as a grounded material pursuit (its rich history often surviving only in caricature), its promise of “occult wisdom,” eternal life, and spiritual transformation would prove indelible.

Before considering alchemy as a spiritual philosophy and trope in literature, exploring scientific views on it in the nineteenth century demonstrates the influence of scientific opinion on occultists and fiction writers. Influenced by advances in the eighteenth century, scientists in the nineteenth viewed alchemy as unscientific. The nineteenth-century biographer of Sir Isaac Newton, David Brewster, offers an outstanding example of this perspective. When discussing Newton’s involvement with alchemy, he writes:

we cannot understand how a mind of such power, and so nobly occupied with the abstractions of geometry, and the study of the material world could stoop to be even the copyist of the most contemptible alchemical poetry, and the annotator of a work, the obvious production of a fool and a knave.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Morrison, 3.

⁵⁶ Brewster, 375. I’m indebted to the blog <http://whewellsghost.wordpress.com/2010/11/14/exploded-systems-views-of-alchemy-in-the-in-19th-century/> for pointing me in the direction of nineteenth-century writers’ views on alchemy.

But nineteenth-century scientists' scorn of alchemy went beyond just thinking it foolish or methodologically flawed. Instead, the period witnessed an entirely different view of the nature of matter. For alchemists, as Morrison points out, "Alchemy held that all the elements could be reduced to a *prima materia*, and then transmuted into other elements." This view of matter was to shift with "John Dalton's field-defining 1808 treatise, *A New System of Chemical Philosophy*," so that nineteenth-century chemistry soon held that "atoms were the smallest particles, both indivisible [and] unalterable [so that the] material basis for alchemy was thus seen as nothing more than a long-held intellectual mistake, now relegated to the realm of superstition and pseudoscience."⁵⁷ For example, as early as 1830 in the book *History of Chemistry*, the Scottish chemist Thomas Thomson writes that alchemy:

may be considered as the inauspicious commencement of the science [of chemistry], of which, in fact, consists of little less than an account of dupes and impostors; every where [sic] so full of fiction and obscurity, that it is a hopeless and almost impossible task to reach the truth.⁵⁸

Thomson nonetheless spends a whole chapter of his book on alchemy's history.⁵⁹

Thomson's disdain of alchemy might seem to be just a scientific brush off, but if we consider a character like Chillingworth, this dismissal of alchemy reveals more about its queer potential than might initially be apparent. Again, Thomson writes that alchemy is merely the

⁵⁷ Morrison, 4.

⁵⁸ Thomson, *The History of Chemistry*, 2. My emphasis

⁵⁹ When it came to the relationship between alchemy and science, especially chemistry, in the popular literary imagination of the nineteenth century, chemistry, despite its efforts to the contrary, did not really do away with the image of the alchemist. For many writers, chemistry just became a new stand-in for alchemy—with the frenetic and crazed alchemist being replaced by the figure of the mad scientist. See Schummer.

“account of dupes and impostors; every where so full of obscurity, that it is a hopeless and almost impossible task to reach the truth” (emphasis added). If this is the view of the alchemist, who else might share these qualities—what sort of character is this describing? In short, Thomson describes the alchemist through the language of a nineteenth-century “deviant.” As Chris Castiglia points out, for Hawthorne queer characters are often queer in the sense that they deviate from norms. Hawthorne and Thomson’s descriptions line up: queer characters and persons invested in alchemy are dupes, impostors, and appear hopeless or impossible. Castiglia writes, “The queer characters of Hawthorne’s romance [...] deviate not by breaking the law [...] but by virtue of their excessive and inscrutable emotions, their melancholic devotion to the past, their antisocial reclusiveness, even their lack of control over bodily functions.”⁶⁰ Part of Thomson’s disdain comes from his assertion that the alchemist represents a “melancholic devotion to the past,” a devotion to a world organized and shaped by desire. The alchemist bases his world-view on, as Thomson insists, a now debunked view of the material world, a view Thomson argues is past its prime and simply untrue. For Hawthorne, the devotion to past forms of knowledge, the antisocial reclusiveness of the alchemist in his lab, and his excessive attention to transforming emotions and regulating the body all become markers of deviance or queerness. While this does not immediately link Chillingworth’s deviance with a sexually queer one, the conflation soon becomes apparent.

Both a queer figure of seductive deviance and an alchemist, Chillingworth attempts to lull or dupe others into seeing the world in a way that stands in contrast to dominant paradigms of knowledge. Of course within the context of the novel, alchemy would have been an acceptable form of “scientific” knowledge—but Hawthorne’s alignment with nineteenth-century views

⁶⁰ Castiglia, 187. Castiglia’s reading is specifically about *The House of Seven Gables*, but his point applies to *The Scarlet Letter* as well.

colors his portrayal of the alchemist. Nevertheless, while the advances of science in the nineteenth century took away the potentiality that an alchemical world-view offered for the transformation of materiality, for Hawthorne it still offers a productive way to think about affects and their transformation. When Chillingworth turns to alchemical paradigms in his pursuit of Dimmesdale, he does so because they offer the promise of a world of affects that are constantly open to radical change. While Hawthorne finds such affective malleability productive, his views on alchemy, even when allowed room to play in fiction, do not differ all that much from Thomson's—they both remain highly suspicious of the alchemist. However, whereas for Thomson this anxiety has to do with a distrust of alchemical forms of knowledge, for Hawthorne this distrust becomes an anxiety over forms of sexual knowledge. If the alchemist can dupe us, if he can so easily seduce one into being transformed by his desire, and if this makes knowing what is true a “hopeless and almost impossible task,” then what happens when alchemy becomes more explicitly erotic? For Hawthorne the answer is panic, and he returns to this sense of panic in his fiction repeatedly, especially in presenting the figure of a man whose seductive force is so strong that truth disappears under the transformative weight of desire.⁶¹ Be it with alchemy, or his desire for Dimmesdale, Chillingworth occupies the role of a queer deviant, using obscurity and fiction towards his own ends. Moreover, when Chillingworth's desire is for Dimmesdale, Hawthorne's text seems to express as much anxiety and panic over this as a scientific work like Thomson's does over alchemy. For both writers, the figure of the alchemist remains a threat because he cannot be gotten rid of, because he haunts forms of erotic relation (Hawthorne) or forms of knowledge formation (Thomson) and threatens to open up potentialities aligned with

⁶¹ Beyond Chillingworth, we find examples of this “The Birth-Mark” with Aylmer's desire, with the idea of desire, sin, and alchemical quest for the Elixir of Life in “Ethan Brand,” in “Dr. Heidegger's Experiment” and with “Rappaccini's Daughter.”

his desires. Alchemy, as well as the alchemist, becomes a queer way of knowing the world that (in the sheer act of persistence and in the insistence on deviant forms of knowledge) demands a potentiality for the world to be otherwise.⁶²

All that said, while scientists of the period relegated alchemy to the realm of “superstition and pseudoscience,” this did little to curb the interest of occultists and fiction writers. And so, whether deeply wise or inexcusably foolish, the debate on the nature of the alchemist, and on alchemy more generally, was still a lively one in certain nineteenth-century texts, most predominantly in religious and occult ones, but no less so in works of fiction. For writers focusing on spirituality, alchemy represented more philosophical than physical concerns, though its metaphysical uses did not divorce it from its material connotations. Throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, many writers concerned with religious and occult topics held a deep interest in the subject.⁶³ Their investment in alchemy was principally as a metaphorical system of spiritual transformation, but they also viewed it as a system able to unlock the supposedly secret and true nature of the material world.⁶⁴

Moreover, authors often understood this secret and true nature through alchemical metaphors and images linked to sex and the body. For many of Hawthorne’s peers, like Margaret Fuller, alchemy became a symbol of “the confluence of magic, sexual embrace, and the forming

⁶² I use the term queer, not just to mean particular, but to emphasize the erotic dimensions of the alchemist. In addition, one could make the argument from the perspective of temporality, and many scholars working on queer theory, especially within the nineteenth century, have used concepts of temporality, history, and genealogy to think through queerness and being out of time, too late, early, etc. See “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion.”

⁶³ Alchemy was not just a concern of occultists and fiction writers, it found a place in broader religious contexts, as is illustrated in the development of the Later Day Saint Movement, more popularly known as Mormonism. See John L. Booke’s *The Refiner’s Fire*.

⁶⁴ See Carl Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy*. For alchemy’s importance in the occult in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Israel Regardie’s *The Golden Dawn: The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites & Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order* and *The Middle Pillar: The Balance Between Mind and Magic*.

of a greater whole out of the meeting of man and woman.”⁶⁵ Fuller’s poem, “Double Triangle, Serpent, and Rays” offers one of the best examples of alchemy and its sexual dimensions. The poem describes a version of the Seal of Solomon, a symbol Fuller would also use as the frontispiece of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Fuller’s poem discusses the symbol’s interlocking triangles as an alchemical and sexual union, “Male and Female, black and white/ Soul is justified in space.”⁶⁶ This union is encased in and produces what she calls a “Double form of godly prime/ Holding the whole thought of time/ When the perfect two embrace.”⁶⁷ Within alchemical texts, the double form of “godly prime” is not a child, but the alchemical hermaphrodite— a perfect balance of male and female form, and thus a central symbol of perfection for alchemy.⁶⁸ Perfection arrives, to be sure, but it is a queer perfection, something so perfect as to be a physical anomaly. Moreover, the queerness of a hermaphroditic figure does not get entirely erased under alchemical metaphor.

Of course, much more could be said about this figure within alchemy. I bring it up here simply to illustrate that alchemy is not just a history of transformation generally (metallic, spiritual, or both), but rather that it is a discourse intimately linked to sex and to queer bodies and objects. While we cannot know if Hawthorne had something like the “chemical marriage” and its resulting alchemical hermaphrodite in mind, the centrality of this image to alchemical discourse, coupled with his peers’ interests, makes the image hard to ignore. This, when coupled with the deviant aspects of alchemy, demonstrates that an exploration of the language of alchemy quickly becomes an exploration of a language of sexuality and erotics.

⁶⁵ Versluis, 152.

⁶⁶ Fuller, 233.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ For example, see Long.

Erotic, deviant, and queer, if by the nineteenth century the promise of alchemy was problematic and no longer just the perfection of lead into gold or the perfection of material world more generally, then what was its promise for the spiritually concerned? Ethan Allen Hitchcock (a Major General who was Edgar Allen Poe's tutor and a correspondent of Hawthorne's wife, Sophia) perhaps says it best. The true purpose of alchemy is "to bring man into a right state of hearing the still small voice whose potency, like that of the Alcahest [sic] is able to dissolve the stoniest hearts."⁶⁹ In other words, alchemy produces personal and spiritual perfection. Arthur Versluis sums it up nicely, "In essence, the aim of alchemy is restoration of paradise not only in oneself, but in nature as well."⁷⁰ This articulation begins to make the other dimensions of alchemy apparent, namely its utopian aspirations, thus placing it into the larger utopian experiments of the nineteenth century that were also grounded in occultism.⁷¹ More important, the recourse to sexual union as a metaphor for utopian paradise or material and spiritual perfection troubles any take on alchemy as a purely spiritual system: its promise, even when spiritual, remains grounded in a sexual union that produces a body that, while perfect in balance, is queer in appearance.

While someone like Hitchcock seems to have reached a genuine spiritual transformation through the study of alchemy, others were more skeptical of alchemical perfection and utopia. For other writers, alchemy didn't always make good on its promise, it seemed to fail—but did so in a way where it kept failing, floundering towards its goal and refusing to disappear into finality.

⁶⁹ Hitchcock, 223.

⁷⁰ Versluis, 30.

⁷¹ I am currently developing this line of thought further with regards to Alcott's failed utopian experiment, Fruitlands, and Hawthorne's fictional work in *The Blithedale Romance*. In both instances, I demonstrate how occult paradigms were central to utopian discourse at the time, and how occultism become a major factor in opening new possibilities for erotic relations within these environments.

Much like Hawthorne's character Aylmer in his lab, it fumbled about, looking for a means into a perfect world transformed by desire.⁷² Whether one held the alchemical promise of perfection to be a dead end or a spiritual gateway — throughout the nineteenth century alchemy served as a reminder of the hazy distinction between the material and the mystical. Perhaps this haziness, this ambiguity, this “fiction and obscurity” and this “hopeless and almost impossible task to reach the truth” (as well as perfection) is what emblazoned alchemy on Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagination.

Hawthorne's Crucible: Views on Alchemy

Unlike scientific texts invested in empiricism or occult accounts focused on spiritual perfection, literary work like Hawthorne's allows a space for alchemy that takes into account all the imaginative, thematic, and phenomenological ambiguities surrounding it. In a text like *The Scarlet Letter*, alchemy's broader concerns (transformation, the material world, solitude, madness, desire, etc.) find wider thematic and methodological expression, and in doing so open up new vistas of possibility for the ways we think of the material world, our relation to it, and our relation to others.

While an unpopular topic in current critical discourse on Hawthorne, alchemy permeates his writing. We find instances of it in his short stories, in his most popular novels, and in his unfinished romances. At times, alchemy is the preoccupation of a single character; at others, it is only mentioned in passing—quickly used as a metaphor, and just as quickly abandoned. In other instances, it becomes central to the narrative, driving the entirety of a work. Reading the bulk of Hawthorne's fiction with attention to alchemy, three things become apparent. First, it fascinated him; at the end of his career, it became the dominant focus of his writing. Second, he didn't think

⁷² See Hawthorne's short story, “The Birth-Mark.”

very highly of it; characters involved in alchemical occupations never fare all too well—they either die, are murderous, deviants, sinister, sickly, queer, or (like Roger Chillingworth) all the above. Third, in his personal life, his letters, journal entries and notebooks, alchemy is curiously absent. In this way, Hawthorne's relation to the occult differs from other American writers who were his peers.⁷³ As Arthur Versluis notes, “Although [occult] topics inform and even govern his fiction, they do not seem to have intruded at all on his daily life or thought; indeed, it seems that he may even have gone out of his way to avoid them.”⁷⁴ Hawthorne may have avoided these topics in his daily life and letters, but the opposite is the case with his fiction.

When literary critics have examined this extended use of alchemy in Hawthorne's work, they have done so in ways that remain determined to find and interpret all alchemical metaphors. In addition, the bulk of scholars who deal at length with alchemy in Hawthorne's work make many of the same critical moves. Their principal aims appear to include giving examples of Hawthorne's historical relationship to alchemical texts (from records of his reading practices, library withdrawals, and personal notebooks), pointing out examples of the more obvious alchemical moments in his fiction (“The Birthmark,” “Dr. Heidegger's Experiment,” *The Scarlet Letter's* Roger Chillingworth, and the unfinished Elixir of Life manuscripts), and then attempting to read his use of alchemy as a strict system of symbols.⁷⁵

While the majority of this criticism is from the 1970s, even more recent scholarship makes recourse to this formation. In “The Alchemy of Love: Hawthorne's Hermetic Allegory of

⁷³ This is especially true with Margaret Fuller and Amos Bronson Alcott. Occult literature deeply fascinated both writers, as did alchemy, hermeticism, and magic. We find evidence for such interests in their letters, descriptions of their lives by themselves and their contemporaries, and in their fiction. We do not get this with Hawthorne.

⁷⁴ Versluis, 82.

⁷⁵ Many critics mention the subject. For some (but certainly not all) of the more extended treatments of alchemy in Hawthorne's work generally see: Burns, Clack, Gabe, Hennelly, Hull, Martin, and Swann.

the Heart,” Randall A. Clack, after giving possible sources for Hawthorne's knowledge of alchemy, returns to earlier critics to buttress his reading of “The Birth-mark.” In one moment he writes:

The crimson hand on [Georgiana's] cheek recalls the alchemical rubedo. The name Georgiana itself suggests the alchemical marriage of male and female, often represented by the alchemical hermaphrodite, and the birthmark in the shape of a hand invokes the fifth element (the quintessence reflected by the five digits), a synonym for the philosopher's stone.⁷⁶

Hawthorne's texts are allegorical, but this sort of reading seeks to completely decode his symbols, rather than rest in ambiguity. Such readings of alchemy in Hawthorne can be useful, and have done much to point out the rich and vast employment of alchemical language in his texts. However, I am concerned with bringing out other legibilities. Additionally, the archive of Hawthorne's reading practices simply does not seem to adequately support an intense interest in the details of alchemical symbolism. As the examples in his texts illustrate, he seems more interested in it generally as a kind of method, rather than as a way to talk about the color and elemental correspondence of the philosopher's stone.⁷⁷

Unlike Hitchcock or Thomson, Hawthorne's treatment of alchemy in his fiction offers a more conflicted view of alchemical pursuits. More important, his use of alchemy is not fettered to proving or disproving its authenticity. Instead, since alchemy represents a way of relating to the material world, it also offers new forms of relating to other bodies, subjects, and desires.

⁷⁶ Clack, 321.

⁷⁷ This is especially true in *the Elixir of Life* manuscripts. As Versluis writes, “What makes these manuscripts interesting for our purposes is the fact that alchemy is reduced from its multivalent symbolism and spiritual significances to a form of pharmaceutical production for the indefinite extension of earthly life” (84).

Scarlet Letters/Golden Threads

Just as alchemical images, tropes, and scenes are scattered throughout Hawthorne's work as a whole, so too are they sprinkled throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. Sometimes they are obvious (as when Chillingworth explicitly refers to his alchemical practice) and sometimes the text voices them less directly (Hester's transformation of the scarlet letter through goldwork). For all the themes and images that come to the forefront of *The Scarlet Letter*, alchemy remains an ever-present concern, but one that has never gained much critical traction beyond listing its occurrences or pointing to it as yet another Hawthornian allegory. As I have noted, Hawthorne's use of alchemy is much richer than an allegorical tit for tat. Alchemy appears in Hawthorne around his most vexed moments of desire. Whether in a character like Aylmer with his desire to transform the female body into perfect whiteness, or in Chillingworth with his desire for homoerotic possession, alchemy becomes a way of approaching erotic tension.⁷⁸

When Hawthorne turns to alchemy to figure transformation, it seems to flounder, to regress to being merely hypothetical, or sometimes it seems to act only superficially, never creating a lasting interior change. But such floundering, hypothetical, or fleeting transformations are not Hawthorne's cataloging of transformative failures. Instead, these alchemical moments make transformation legible, felt, known—and yet not actualized. Moments of alchemical floundering illustrate that transformation is the process that brings potentiality into a kind of actuality, but transformation isn't itself potentiality. Instead of completed transformation,

⁷⁸ It also becomes a way of negotiating race. With "The Birth-Mark" one can read this desire as a fantasy of perfect whiteness that alchemy promised, where alchemical perfection becomes a racial ideal of perfection with disastrous outcomes. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the relationship between race and alchemy works in the opposite direction: Chillingworth's alchemical obsession actually changes his skin black. I'm currently developing this argument in a book length manuscript.

Hawthorne demonstrates how things are open or susceptible to becoming transformed, how they might become odd or peculiar. For Dimmesdale, this susceptibility creates deep anxiety for the majority of the novel, but in the end Hawthorne illustrates how such potentialities might open up new forms of intimacy. The text captures this contingency, abeyance, and potentiality of transformation through the figure of the alchemist toiling away towards what appears to be an impossible goal. In Hawthorne, the alchemist persists because a potential for the world to be other than it is intoxicates him, and alchemy allows us to think through what that potentiality might be without having to think of a transformative end or even a beginning. To borrow from alchemy's lexicon, the text allows us to realize lead's golden potentiality without ever having to acquire the actualized golden product, as potentiality itself makes gold already present without being actualized. Speaking of transformation in this way requires some level of theoretical abstraction, but part of *The Scarlet Letter*'s power rests in the way that it illustrates transformative potentialities through the grounded material language of alchemy.

The first mention of alchemy in the text occurs in the scene I opened with, where Chillingworth reunites with Hester after witnessing her public punishment for adultery. Not only does this scene establish alchemy's role, it also introduces the reader to the text's most important alchemical trope: gold. In *The Scarlet Letter*, gold appears at critical moments of potentiality. Such moments include: when Chillingworth seeks new potential circumstances, when Hester employs the color through gold-work (an embroidery technique) to reveal the scarlet letter's potential to be a multivalent symbol ("in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A"). Finally, gold appears in the affective potentiality of homoerotic desire to transformation into "golden love."⁷⁹ These

⁷⁹ *The Scarlet Letter*, 65, 240.

references to gold, informed by Chillingworth's declaration of alchemy's importance, increase as the novel reaches its climax, creating, if we will excuse the pun, a gold rush.

By the end of the novel, gold appears almost everywhere; while alchemy figures directly only a few times, gold freighted with the alchemical implications of transformation and potentiality is a through-line. First gold becomes a figure that represents Hester's relation to the world with her "links" of "gold" to humankind broken.⁸⁰ She also tells Pearl she wears the scarlet letter "for the sake of its gold thread."⁸¹ When Hester is in the forest with Dimmesdale, Hawthorne writes, "No golden light had ever been so precious as the gloom of this dark forest."⁸² Chillingworth later notes, "A good man's prayers are golden recompense!"⁸³ When the novel is reaching its finish, these references accelerate. Hawthorne talks about the possibility of a "good and golden year."⁸⁴ In the final scene where Hester and Dimmesdale are about to leave with Pearl, men in the crowd have "belts, often clasped with a rough plate of gold."⁸⁵ One figure has "gold lace on his hat, which was also encircled by a gold chain."⁸⁶ And Mistress Hibbins arrives with a "gold-headed cane."⁸⁷ One man, trying to talk with Pearl, takes "from his hat the gold chain that was twisted about it" and gives it to her.⁸⁸ The whole scene then finally becomes transformed into gold when Hawthorne writes, "it was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant,—at once a shadow and a splendor,—

⁸⁰ Ibid., 145.

⁸¹ Ibid., 165.

⁸² Ibid., 180.

⁸³ Ibid., 207.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 212.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 216.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 226.

and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them.”⁸⁹ These descriptions of gold anticipate what Hawthorne describes as the possibility of “golden love” between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. Gold is plentiful, but Chillingworth seems hard-pressed to find it. This myopia, however, has more to do with his understanding of gold, than with any kind of failure. Actual gold is simply not enough for Chillingworth; he wants the gold of alchemy—the golden promise of possibility. To this end, understanding the relationship between gold, desire, and transformation is vital.

Hawthorne first introduces the reader to how alchemy becomes a method of transformative potentiality earlier in the novel. Again, this is where Chillingworth declares:

I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine!

Chillingworth’s desire, figured as an endless seeking out of obscure objects, becomes (because of its equation with the alchemical search for gold) marked as a near impossibility. Nevertheless, this is a desire which keeps seeking in the face of objects and goals that resist being anything more than promised potentialities: absolute truth, alchemical gold, and (of course) Arthur Dimmesdale.

Moreover, Hawthorne emphasizes both the corporeality and obscurity of Chillingworth’s desire in the line, “There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares.” A loaded and inexact word,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 230.

“sympathy” occludes the affective response between the two men.⁹⁰ This ambiguity leads the reader to question what sort of sympathy this might be and why it would arise between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. At this point in the passage, what Chillingworth desires starts to shift. At first, we could certainly argue that Chillingworth expresses his power to uncover Hester’s secret, but by the time he moves to equating his desire to an alchemical quest that ends in “shuddering” and “trembling” by a shared affect (sympathy) between men’s bodies, Hester’s secret has fallen into the background.⁹¹ Furthermore, the passage’s intense focus on men’s bodies makes the issue of uncovering Hester’s partner in adultery fall to the side. For one, Chillingworth is voyeuristic for the trembling body as a body just as much as he might be for the revelation of knowledge, “I shall *see* him tremble.” We can only assume that the cause of this trembling in Dimmesdale is a manifestation of an unknown “sympathy” he shares with Chillingworth. After Dimmesdale’s trembling, Chillingworth elaborates, “I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares.” The chain of cause and effect here remains frustratingly unclear because we do not know what causes Dimmesdale to tremble first. The vague sympathy between the men makes one tremble, and this trembling then seems to cause the other to shudder. It remains somewhat ambiguous whether Chillingworth’s shuddering is caused by seeing Dimmesdale tremble, or whether it is an interdependent manifestation of some affect the men secretly share (as would seem to be suggested by the words “suddenly and unawares”). Whatever the case, the passage illuminates an affective resonance between men’s bodies that happens both on an affective and precognitive level.

⁹⁰ This is a complex body of scholarship, for more on sympathy, see Boudreau, Stern, and Hendler.

⁹¹ For this reason, I’m setting aside the triangulation argument. See Sedgwick.

As if trembling bodies were not enough, Hawthorne places all of this under the structure of “as I have sought gold in alchemy.” What happens if we put a little more pressure on the importance of this statement by elaborating on the method one uses to seek gold in alchemy? Suddenly, this passage is not a declaration of Chillingworth’s desire to uncover or expose Dimmesdale through affective sympathies. On the contrary, it is a declaration of Dimmesdale’s potentiality to be what Chillingworth seeks.⁹² The alchemist doesn’t look for gold in the conventional sense; we wouldn’t say that Chillingworth is prospecting. Instead, he recognizes or intuits a golden potentiality where others do not. Attending to the implications of the alchemical metaphor as it relates to gold finally makes the structure of Chillingworth’s desire clear: he does not look for gold, but instead seeks to transform objects into their golden potential.

Chillingworth does not figure his desire as a search for (or prospecting of) gold, but as looking for what can become golden (alchemically). Importantly, however, this search for gold is not abstract—after all, it is Dimmesdale he is after. Therefore, we could, of course, argue that this desire for knowledge of Dimmesdale’s identity is sublimated sexual curiosity.⁹³ While tempting, this argument would have to assume that the shift from pure sexual curiosity to desire for knowledge of someone in a platonic sense occurs completely. The argument for a kind of knowledge substitution motivated by sexual anxiety has been a popular way to read sexual desire in Hawthorne, but it can lead us to reading Hawthorne from a space where we think that we

⁹² Returning to Sedgwick, we might say that alchemy allows a way out of a paranoid reading. See *Touching Feeling*.

⁹³ Writing about the relationship between sexual desire and knowledge in her biography of Hawthorne, Brenda Wineapple points out, “With tragic or pathetic consequences, these repressed men transform sexual curiosity into a desire for knowledge” (65). If this is so, then we must look at the kind of knowledge these characters seek, and the structures of knowing that they inhabit. We might look more closely at the relationship between desire for knowledge and sexual curiosity, and doing so might then allow for a greater insight into the architecture of desire in Hawthorne’s work—an architecture that while seemingly opaque, might also make possible new, even marvelous, queer transformations.

know better now, where we assume that we are more fully equipped than he is to express the sexual dimensions of desire. Recently, many scholars in queer theory working in and outside of the nineteenth century have demonstrated how these readings can lead us to missing out on the complexities of erotic desire in texts, rather than revealing them. Therefore, instead of arguing that desire for knowledge fully represents a transformed sexual curiosity, I'm more inclined to argue that such a transformation doesn't really occur, or rather, that it might be unsuccessful or unfinished. Exploring the possibility of a queer potentiality in Chillingworth and Dimmesdale's relationship means that we must read for the moments when the not-yet-transformed manifests in the text not as some kind of anticipatory marker for what we would call homosexuality or even homoeroticism, but instead as a marker of the transformative potential of multiple modes of erotic relation, many of which might remain partially or even entirely illegible.

Approaching the text in this way makes it possible to read for potentiality qua potentiality, rather than searching for moments that clearly have the potential for a homoerotic finality. Rather than examining the text for moments that appear to uncover “real” sexual curiosity, we might instead look for instances that become hyperbolic in their opacity, in their unfinished-ness, or in their postulation of possibility. *The Scarlet Letter*'s use of alchemical images to point to possibility, to unfinished transformations, or to yet-to-be revealed desires, illustrates that a multiplicity of erotic potentialities exists within even a single relation, which is why I argue that alchemy reveals a queer, rather than homoerotic potentiality—though its homoerotic dimensions are often so plainly evident that the text goes into a panic over them. While the homoerotic panic between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale motivates much of the anxiety over their relationship, the erotics of Chillingworth's desire are more nuanced. What might we gain by thinking of a queer potential in erotic desire that pulls certain bodies together,

that forms intense affective relations and resonances, but which never reaches a point of legibility where we can definitively call it homoerotic? And what method might we employ to cultivate a language to articulate such indefinite moments of desire? While Chillingworth's lines to Hester introduce alchemy as a metaphor for desire, alchemy soon becomes a method of negotiating multiple queer potentialities. When it occurs as a metaphor for desire, it tends to do so at moments that are highly ambiguous, but which become illuminated when we think through them alchemically by using the structure of alchemy itself (as I argued in the case of reading the "seeking" of Chillingworth's search for gold as an alchemist seeking things that have the potential to transform).

Additionally, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's use of alchemy is, well, just messy. In terms of its thematic and methodological manifestations, when alchemy becomes a theme (as it does in many of the passages dealing with Chillingworth), it also soon manifests as a method for the narrator, so that often the language of the narration will rely on a quasi-alchemical image as a method of transformation and then, not long after, the image will be solidified in a more thematic way. The text's messiness between theme and methodology makes understanding the alchemical operations in the novel difficult. However, this need not be an interpretative problem. Rather than moving further into abstraction, it would serve us better to look at an example of Hawthorne's alchemical messiness or opacity. To do so, I'll examine one of the first extended moments where Chillingworth and Dimmesdale enter into the plot of the novel together and end by discussing the ramifications for the alchemical language that surrounds their mutual exit.

Recalling Chillingworth's declaration of his desire to discover Dimmesdale's identity as consonant with a desire to seek gold in alchemy, we can begin to read the text for moments when this desire for "sympathy" becomes legible as potentiality. One of the first, as well as stranger,

manifestations of erotic potentiality occurs in Hawthorne's description of the Governor's Hall—the hall to which Hester takes Pearl to plead her case for custody. In the Governor's Hall, Hester meets not only the Governor but also Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. While the descriptions of the two men are not all that interesting in this chapter, the description of the space they occupy together certainly is. Detailing the building, Hawthorne writes:

This was a large wooden house, built in a fashion of which there are specimens still extant in the streets of our elder towns; now moss-grown, crumbling to decay, and melancholy at heart with the many sorrowful or joyful occurrences remembered or forgotten, that have happened, and passed away, within their dusky chambers. Then, however, there was the freshness of the passing year on its exterior, and the cheerfulness, gleaming forth from the sunny windows, of a human habitation into which death had never entered. It had indeed a very cheery aspect; the walls being overspread with a kind of stucco, in which fragments of broken glass were plentifully inter-mixed; so that, when the sunshine fell aslant-wise over the front of the edifice, it glittered and sparkled as if diamonds had been flung against it by the double handful. The brilliancy might have befitted Aladdin's palace, rather than the mansion of a grave old Puritan ruler. It was further decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures and diagrams, suitable to the quaint taste of the age, which had been drawn in the stucco when newly laid on, and had now grown hard and durable, for the admiration of after times.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *The Scarlet Letter*, 94.

Hawthorne first calls attention to a temporal disjuncture in the description of the hall. While it is now “moss-grown, crumbling to decay, and melancholy at heart,” in the past it held a “freshness of the passing year on its exterior, and [demonstrated] cheerfulness gleaming forth from the sunny windows.” Hawthorne emphatically reminds the reader what this building would look like in the nineteenth century, but then goes on to describe it within the timeframe of his narrative, Puritan New England. This quick temporal shift pulls us out of the timeframe of the story, but it also calls attention to the building’s decay. In doing so, Hawthorne invites us to think through the potentiality of this object in multiple directions. Objects (and affects for that matter) exhibit potentiality in the most popular usage of the word, as having the power of a projected futurity (“having or showing the capacity to develop into something in the future; latent; prospective”), in other words they have a not-yet quality. Decay, by contrast, demonstrates an object’s potential towards the past, as having a once-was quality.⁹⁵ By first calling attention to the decay of the building, Hawthorne reminds us that an object’s potentiality projects in both temporal directions. The slow decay, or loss, of a not-yet potentiality marks the maintained quality of a once-was; in other words, while decay marks something fading away, the transitional nature of decay necessarily highlights the attenuated preservation of past potentialities as they become increasingly ephemeral. Potentiality’s multiple temporal directions invite us to read the novel as an archive of various pasts with unpredetermined futures, but this is an archive of potentiality that is in a state of decay as these past possibilities become increasingly foreclosed towards the novel’s conclusion.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ "potential, adj. and n." *OED Online*. March 2013. Oxford University Press.

⁹⁶ More could be said here about temporality and potentiality. For a powerful reading of temporality, possibility, or the foreclosure thereof, see Peter Coviello’s *Tomorrow’s Parties*.

In addition, reading potentiality in both temporal directions demonstrates how decay can be a marker of what once was but will never be. Decay, when viewed through the lens of potentiality, allows us to sense the potentiality of something even while it becomes increasingly illegible and fades from view. In this way, like transformation, decay allows one to gain a sense of an object's potential to be other than it presently seems. The Governor's Hall passage becomes even more complex when we ask what it is that is in decay. After all, while Hawthorne describes the decay of the building in a material sense, "crumbled" "moss grown," he also describes it affectively. The building is now "melancholy at heart," because it is filled with the decay of affects it once held. But when Hawthorne goes on to describe these affects, he writes that there once were "many sorrowful or joyful occurrences remembered or forgotten, that have happened, and passed away." This double usage of "or" (the Hall might have been filled with either joy or sorrow, and this might be remembered or forgotten) illuminates that the decay of the Hall is not the loss of a potential for what was, but for what might have been, but now will not be. It is the hall's potentiality for multiple forms of affect (now in decay) that leads to the sense of melancholy.

While reading potentiality backwards through decay might be interesting enough for an object like the hall, such a reading becomes especially poignant when we realize that Chillingworth himself is like the Governor's Hall, both mark potentiality as a decay of what might have been but will not be. The end of the novel highlights this similarity when Chillingworth asks Hester:

Dost thou remember me, Hester, as I was nine years ago? [...] all my life had been made up of earnest, studious, thoughtful, quiet years, bestowed faithfully for the increase of mine own knowledge, and faithfully, too, though this latter object

was but casual to the other,—faithfully for the advancement of human welfare. No life had been more peaceful and innocent than mine; few lives so rich with benefits conferred. Dost thou remember me? Was I not, though you might deem me cold, nevertheless a man thoughtful for others, craving little for himself,—kind, true, just, and of constant, if not warm affections? Was I not all this? ⁹⁷

Where Chillingworth asks Hester to remember, the text requests that we imagine what Chillingworth was, even though Hawthorne only offers descriptions of decay. In this way, Chillingworth asks that he not be the only one seeking gold in alchemy—he wants others to attempt to seek the same potential in his character, even as he actively becomes more leaden. Hawthorne’s emphasis on affective decay, for the interior space of the building and the interior life of Chillingworth, calls attention to the novel’s investment in outlining past potentialities even as they fade from view. While decay seems, and indeed is, irreversible—part of the promise of alchemy is to arrest such moments. Seeking gold in alchemy, while pointing to a material impossibility, also alludes to a temporal one: the elixir of life. Alchemy does not just promise transformation into golden potentialities, it promises to make that transformation eternal.⁹⁸ This becomes especially relevant when we consider that the encroachment of time, of old age, becomes one of the main impediments to Chillingworth’s desire, as well as the source of his manic and anxious search for “gold.”

Its current (nineteenth-century) state of decay aside, as Hawthorne goes on, the Governor’s Hall becomes a space suffused with images of gold. For example, there is the “vegetable gold” of the garden, and the sunlight (when entering through the windows) makes

⁹⁷ *The Scarlet Letter*, 154.

⁹⁸ The subject of eternal life would be one that became increasingly important for Hawthorne in his later and unfinished romances. See *The Elixir of Life Manuscripts*

“such figures [...] shining through a richly painted window [trace] out the golden and crimson images across the floor.”⁹⁹ Both the vegetables and the sunlight signify fleeting and contingent kinds of gold, subject to circumstance and time. While certainly not the gold Chillingworth was looking for, this is the gold that encompasses his relationship with Dimmesdale. The description of the hall illustrates a contingent and ephemeral potentiality that, here, literally encompasses Chillingworth and Dimmesdale's relationship. Chillingworth fails to recognize the gold surrounding him—or rather, he fails to realize that there is a golden potential that already encases him in his relation to Dimmesdale. While it might then be easy to blame Chillingworth for his myopia, Hawthorne complicates any recourse to this by the way he calls attention to the occult and fleeting nature of the hall's golden potentiality. For one, the ornamentation of the Governor's Hall enacts a transformative potential that is occult (mystical) and occulted (occluded). Hawthorne writes, “It was further decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures and diagrams.” Hawthorne describes the architecture as formed by “seemingly cabalistic figures,” but also, by figures that occlude us from the actual cabal forming between the men occupying the hall's interior.¹⁰⁰ The potentiality of alchemical transformation here is both occult and ephemeral, so much so that Chillingworth does not realize that he's right in the middle of the transformation he seeks. The gold of this scene is not materialized; instead its potentiality manifests as ephemeral moments of decay, occlusion, or transformative contingency. The Governor's Hall illustrates that the gold Chillingworth seeks has already begun to surround his relation to Dimmesdale, but like the philosopher's stone it remains just beyond realization, and stranger and more fleeting than he could have imagined.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, because he describes the architecture in two different periods, Hawthorne highlights the problem of looking backwards, of how time itself might occlude reading the potentiality of what Chillingworth and Dimmesdale's relationship was or had the potential to be.

Chillingworth fails to recognize that the “gold” he seeks (that which will make him shudder) surrounds him as a potentiality he already inhabits. Rather than looking to the golden potentiality of the space he shares with Dimmesdale, Chillingworth turns to penetration in search of gold, which leads to bodily violation and homoerotic panic. Hawthorne writes:

Roger Chillingworth [...] now dug into the poor clergyman’s heart, like a miner searching for gold; or, rather, like a sexton delving into a grave, possibly in quest of a jewel that had been buried on the dead man’s bosom, but likely to find nothing save mortality and corruption. Alas for his own soul, if these were what he sought!¹⁰¹

As the Governor's Hall passage illustrates, images of gold and jewels are not simply present within the text, Hawthorne also places them on the surface of spaces that Chillingworth inhabits, and, more importantly, spaces that he inhabits with Dimmesdale. Roger Chillingworth is anything but a stupid man, so to what purpose does the text surround him with surfaces that are transformed into gold and jewels only to have him then penetrate Dimmesdale's body in search of them?

One answer would be that penetration demonstrates that the horror and panic over Chillingworth’s desire is not because of an erotic desire for Dimmesdale/gold in and of itself (it already encases the two men) but is instead caused by moving out of an inhabited potential into an actualized bodily act. Where Hawthorne first figured Chillingworth’s desire for gold as an alchemical quest, once inside Dimmesdale his search is that of a sexton or miner: material, corporeal, something actual to be touched. As the novel moves towards the final image of gold between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, it becomes clear that the gold Chillingworth had set out

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 117.

to find in the beginning of the novel has, while remaining an image of desire, become something else: the gold of hatred and vengeance that Chillingworth penetrated Dimmesdale to obtain is the same stuff that transforms into a gold that will force a reconsideration of the dynamics between the two men. Most importantly in the novel's conclusion, gold is not the end product of an alchemical transformation; rather gold becomes the alchemical crucible itself. Moreover, the character that might undergo a golden transformation in the end is, against all odds, Roger Chillingworth.

In the last chapter, "Conclusion," Hawthorne returns to the relationship between Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale. After Dimmesdale's death, Chillingworth starts to fade away, in part because he now no longer has someone to fully project his desire on. Hawthorne writes:

All his [Chillingworth's] strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight. [This] unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge [...].¹⁰²

When Dimmesdale dies, so too does this space for Chillingworth's "hatred." But Hawthorne does not argue that hatred and revenge are the only reasons for Chillingworth's fading away. Moving on, Hawthorne complicates hate by conflating it with love:

But, to all these shadowy beings, so long our near acquaintances, —as well Roger Chillingworth as his companions, —we would fain be merciful. It is a curious

¹⁰² Ibid., 240.

subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another: each leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object. Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love.¹⁰³

While it would be both excessively simplistic and a mistake to read this passage as Hawthorne arguing that love and hate are one and the same, it does force a reconsideration of what has occurred between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, as well as a reassessment of the affective relationship these two men shared.

Hawthorne does not merely conflate love and hate, but argues for a kind of formal similarity that occurs in these affects at the root of their manifestation, and which is only maintained when these affects manifest in their “utmost development.” Love and hate begin to become conflated when they reach their intensities, intensities that demand “a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge.” When we consider Chillingworth's first declaration of his desire for Dimmesdale as analogous to a search for gold in alchemy, the near impossibility of

¹⁰³ Ibid. My emphasis.

distinguishing love from hate at a certain level of intensity is significant because we have to return again to asking, what does Roger Chillingworth want?

In the end, if Chillingworth has found the gold he was looking for, he has only found that it has transformed his passionate hate into passionate love. But even this remains uncertain. The potentiality of “golden love” between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale remains in the realm of the “may have” for Hawthorne. Their bodies now gone, what Hawthorne calls “the Actual” has vanished, and the two men now reside in the celestial space of “the Imaginary”—a space beyond the physicality that created so much anxiety and violation between them. Nevertheless, Hawthorne stops short of imagining a happy ending. Like the philosopher's stone, the potentiality of golden transformation remains just that—a potentiality. This might seem tragic at first, but we could use Hawthorne's speculation on this transformation into “golden love” to read the text as a narrative of the potentialities within the not-yet-transformed: the wide-open, fundamentally ambiguous, unstable, and dynamic potentialities of those floundering moments of desire, neither succeeding nor failing. In this not-yet-transformed (or might-be) relation between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, perhaps we can begin to get a sense of how to augment the ways we approach what we might now read as queer relationships in the nineteenth century. Hawthorne's use of alchemy in the text remains relentlessly unclear, and yet this very opacity seems to do the work that the occupation of the Governor's Hall does for Chillingworth and Dimmesdale's relationship—it provides a space of transformative abeyance, of potentiality, that allows for a deeper speculation into what might be queer about the affective intensities between the two men. Perhaps these moments of opacity in the text, where transformation seems to flounder, where we are unsure of what gold represents, and where Hawthorne gives us only a “may have,” or “might-

be” —perhaps these are the moments that let us occupy the golden space of a queer imaginary, not transformed but transforming.

CHAPTER TWO

“DISTANT WORLDS OF LIGHT”: MARGARET FULLER, MYSTICISM, AND INTIMATE INACCESSIBILITY

“*Queer This*”
—Margaret Fuller¹⁰⁴

“*Mysticism which may be defined as the brooding soul of the world, cannot fail of its oracular promise to woman.*”¹⁰⁵

—Margaret Fuller

“*It was soon evident that there was somewhat [sic] a little pagan about her; that she had some faith more or less distinct in a fate, and in a guardian genius, that her fancy, or her pride, had played with her religion. She had a taste for gems, ciphers, talismans, omens, coincidences, and birth-days. She had a special love for the planet Jupiter, and a belief that the month of September was inauspicious to her. She never forgot that her name, Margarita, signified a pearl. ‘When I first met with the name Leila,’ she said, ‘I knew, from the very look and sound, it was mine; I knew that it meant night,—night which brings out stars, as sorrow brings out truths’*”
—Emerson¹⁰⁶

“*I had no idea how Far Margt [sic] had gone in mysticism,—nor how very far she was from peace. I had no idea that she was another instance of the old fate, —of a woman of strong nature, debarred from a home of her own, & seeking a refuge in mysticism.*”
—Harriet Martineau¹⁰⁷

“*How can you describe a Force? How can you write the life of Margaret?*”
—Sam Ward¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Fuller, Biblical marginalia from Fuller’s Bible. As transcribed in Deshae Lott, *“this Mutual Visionary Life”: The Mystical Model of Margaret Fuller*. Order No. 9943530, Texas A&M University, 1999, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304573404?accountid=10267> (accessed August 5, 2013), 275.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 54.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Fuller, W. H. Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Freeman Clarke, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Co. 1852), 219.

¹⁰⁷ Harriet Martineau to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Feb. 25, 1852, in Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 122.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson to Samuel G. Ward, Aug. 2, Sept. 7, 1850 in Emerson, Ralph W., L. Rusk, and Eleanor M. Tilton. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939). Hereafter cited as *EmL*

Ghost of a Chance

Not one of them thought we would remember her. When Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Channing and James Freeman Clark came together to edit Margaret Fuller's letters and journals into a biography (originally to be called *Margaret and Her Friends*) they did so hurriedly.¹⁰⁹ In part, this was to make the Christmas trade publishing deadline (they would fail to meet it), but the real sense of urgency to publish the biography came from Horace Greeley, who implored Emerson that it be done, "before the interest excited by her [Fuller's] sad decease [...] passed away."¹¹⁰

Fuller had died only recently, and tragically so, on her return from Rome when the *Elizabeth* shipwrecked off the coast of Fire Island. Following her death, each of the men who would become the editors of her biography firmly believed she was going to be forgotten, and so they quickly set themselves to the task of silencing and shaping Fuller into what they thought would be an enduring and socially acceptable portrait. Although she had been at the center of Transcendentalism, as well as a pivotal intellectual and political figure for many American women, Emerson never thought that her biography, let alone her legacy to American literature and history, would amount to much. As Joan Von Mehren, quoting Emerson, points out:

In the last weeks before publication, Emerson grew weary. He had come to the conclusion that Fuller represented only "an interesting hour & group in American

¹⁰⁹ Horace Greeley to Ralph Waldo Emerson, July 27, 1850, *EmL* 4: 225.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

cultivation.[Q]uantities of rectitude, mountains of merit, chaos of ruins, are of no account without result.¹¹¹

Emerson was wrong. However, if (in the eyes of her peers) Fuller's life and work only amounted to "quantities of rectitude, mountains of merit, [and a] chaos of ruins"—what, then, was the result of all this? Reading the current scholarship on Fuller, clearly we do indeed remember her, but Fuller's legacy does not end there. Scholars do not just remember Margaret Fuller; they are haunted by her. As early as 1903, Henry James, in editing *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, wrote of Fuller's haunting quality:

W came for me, and we stayed until a late hour in the night. The unquestionably haunting Margaret-ghost, looking out from her quiet little upper chamber at her lamentable doom, would perhaps be never so much to be caught by us as on some such occasion as this. What comes up is the wonderment of why she may, to any such degree, be felt as haunting.

James goes on to note that it is *not* Fuller's writing that is haunting:

It matters only for the amusement of evocation—since she left nothing behind her, her written utterance being naught; but to what would she have corresponded, have 'rhymed,' under categories actually known to us.¹¹²

James would be only the first of many who, although fascinated by Fuller, would treat her "written utterance" as "being naught." In 1957, Perry Miller would write, "Her specter haunted

¹¹¹ Joan Von, Mehren, *Minerva and the Muse: A Life of Margaret Fuller* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 342.

¹¹² James quoted in Joel Myerson, *Fuller in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 182.

all who knew her, and many who did not.”¹¹³ Her writing, however, Miller goes on to argue, is no ethereal phantom. Miller argues, “Margaret’s essays are considerably faded. However massive her erudition, her mind was undisciplined, and her style as verbose as her emotions were chaotic. Still, they are remarkable achievements.”¹¹⁴ Fuller’s writing is remarkable, even if demanding, but many seem to agree that it is not what fascinates us.

While Miller might seem outdated now, the haunting image of Fuller remains. Colleen Glenney Boggs in, “Margaret Fuller’s American Translation,” writes, “When Margaret Fuller drowned in a shipwreck off the American coast in 1850, her spirit, though finally disembodied, still haunted the imagination of her male peers.”¹¹⁵ And as recently as 2012, in a review of John Matteson’s *The Lives of Margaret Fuller*, Vivian Gornick in *The Nation* would declare:

Some 160 years after her death, Fuller remains a haunting figure not so much for the one important book she committed to paper as for the exceptional life she lived, the significance it had in its own moment as well as the one it might have had, if it had not been cut severely short in 1850 when she was 40.¹¹⁶

That critics return to this language of haunting to describe Fuller is not all that surprising. She is a fascinating and important figure in American history, not only for the literary history of America, but also for its religious and political history more generally. With the publication of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she openly advanced a feminist argument. In addition, at Emerson’s urging, she served as the editor of *The Dial*, becoming central to the publication of American Transcendentalist thought. And she was a literary critic, an influential teacher, and

¹¹³ Perry Miller, “I find no intellect comparable to my own” *American Heritage Magazine* 8.2 (February 1957)

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Colleen Glenney Boggs, “Margaret Fuller’s American Translation.” *American Literature* 76.1 (2004): 31-58. *Project MUSE*. Web. 6 Feb. 2013. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

¹¹⁶ Vivian Gornick, “A Double Inheritance: On Margaret Fuller” *The Nation* April 23, 2012 <http://www.thenation.com/article/167179/double-inheritance-margaret-fuller#>

America's first female foreign correspondent. Moreover, when we take into account that it is almost impossible to read descriptions of Fuller by her contemporaries without them pointing out how magnetic she was, how she drew in crowds, and how enthralling she was in conversation, then we can see why she might haunt us long after she is gone. Unlike her peers and contemporaries who knew her, however, all we have of Fuller is her written work. Also, if critics have been so quick to dismiss Fuller's writing as the least important part of her legacy, why, then, do so many critics turn to the language of haunting to speak about her?

My main concerns in this chapter only deal with haunting tangentially. I bring it up mainly to highlight how problematic this it is to read women writers not as embodied minds, but as disembodied affective ephemera for us to tremble at. In this chapter, I examine what, at first, might seem as ghostly as the figure of Fuller herself: the occult mysticism of her writing. But rather than perpetuating this view of Fuller as some spectral trace, her esoteric interests illustrate a mysticism grounded in a body as it relates to objects in the material world. Fuller's mysticism might seem spectral, but it is a tangible embodied experience that allows her to express her most metaphysical experiences and views.

While Margaret Fuller's role as a historical figure might be what continues to haunt critics, I argue that her mysticism and occult obsessions are the true "noisy ghost" in the room, the haunting presence of her text trying to be heard.¹¹⁷ This chapter explores what that mysticism is, its relationship to desire, and how it opens up queer relationality in Fuller's work through various forms of occult correspondence, affective and intellectual. More concretely, I first argue that occultism acts as the core structure for Fuller's private life, which then gives her the

¹¹⁷ I borrow the phrase "noisy ghost" from Wai Chee Dimock. See Wai Chee Dimock, "The Planetary Dead: Margaret Fuller, Ancient Egypt, Italian Revolution." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 50.1-3 (2004): 23-57.

conceptual tools to engage mystical experiences and voice what she calls “the background of being”; that is, forms of relationality that allow for intimacy with others (objects, times, and persons) through, not in spite of, isolation, indirectness, and the pain of solitude. While Fuller was certainly no hermit, her emphasis on the erotic possibilities of mystic solitude allows her to experience new forms of intimacy with everything from flowers to Egyptian goddesses. Her work expresses the most powerful moments of intimacy through various forms of mystic isolation, where the subject herself moves into an occult position to experience intimacy with occult and mystic phenomena, a formation I call *intimate inaccessibility*. For Fuller, intimate inaccessibility is a relational, somatic, and erotic resonance, not an intimate attachment. Moreover, it does not express intimacy as union, but as a potentiality of relation found in isolation that, while often expressed as impossible, is nonetheless more affectively real, potent, and erotic than any kind of completed union or connection might be.

Fuller’s Place in American Letters

*There is some magic about me which draws other spirits into my circle whether I will or they will or no. It would be the same if I planted my staff in a desert.*¹¹⁸

If scholarly attention to Fuller as a mystic and dedicated occultist remains small, until recently so too was the attention critics gave to her larger role in American literature. As such, it may be useful to reexamine Fuller’s role in American literature. Doing so, I hope, does not merely rehash or summarize previous scholarship, but helps remind us how important and influential Fuller was to those who would become canonized as the writers of the “American Renaissance.” When we combine this knowledge with an exploration of the centrality of occultism to Fuller’s thought—it should give us pause to think about how important mysticism

¹¹⁸Margaret Fuller, *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, Ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1983), 2: 175.

and occultism were to the philosophical, literary, and political endeavors of writers that would become the staples of contemporary education on nineteenth-century American literature.

Where did Fuller fit into this group of writers who would become so canonical, and why was she so long excluded? Perhaps the best place to start is to look at her role in Transcendentalism more generally, doing so gives a picture of her relationship to other writers, as well as serves to remind us how much the transcendental movement drew from occult and esoteric traditions. While currently it might seem natural to consider Fuller as central to this movement, this has not always been the case. For example, as recently as 1985 Carolyn Hlus devoted an entire article to arguing for Fuller's importance as a Transcendentalist. Hlus argues that while the recovery of female artists and writers has been important work, when it comes to Fuller, these efforts were misplaced. She writes:

Critics consider in detail the events of Fuller's life: her friends in America, her occupations there, her trip to England, her romance with Count Ossoli—often worrying obsessively about the authenticity of his professed nobility or about the legality of their professed marriage—her role in the 1847 Italian revolution, and her death in the shipwreck off Fire Island; but few consider her a major figure in the intellectual circle of which she was a part from 1836 until 1844 when she moved from Boston to New York.”¹¹⁹

Like myself, Hlus takes issue with the critical obsession with Fuller's life and the inattentiveness to her work. When we look at Fuller's work, however, the picture changes. Hlus points out, “[t]here is evidence in her career and in her writings that she was an eminent Transcendentalist;

¹¹⁹ Carolyn Hlus, "Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalist: A Re-Assessment." *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue Canadienne d'Etudes Americaines* 16.1 (1985): 1-13, 1.

her application of Transcendentalist principles to justify the natural rights of women is her unique contribution to the Transcendentalist movement.”¹²⁰

Hlus’s work means to correct what Carlin Romano has called “the Fuller Brushoff”: a history of scholars arguing that (while she was a part of its inner circle) Fuller was either unimportant to Transcendentalism or her writing so weak as to render the study of it (at best) frustrating or (at worst) pointless. Romano writes, “‘The Fuller Brushoff’ in American intellectual history, denying Margaret Fuller’s philosophical centrality to Transcendentalism, is a vexed affair,” because it “remains a case of outsiders placing a tag on insiders, who at first resist the tag, then embrace or try to make sense of it after it enters public consciousness.”¹²¹ Romano goes on to cite Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* which, now decades past second-wave feminism can still be shocking to confront as it is full of, “the prejudices of faded sexist scholars.”¹²² That said, even more recent scholars, if not as offensive as Parrington, still refuse to take Fuller seriously. Carlin Romano writes:

Such derision made it easy, though, for even better-intentioned sorts to reject Fuller as a thinker. Elisabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, in their two-volume *A History of Philosophy in America* (Capricorn Books, 1977) mention Fuller as a member of the Transcendentalist “movement,” but refer to her only

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Carlin Romano, “The Fuller Brushoff--Margaret Fuller as Transcendentalist.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/19/2007, Vol. 54, Issue 8 <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Fuller-Brushoff-/35509>

¹²² Ibid. While now deeply outdated, it is important to remember that Parrington’s *Main Currents of American Thought* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1928. Moreover, it dominated literary criticism until the 1950s, see Russell J. Reising, “Reconstructing Parrington.” *American Quarterly* 1989 41(1): 155-164. In addition, Parrington was influential in the founding of American Studies, along with Perry Miller, F.O. Matthiessen and Robert Spiller, see Jaap Verheul, “The Ideological Origins of American Studies.” *European Contributions to American Studies* 1999 40: 91-103.

one more time, when they quote a letter to her from Emerson. Neither *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967) nor *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998), two authoritative reference works in the field, includes an article on Fuller.¹²³

Even recently scholars seem to forget, “Fuller also served as inaugural editor of *The Dial*, Transcendentalism's most important publication.” So important was Fuller that, “the later 19th-century feminist Caroline Dall concluded, in the 1880s, ‘what is meant by Transcendentalism perished with Margaret Fuller.’”¹²⁴

When scholars do attempt to place Fuller within Transcendentalism, often they note that her writing makes her place problematic. Barbara L. Packer elaborates on this point in what is still one of the best and most comprehensive essays on the topic, she notes that the Transcendentalists deeply admired Fuller:

Hedge treated her with respect; Clarke, [...] adored her and tried desperately to amuse her; and Emerson, though he was startled by the impertinence of her first letter to him, soon found himself seduced by the way she invaded his reticences and demanded his responses.¹²⁵

However, when it came to her writing, their reactions were different:

[H]er early public prose was disappointing to even her closest friends. Clarke could hardly conceal his surprise and dismay at the first pieces she sent him in response to his request for material to fill up the *Western Messenger*. They were

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Barbara L. Packer, “The Transcendentalists,” *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 2, Prose Writing 1820-1865*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 443.

very unlike her letters; the style was Latinate and heavily mannered and the tone seemed alternately arch and patronizing.¹²⁶

The real problem, of course, was not Fuller's writing generally. A single glance at her letters and journal entries demonstrates a remarkable brilliance that extends into her later work, especially her short autobiographical stories and poetry. The problem had more to do with the Transcendentalists' "endless obsession with the issues of 'manliness,'" not in the sense of a fear of effeminacy, as Packer points out, but with "servility."¹²⁷ Such a preoccupation made entrance into public prose especially knotty for Fuller. However, she would soon assume the position of gatekeeper for Transcendentalism's most public expression when she became editor of *The Dial*, even though Emerson was consistently meddling and interfering with her choices, leaving her "involved from the outset in a tangle of frustrations."¹²⁸

Placing her writing aside for a moment, Fuller's place in this movement was in the spoken word as much as it was in the written. Looking at her journal entries and her letters to friends alongside what would become her "Conversations" begins to give a sense of her importance in conversation, as well as writing. In the summer of 1839, Fuller started to bring together groups of women for "Conversations," in hopes of making enough money to support herself and send her brothers to Harvard, as well as to create a new discourse among women. Fuller held these events each winter between 1839 and 1844; the meetings were two hours long and took place at the home of Elizabeth Peabody.¹²⁹ *Reminiscences of Ednah Dow Cheney* offers one of the best descriptions of these meetings. Recalling the meetings, Cheney writes:

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 430.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 445.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 444.

I found myself in a new world of thought; a flood of light irradiated all that I had seen in nature, observed in life, or reading in books. Whatever she spoke of revealed a hidden meaning, and everything seemed to be put into the true relation. Perhaps I could best express it by saying that I was no longer the limitation of myself, but felt that the whole wealth of the universe was open to me.¹³⁰

This was a large part of Fuller's goal: to illuminate nature, life and literature ("light irradiated all that I had seen in nature, observed in life, or reading in books"). In addition, Fuller was attempting to "reveal a hidden meaning," to demonstrate the "true relation" of things, and expand understanding so that one was "no longer [at the] limitation" of herself. In other words, in her involvement with Transcendentalism, and especially in her "Conversations" with other women, Fuller was trying to allow others to feel that the universe was open to them, to feel what we might call a mystical experience—she was attempting to reveal what was hidden. That is, the "true relation" of objects, or what we will see is a doctrine of occult correspondence. In other words, one of her most significant contributions to the Transcendental movement was to reveal what we might also call the occult.

Fuller and Occult Discourse

Before exploring the relationship between mysticism and eroticism in Fuller's work, it will be useful to gain a better understanding of the role of occultism in her thought more generally. Perhaps most surprising about this aspect of Fuller's work is that the inundation of occultism in her texts (and it is *everywhere*: in her poems, short stories, criticism, journal entries, sketches, and letters to friends) has yet to receive a central place in Fuller scholarship—neither in the critical work that examines her texts from a literary perspective nor in biographical studies.

¹³⁰ ctd in Packer, 444.

Many scholars have either ignored the role of occultism in Fuller, or have only mentioned it in passing, choosing instead to focus on her political life or her role as an intellectual. Such oversight seems to stem from the assumption that an investment in the occult somehow adulterates the political and intellectual aspects of Fuller's life. Deshae Lott says as much when, writing on mysticism in Fuller, she notes that the "tendency to link the mystical with the irrational and the heretical certainly motivates critical distinctions between Fuller's mysticism and her intellect and political activism."¹³¹

The association of occultism, mysticism, and religious intensity with irrationality has created a normalized Margaret Fuller: a more grounded, less queer, and more accessible Fuller who can be incorporated into histories of women's rights and Transcendentalism. However, as Larry J. Reynolds argues in "Prospects for the Study of Margaret Fuller," while scholars have started to examine (especially in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*) "the importance of figures such as Leila, Isis, and the Virgin Mary to Fuller's sense of empowerment, for herself and other women," it is nevertheless vital that we:

learn more about other aspects of her religious mysticism, which has only begun to receive the attention it deserves, from Steele and Lott. The editors of Fuller's *Memoirs* downplayed this aspect of her life, saying that it was too pervasive and

¹³¹ Lott, 14. I am aware that the experience of mysticism, or of being a mystic does not immediately implicate one with the occult. After all, mystic experiences and religious mystics are found across a variety of religious traditions, and unlike the occult's relation to religion, they are not always seen as heterodox. The kind of mysticism Fuller experiences and becomes interested in, however, is deeply linked to her interest in the occult—and as such, was often found suspect by her peers, especially Emerson who viewed it as "threatening" (*Memories* 1:308).

obvious to merit critical attention (1:361), and modern commentators have followed suit.¹³²

Giving examples of this, Reynolds goes on to note:

Chevigny, in her essay “Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women’s Biography,” admits that she slighted Fuller’s mysticism in *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller’s Life and Writings*, and even Capper’s and von Mehren’s biographies present Fuller’s life as more normal and rational than her poetry and journals suggest that it was. Her intense inner life, her mystical transports, her erotic fantasies, her prophetic visions, her moments of rapture, her “wildness,” if you will, await a study that elucidates Fuller’s heightened states without dismissing or normalizing them.¹³³

This is not to say that Fuller was not grounded. To understand her mysticism we must understand how it was grounded both in very real, physical and embodied experiences, as well as in her extensive reading in occult philosophy. A form of “wildness,” sure— but not without reason or cause.

¹³² Lary J. Reynolds, “Prospects for the Study of Margaret Fuller.” *Resources for American Literary Study* 26.2 (2000): 139-58, 149.

¹³³ Ibid. Reynolds goes on to suggest that some “suggestive lines of inquiry on this topic can be found in Barton Levi St. Armand’s essay “Veiled Ladies: Dickinson, Bettine, and Transcendental Mediumship,” which focuses on Emily Dickinson, but reveals in passing Dickinson and Fuller’s mutual indebtedness to the “wild, free, and unchecked spirit of Bettine Brentano” (149). Reynolds also points to Steele’s book *Transfiguring America*, which was forthcoming at the time. See, Jeffrey Steele, *Transfiguring America: Myth, Ideology, and Mourning in Margaret Fuller’s Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001). However, if Reynolds calls for a study of Fuller’s mysticism and occult obsessions that does *not* normalize them, then Steele’s work would not be successful by this standard, as (because of his commitment to psychoanalysis) he makes Fuller’s work fit into a framework of mourning and melancholy, that (while interesting) tends to be a hermeneutic that purports to “solve” the messiness of Fuller’s experience, philosophical commitments, and writing.

While Fuller's reading certainly was cause for her fascination with the occult, so too were her lived experiences. Unlike Hawthorne, for example, the occult was not an abstraction for her, but part of her daily life, and Emerson says as much in *Memoirs*.¹³⁴ Moreover, while the *Memoirs* might claim that Fuller's occultism was, "too pervasive and obvious to merit critical attention (1:361)," Emerson and the other editors do not erase it entirely. To do so would have been to erase a large part of Fuller's life. Emerson instead offers examples of Fuller's occultism while constantly chastising her for it. Nonetheless, it manifests, fittingly, in a section of the text titled "Arcana."

Before moving into what Emerson reveals in the section of the *Memoirs* called "Arcana," the title itself is illuminating. Arcanum or Arcana, of course, can simply mean a secret, but it also means "A hidden thing; a *mystery*, a *profound* secret."¹³⁵ While one could argue that the title "Arcana" signals Emerson's telling the reader that he is revealing the central arcanum of Fuller's life, the title reveals more than Emerson might wish. He isn't just telling the reader about a secret part of Fuller's life (and besides, it becomes clear that she made no real secret of her interests anyhow), he is (most likely unintentionally) also revealing that *this* secret of Fuller's life is not just a secret, but the profound secret, it is an arcanum—a great mystery which forms the center of her life as a scholar, friend, woman, and mystic. Moreover, arcanum has alchemical implications, meaning "One of the supposed great secrets of nature which the alchemists aimed at discovering; hence, a marvelous remedy, an elixir."¹³⁶ Fuller herself would turn to alchemical language when describing her search through occultism to find some arcanum that would be the

¹³⁴ Although, the amount of silencing and editing of Fuller's voice in *Memoirs* is frustrating for contemporary scholars, especially considering how many journals, letters and other documents were altered, censored, or just left out to create a more normal Margaret Fuller.

¹³⁵ My emphasis. "arcanum, n." *OED Online*. June 2013. Oxford University Press.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

remedy to her emotional and physical pain, and she would return to alchemy again, speaking of her writing as a search for “the philosopher’s stone.”¹³⁷

Once Emerson begins the section called “Arcana,” he attempts to give a picture of Fuller’s occult proclivities while simultaneously attempting to critique them or demonstrate their unimportance to her. He writes:

it was soon evident that there was somewhat [sic] a little pagan about her [she had a taste for] gems, ciphers, talismans, omens, coincidences, and birth-days. She had a special love for the planet Jupiter, and a belief that the month of September was inauspicious to her.¹³⁸

While one could simply brush off Fuller’s love of “gems, ciphers, talismans, omens, coincidences” as a series of frivolous eccentric interests (it is hard not to be reminded of Hawthorne’s *Zenobia* here), *Memoirs* also illustrates that Fuller was not just interested in occultism as a way of relating to physical objects like talismans or gems; she saw herself as possessing occult powers. Emerson writes:

There were other peculiarities of habit and power. When she turned her head on one side, she alleged she had second sight, like St. Francis. These traits or predispositions made her a willing listener to all the uncertain sciences of mesmerism and its goblin brood, which have been rife in recent years.¹³⁹

Emerson’s scorn for Fuller’s belief in second sight is clear. Nonetheless, he continues to write about her occult interests.

¹³⁷ Fuller, *Memoirs* 1:128. She writes, “I am not sure that even if I do find the philosopher’s stone, I shall be able to transmute them into the gold they looked so like formerly. It will be long before I can give a distinct, and at the same time concise, account of my present state

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:219.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 229.

In addition, esoteric investments occupied Fuller's social interests and thinking. Of course, Emerson does not offer the reader this information without judgment; instead of seeing mystic and occult investments as a foundation of Fuller's thought, he sees them as a threat:

In the summer of 1840, Margaret underwent some change in the tone and the direction of her thoughts, to which she attributed a high importance [...] I observed that, with her literary riches, her invention and wit [...] consisted a certain pathos of sentiment, and a march of character, threatening to arrive presently at the shores and plunge into the sea of Buddhism and mystical trances.¹⁴⁰

For Emerson, this sea of mystic trances and Eastern thought became an undertow for Fuller. An undertow, but in Emerson's view not a strong one. He writes that, while "the literature of asceticism and rapturous poetry was familiar to her" that the "conversation of certain mystics, who had appeared in Boston about this time had interested her, but in no commanding degree." In no commanding degree? He's either kidding or clueless. Whereas he first starts off by describing a transformation in her thought, Emerson quickly turns on his heels to deny that Fuller's thought was undergoing an intense transformation due to her exploration of all forms of occultism in literature, in other persons, and in objects like rings and talismans.

In addition, it was not just conversations with outright mystics or a fascination with the power of gems and dates that brought Fuller to a sea of mystic trances; her intimate relationships did so as well. Fuller describes many intimate relations using the language of occult

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1:308.

mysticism.¹⁴¹ The intimacy she experiences with nature, for example, uses this kind of language; in her 1839 journal Fuller writes:

My head wrapped in my shawl I would listen to the music of earth then raise it and look straight into the secrets of the heaven. I fail the moon. Thoughts on lunacy. How could Swedenborg think children were in the moon [...] Shapes move across the valley. Abandon thyself to second sight.¹⁴²

Fuller looks to the “secrets of heaven” gaining a gnostic experience through the practice of “second sight,” which allows her to “look straight into” occult knowledge. In an 1840 journal entry she is even more emphatic about her esoteric investments, “I grow more and more what they will call a mystic. Nothing interests me except listening to the secret harmonies of nature”¹⁴³ Again, for Fuller mysticism means the experience and knowledge of something “secret.” When describing her relationship with Anna Barker she writes, “again that night when she leaned on me and her eyes were such a deep violet blue, so like night, as they never were before, and we both felt such a strange mystic thrill and knew what we had never known before.”¹⁴⁴ In each of these examples, Fuller argues that occult knowledge becomes accessible through mystical experience. I will return to a more extensive exploration of the relationship between mysticism and gnosis later, as it deserves extended attention. I bring it up here only to illustrate how pervasive and important occult knowledge and mystic experience were in Fuller’s life.

While Fuller often uses the term mysticism in these moments of intimacy, this is an occult mysticism, one tied to secret objects and hidden intimacies. It is a mystic experience of contact

¹⁴¹ By occult mysticism I mean a mysterious union that either occurs in secret, or purports to give access to secret (occult) knowledge.

¹⁴² Margaret, Fuller, *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, Ed. Jeffrey Steele (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

or absorption that reveals something hidden, secret, and occult. The occult demands Fuller's attention everywhere: "Coincidences, good and bad, *contretemps*, seals, ciphers, mottoes, omens, anniversaries, names, dreams, are all of a certain importance to her"; Emerson goes on to elaborate even further:

In this spirit, she soon surrounded herself with a little mythology of her own. She had a series of anniversaries, which she kept. Her seal-ring of the flying Mercury had its legend. She chose the *Sistrum* for her emblem, and had it carefully drawn with a view to its being engraved on a gem. And I know not how many verses and legends came recommended to her by this symbolism.¹⁴⁵

The last part of this passage is especially telling: for it would be in Fuller's verses and legends, and in her prose as well, that occult symbolism would, like the engraving she desired in stone, leave its mark.

While I hope to have firmly established the importance of mystic occultism in Fuller's life, I would be remiss were I not to mention how her reading practices contributed. Along with her life experiences, she found mysticism and the occult in the texts of various Hermetic traditions, especially in German writers. As Patricia B. Ash notes:

Fuller was familiar with the hermetic tradition through a number of sources, including the German Romantics and Jacob Boehme [Böhme], the German mystic whose writings were current among the Transcendentalists.¹⁴⁶

The Western Hermetic tradition so influenced Fuller that she would open her best-known work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* with an unapologetically Hermetic symbol. Arthur Versluis, in *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*, writes:

¹⁴⁵ Fuller, *Memoirs*, 1:18-19.

¹⁴⁶ Ash, 272

The original edition of Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* is preceded by an obviously Hermetic illustration—a serpent biting its own tail and forming a circle, within which are two superimposed triangles, one black, pointed upward, another white, pointed downward, behind the first. The entire image is amid rays going outward like the sun's. But the later edition of the same book, edited by Fuller's brother, is *sans* this very illustration, which unquestionably has occult origins and significance.¹⁴⁷

While many writers were interested in occult topics, for Fuller the subject holds an especially powerful place because it is so central to understanding her thought. Again, Versluis argues:

It was not that Fuller was exclusively interested in esotericism, any more than any of these [nineteenth-century American] writers was, but one cannot consider Fuller's life and work *in toto* without acknowledging esotericism as one of its primary influences. In the various traditions of Western esotericism, including not only astrology and gemology, but also oneiromancy, trance literature, and Rosicrucianism, Fuller found inspiration for her own daily life, as well as writing.¹⁴⁸

Fuller's involvement with the occult was not limited to astrology, talismans, or omens, or to mystical personal experience. She was deeply invested in the occult as a philosophical *system*—as a way of reading the world and understanding her experiences in it. As Ash demonstrates, Fuller was keenly aware of, and reading, occult philosophers. Arthur Versluis concurs, “Fuller drew some of her esoteric views from Goethe, whose work she studied more extensively than

¹⁴⁷ Versluis, 147.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

anyone else's."¹⁴⁹ But Fuller's reading was not just confined to Goethe or German mystics like Jacob Böhme. Bruce Mills, in his study of Fuller, Poe and mesmerism, notes that, before Fuller set out to write *Summer on the Lakes*, "she had been immersed in nearly a decade of speculation on animal magnetism."¹⁵⁰ These reading practices—combined with journal entries of her mystical experiences and the opening of *Women in the Nineteenth Century* with its illustration of the Seal of Solomon demonstrate, "[w]ithout doubt, [that] Fuller had a strong and, one might say, practical interest in what could well be described as "occult" subjects."¹⁵¹ In other words,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁵⁰ These are merely a couple of examples of the ideas and authors Fuller was reading and referencing. She was also "influenced by the 'marriage mysticism' of Emanuel Swedenborg, who was very much interested in the topic of marital love and treated it at length in one of his works, *Conjugal Love*." See Patricia B. Ash, *The Quest for Harmony: Religion in the Origin of the Antebellum Woman's Rights Movement*. The Claremont Graduate University, 1998 ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT) 25 Jan. 2013, 272). Ash also notes, "Robert Hudspeth says that Fullers remark concerning the "carbuncle" probably was a reference to Novalis' mystical novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*" (248). Jeffrey Steele, in "Margaret Fuller's Rhetoric of Transformation," *Woman in the Nineteenth Century: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*. Ed. Larry J. Reynolds. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998. 278-97), also points out that Fuller's writing is linked to "a set of mythic images that linked her writing to powerful strains of nineteenth-century female spirituality," so that in a book like *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, "Fuller's imagery echoes the language of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, an eighteenth-century French mystic later cited near the beginning of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as an example of a "new hour in the day of man" (Steele 294). Additionally, I don't believe it unreasonable to speculate that Fuller was reading even more widely because her peers always described her reading practices as voracious. And some of this reading must have touched on what was the largest and most extensive library of Hermetic and theosophic literature in America: the collection brought to America by Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott. Fuller certainly at least knew of this library and the titles of the books it contained as in 1843 *The Dial* published a partial catalogue of the books. Some of the titles include: *The Divine Pyramider of Hermest Trismegistus* (London 1650), Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy* (London, 1651), *Bacon's Opus Magus* and *Mirror of Alchemy* (1597) and E. Sibley's *Key to Physic and the Occult Sciences* (London, 1821).

¹⁵¹ Versluis, 147.

the occult informed not only Fuller's day to day life, but served as a way for her to think through and articulate a broader philosophical project.¹⁵²

Fuller's Occult Negotiations of the Mystic Experience

How does Fuller's broader philosophical project manifest? While tracing out this or that line of the occult in Fuller would be interesting enough, the truly fascinating part of her work lies in how her mystical experiences open up, challenge, and augment occult paradigms as a means of expressing new erotic relations. Fuller consistently challenged and expanded upon the texts she read. As an example, even in what would appear to be scientific reading, she looked for mystic insight. In a letter to William H. Channing composed in the winter of 1841 she writes: I have been reading, most of the day, the "Farbenlehre" [Goethe's *Theory of Color*]. The facts interest me only in their mystical significance."¹⁵³ What that mystical significance was, however, remains unclear. Nevertheless, this passage illuminates Fuller's view that mystic experience could act as a means to navigate ineffable interactions with physical phenomena. She continues:

As of the colors demanding one another in the chromatic circle, each demanding its opposite, and the eye making the opposite of that it once possessed. And of nature only giving the tints pure in the inferior natures, subduing and breaking them as she ascends [...]¹⁵⁴

Fuller refers to Goethe's idea of how the relationships on a color wheel work, as well as to the interaction of the eye to the relationships between them. She illustrates that the mystic nature of

¹⁵² Steele, 18. How scholars view Fuller's use of occult philosophy, of course, differs. For example, Jeffrey Steele, in his book *Transfiguring America*, argues that through her attention to myth, Gnostic and theosophical traditions, and the study of texts by Jakob Bohme, Fuller, "began to explore alternative images of the divine as transcendent Mother able to embody the suppressed dimensions of women's lives."

¹⁵³ Margaret Fuller to William H. Channing. Feb 21, 1841. *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, 2: 204.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Goethe's text manifests in the ability of oppositions to call other colors into being or draw them out of it. Color perception is not passive, instead oppositions make the eye a creator of color: vision creates the opposite of what it once viewed (what we would call the afterimage). That Fuller views the afterimage as an optical *creation* rather than an illusion, illuminates how she sees the mystical nature of the passage in how the viewer calls into being (or creates) an image in opposition to what was once "viewed." The mystical significance of the relationship between creation, perspective, and absence becomes significant in Fuller's "Leila" where an afterimage becomes a phantom presence (both existing, but representing something absent) that is invoked by the viewer through scrying and magic. "Leila" operates similarly to Fuller's reading of Goethe's *Theory of Color* with one important difference: "Leila" deals with erotics and desire, rather than scientific laws. When Fuller ends her letter to Channing she signals how her erotic life was becoming the central location of her mystical and psychic investments. Concluding on her reading of *The Theory of Color*, she writes, "There was a time when one such fact would have made my day brilliant with thought. But now I seek the divine rather in Love than law."¹⁵⁵

Fuller sought "Love" through mysticism, doing so in ways that were innovative, occult, sometimes cryptic, and which, most of all, opened up new queer relations. A series of short essays composed during 1840-1841 express the height of Fuller's mystic experiences, as well as give the most concrete articulation of their erotic dimensions. During these years, in letters to friends and in her essays in *The Dial*, Fuller would begin to develop a unique and decidedly esoteric or occult articulation of relationality. Along with her letters during this period, the

¹⁵⁵Ibid.

essays, “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain,” “Yucca Filamentosa,” and “Leila” articulate Fuller’s mystic vision of the erotic potentialities for relating to the world and other people.

The period between 1840-1841 marks a deeply solitary and transformative time in Fuller’s life, the reasons for this being as personal as they were philosophical. Steele writes, “ By the late autumn and winter of 1840-1841, Fuller had entered a period of ecstatic solitude that she later characterized as ‘the era of illumination in my mental life.’”¹⁵⁶ What brought about this solitude? Critics seem to agree that from the autumn of 1839 until the summer of 1840, Fuller was experiencing a state of spiritual rapture, as her writing evinces.¹⁵⁷ But Fuller’s spiritual rapture would soon meet great loss. At this time two of Fuller’s closest friends, Anna Baker and Samuel Gray Ward became married, and as a consequence Fuller lost two intense (perhaps erotic and/or romantic) friendships. Moreover, Baker and Ward’s marriage date also approximated the anniversary of the death of Fuller’s father.¹⁵⁸ As Steele notes, “Forced by personal circumstances into an unwanted isolation, Fuller began to attune herself to inner spiritual resources”; he continues, “By October 1840, this growing sense of self-reliance began to manifest itself as a remarkable spiritual ecstasy. Entering a state of deep mystical seclusion, Fuller felt herself transfused by an overwhelming power—a mood that lasted well into the new year.”¹⁵⁹

Fuller’s journal entry in 1840 gives the best description of the apex of her ecstatic solitude, culminating in a mystical experience. Oddly, the journal entry in 1840 details Fuller’s experience on Thanksgiving Day in 1831. Speculating on this temporal gap does not do much for understanding the experience, but a few notes on Fuller’s life are important to consider. In 1829 her brother Edward would die in her arms, being only about a year old at the time. Fuller was

¹⁵⁶ Steele, *Transfiguring America*, 47.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 48

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

particularly attached to him, and in 1831 she must have still been experiencing loss. Moreover, the years between her mystical experience in 1831 and writing about it in her journal were formative: in 1833 her family would move from Cambridge to Groton, (where her father attempted to create a farm and live out a life as a farmer-scholar), in 1835 her father would die from cholera, she would publish essays in *The Western Messenger*, and she would have to cancel a trip to Europe to look after her family. As 1840 approached, she would meet Emerson, intensely read Goethe (publishing on him) and become the editor for *The Dial* by 1839.

And so, in 1840 Fuller was still thinking seriously about her mystical experiences. Nearly ten years later, reflecting on that day in November of 1831 at the age of 21, Fuller wrote that she had been in church with her family and experiencing “disunion” with the parishioners. In her journal, she writes that she becomes locked in isolation as well in a present moment full of pain and loneliness, feeling that the “past was worthless, the future hopeless.”¹⁶⁰ Leaving the church she goes for a long walk out into “the fields” until, “It seemed as if I could never return to a world in which I had no place, —to the mockery of humanities.”¹⁶¹ At first she describes the scene as “a sad and sallow day of the late autumn,” but she comes to a stream and a pond where the “trees were thick around a little pool, dark and silent”; then, “Suddenly the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness [...] And, even then, passed into my thought a beam from its true sun, from its native sphere, which has never since departed from me.”¹⁶² At this moment, Fuller experiences a mystic dissolving of the self after remembering that as a child when she had thought, “how came I here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean?

¹⁶⁰ Fuller, *Essential*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 11.

What shall I do about it.”¹⁶³ This memory, when coupled with her experience in nature, brings her to a mystic insight:

I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the ideal of the ALL, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God. In that true ray most of the relations of earth seemed mere films, phenomena.¹⁶⁴

While much of this passage could be linked to Romanticism, and indeed doing so would make sense considering Fuller’s reading of German author’s like Goethe, this historical and literary context does not mean that Fuller did not have an authentic mystic experience. We can and should take seriously Fuller’s claims. Doing so, I would suggest, is more productive for understanding the complexities of her mystic experience than contextualization alone.

Sadly, when Fuller attempted to tell others of her experience, she was met with resistance or disbelief. Her friendship with Emerson, perhaps, best illustrates this. Emerson offers one of the most detailed accounts of Fuller’s occultism, but (as I have illustrated) he never does so without denouncing it. One would think that, of all people, Emerson might be able to understand Fuller’s new sense of self-reliance and mystic relation to the world. However, he did not. And he was not alone in this. As Margaret Vanderhaar Allen remarks in *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, “Fuller’s friends were also alarmed by her interests in occult and mystical phenomena,”

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

and Emerson “decisively stated that Margaret’s occultism showed her paganism, and that occult interests generally were superstitious and puerile.”¹⁶⁵ In *Memoirs*, Emerson writes:

She made many attempts to describe her frame of mind to me, but did not inspire me with confidence that she had now come to any experiences that were profound or permanent. She was vexed with want of sympathy on my part, and I again felt that this craving for sympathy did not prove the inspiration.¹⁶⁶

Apparently, Emerson remained unconvinced, and Fuller’s desire for him to understand her (which he figures as her being “vexed with want of sympathy”) only served to solidify his disbelief that she had experienced anything profound or lasting.

Emerson’s refusal to believe Fuller becomes all the more frustrating because it is not just rooted in his disdain towards her desire for a sympathetic ear, he writes off her experience as not being *original*. He continues:

jets of magnanimity were always natural to her; and her aspiring mind, eager for a higher and higher ground, made her gradually familiar with the range of mystics, and, though never herself laid in the chamber called Peace, never quite authentically and originally speaking from the absolute or prophetic mount, yet she borrowed from her frequent visits to its precinct an occasional enthusiasm, which gave a religious dignity to her thought.¹⁶⁷

He couldn’t be more wrong. Fuller’s writing demonstrates a striking originality and a uniqueness in the ways it departs from the traditional voices that surround her. In fact, Fuller’s originality and breaking away from the more traditional voices of the men who surrounded her fascinates

¹⁶⁵ Margaret V. Allen, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 54.

¹⁶⁶ Fuller, *Memoires*, 1:308-9.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:309

many modern critics, as Steele notes, in “Margaret Fuller’s Rhetoric of Transformation,” “In the end, much of the transformative potential of Fuller’s rhetoric resides in its self-conscious abandonment of such a male dominated empire of signs.”¹⁶⁸ While, like Emerson and other writers, Fuller works within various traditions of German Romanticism, Christian mysticism, and classical mythology—her writing stands out because of the way it queers these voices to deliver a new perspective on the erotic potentiality of mystic experience. Emerson fails to realize that Fuller doesn’t need the “absolute” she doesn’t need a “prophetic mount” or “chamber of Peace,” because she is speaking from a different space entirely. In the end, left by two close friends, misunderstood by Emerson, and reminded of her Father’s death—Fuller would, it seems, seek refuge in mysticism.

This refuge, however, was not an isolated one. Fuller’s “ecstatic solitude” opens up a new form of queer relationality that, in a text like “Leila,” allows her to develop new erotic possibilities. Some of the letters Emerson cites in *Memories* start to give a picture of the relational possibilities of “ecstatic solitude” though Emerson offers this an example of what he calls a “pathetic alteration of feeling, between her aspiring for a rest in the absolute Center, and her necessity of a perfect sympathy with her friends.”¹⁶⁹ Citing a letter to a friend, he finally lets Fuller speak for herself:

What I want, the word I crave, I do not expect to hear from the lips of man. I do not wish to be, I do not wish to have, a mediator; yet I cannot help wishing when I am with you, that some tones of the longed-for music could be vibrating in the air

¹⁶⁸ Steele, 297.

¹⁶⁹ *Memoirs*, 1: 311.

around us. But I will not be impatient again; for, though I am but as I am, I like not to feel the eyes I love averted.¹⁷⁰

Despite what Emerson thinks, Fuller does not desire a “perfect” sympathy. In this letter, she exposes the impossibility of a direct or “perfect” relation: If it is a “perfect” sympathy she seeks, then Emerson misunderstands her. The sympathy or relation here is not dyadic exactly, but atmospheric.¹⁷¹ Fuller does not experience what she desires as emanating from a relationship between herself and her friend, but as “vibrating” around them. Although this “word she craves,” this “longed-for music,” remains atmospheric, it is at the same time *more* direct than if it came from another person. As Fuller writes, she does not want to have “a mediator,” nor does she wish to be one. Instead, she wants to imagine the *possibility* of what she longs for as “vibrating in the air,” both present and at the same time not confined within any one body that then mediates it. All that said, the frustration she expresses remains clear and is best illustrated in the phrase, “yet I cannot help wishing when I am with you.” In this “wishing” for what might be, Fuller reveals that while she longs for an affective relationship that is vibratory, diffusive, and atmospheric, that the desire for this is contingent upon a physical relationship to a specific person, one in whose presence she “cannot help wishing” for the very thing she never expects to experience directly. Even with the excitement and possibility of experiencing what she longs for as atmospheric, the passage ends with some disappointment when she writes, “I like not to feel the eyes I love averted.”

This coupling of a hope at open possibility and the pain of contingent circumstance lies at the heart of Fuller’s mystic paradigm, and so too her eroticism: the sheer rapture at new affective

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ For more on indirect relationality and the queer possibilities of this, see Sarah Ensor “Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity,” *American Literature* 84.2 (June 2012): 409-435.

possibilities of relation in queer formations coupled with the stinging disappointment of a relationship not quite working (or of the isolation experienced at aversion). Fuller's mysticism is both painfully constrained and full of joyous possibility, both erotically exciting and deeply disappointing, both occult and overt. Looking to the letters she wrote during her spiritual crisis in the years 1840-41 and the essays, "The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain," "Yucca Filamentosa," and "Leila," the rest of this chapter illustrates how these various paradoxes illuminate the ways Fuller was thinking about the occult, her mystical experiences, and relationality generally, all to find an erotics that was queer and mystic.

Before elaborating on what is "mystic" in these essays, a more specific definition of mystic, or mystical experience would help anchor my reading. Understanding the different implications of the term makes it more apparent how mysticism becomes erotic and queer in Fuller's work. The most popular definition of the word "mystic," (and the one which Fuller uses most often) means an "exponent or advocate of mystical theology," that is, "any person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into God, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths which are beyond the intellect."¹⁷² In other words, the mystic is simply "a person who has or seeks mystical experiences."¹⁷³ While important and now dominant as a definition, the idea of the mystic as one who experiences a direct experience with divinity is a later development, and its history first points to its relation to the esoteric.¹⁷⁴ Originally, the word "comes from the Greek μύω, meaning 'to conceal.' In the Hellenistic world, 'mystical' referred to "secret" religious rituals. In early Christianity the term came to refer to "hidden" allegorical interpretations of Scriptures and to hidden presences, such as that of Jesus at

¹⁷²"mystic, n. and adj.". *OED Online*. June 2013. Oxford University Press.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Louis Bouyer, "Mysticism, An Essay on the History of the Word," *Understanding Mysticism*, Ed. Richard Woods Garden City: Doubleday, 1981).

the Eucharist.”¹⁷⁵ The etymology demonstrates the occult and esoteric dimensions of mysticism. Mysticism demands a certain isolation and a degree of being closed off from others. The secret, concealed, and hidden nature of the mystical experience is necessary to allow for the gnosis that mystics seek. In other words, to gain the connection that mysticism offers, one has to be, on some level, disconnected. Fuller takes this sense of isolation in the mystic experience and expands upon it by exploring the erotic dimensions of concealment. In her published meditations on the mystic experience, she explores how the movement into isolation allows for a queer connection. For Fuller, all three meanings of the word (as a direct experience of divinity, as a hidden religious experience, and as an esoteric interpretation of texts) relate to her understanding of and writing about her mystical experiences.

Mysticism and Fuller

As I have pointed out, Fuller often called herself a mystic in her correspondences. Moreover, she was not using this term loosely, since both her reading and writing participated in mystic traditions. Fuller drew much of her language chiefly from German Romanticism (reading mystics like Novalis aka Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, and Goethe, from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and from early Christian mystics like Böhme). Fuller looked to her peers as well for mystic writing, drawing on Emerson’s writing about his experiences in nature. All that said, she was not simply miming others’ experiences, nor was she confining her own experiences into a preconceived framework. Instead, Fuller’s mystical experiences both participate in and depart from the common definitions of what makes up the “mystical experience.” Specifically for Fuller, this is:

¹⁷⁵ Jerome Gellman "Mysticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/mysticism/>>.

A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection. [This is also a] unitive experience [that] involves a phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity, where the cognitive significance of the experience is deemed to lie precisely in that phenomenological feature.¹⁷⁶

If the mystic experience grants “acquaintance of realities or states of affairs” that are inaccessible to us normally, and if this contact with new realities is one where there is a “phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity,”—then it would seem that the mystic experience would be ripe for queer theory, which is so often concerned with new realities, blurring, and multiplicity. However, the mystic experience often becomes normalized either through comparative approaches or through a relentless grounding of personal experiences into their cultural surroundings. In other words, scholars often see it as merely a unique manifestation of cultural norms. While comparative and historical approaches to the mystic experience are important and illuminating, in their attempts to understand how an individual’s experience fits into larger structures of knowledge and culture, many of them end up missing the particularities of these experiences

What exactly occurs in a mystic experience? Moreover, how does its manifestation in literature and language illuminate the limits of language, as well as the ability of literature to point towards something that seems otherwise inexpressible? The mystic experience is not the uncanny, nor is it the sublime—instead it is an intense experience of divine connection and

¹⁷⁶ Gellman

absorption, and when such an experience finds, or demands, expression, literary expressions of it can prove illuminating. An experience of deep connection and absorption and loss of a sense of self might also already sound erotic—and mystics certainly used the language of eroticism to voice their experiences.¹⁷⁷ But Fuller's work takes the standard mystical experience, if we can ever call such an experience standard, and pushes it into new affective dimensions that, while pointing toward its more well-known and written about phenomenological dimensions, illuminate how it allows for, or (more exactly) demands, new spaces for the expression of a queer relationality.

So where do we find queer relationality in Fuller's writing about the mystical experience? As I've stated earlier, her most intense work on this subject revolves around an experience she had in 1831 and which she writes about in her journal, in 1840. Her more public meditations, however, are found shortly after, with the publication of "The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain," and the publication of "Yucca Filamentosa." After these two meditations, Fuller offers her most extended writing on the mystic experience in the short story titled, "Leila." This final piece on the mystic experience also explores its occult, erotic, and queer dimensions in depth. However, before exploring Fuller's "Leila," considering the two preceding essays illuminates the development of her thought, as well as illustrates how collectively the three essays elaborate Fuller's views on isolation, occlusion, and the affective dimensions of loneliness.

Flowers: Queer Pleasure and the "mystic shudder" of Becoming Occult

*"You can learn a lot of things from the flowers."*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Fredrica R. Halligan and John J. Shea (eds.). *The Fires of Desire: Erotic Energies and the Spiritual Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹⁷⁸ "All in a Golden Afternoon," Geronimi, Clyde, Hamilton S. Luske, Wilfred Jackson, Milt Kahl, Winston Hibler, Hal King, Oliver Wallace, et al. 2010. *Alice in Wonderland* (Burbank: Distributed by Buena Vista Home Entertainment and Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment).

In "The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain" Fuller begins her exploration of mysticism by looking to connections in nature, but does so in a way that adamantly departs from male writers of Transcendentalism. In the opening of "The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain" (hereafter "Magnolia"), Fuller appears to be in direct conversation with Emerson. She had met Emerson in July of 1836, about five years before the publication of "Magnolia." In September of the same year Fuller met Emerson, he would publish his influential *Nature*.¹⁷⁹ We can see Fuller's indebtedness to and departure from Emerson immediately by placing the opening of *Nature* against the opening of "Magnolia." In *Nature*, Emerson opens:

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. *But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.* The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.¹⁸⁰

Fuller's "Magnolia" opens:

The stars tell all their secrets to the flowers, and, if we only knew how to look around us, we should not need to look above. But man is a plant of slow growth, and great heat is required to bring out his leaves. He must be promised a

¹⁷⁹ Steele, *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, lvi.

¹⁸⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature1.htm>

boundless futurity, to induce him to use aright the present hour. In youth, fixing his eyes on those distant worlds of light, he promises himself to attain them, and there find the answer to all he wishes. His eye grows keener as he gazes, a voice from the earth calls it downward, and he finds all at his feet.¹⁸¹

Fuller's essay moves on to explore solitude, but not without first informing the reader that there is a local and intimate form of inaccessibility that, rather than cutting one off from connection, offers new forms of relation. Whereas Emerson writes, "The Stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible," Fuller will go on to explore an object seemingly more present but even more inaccessible than stars. In short, she talks to a flower, and unlike Emerson's stars, it talks back.¹⁸²

While it might seem that a flower talking to Fuller, or more exactly talking to the narrator of the story, is more accessible than Emerson's distant stars, the conversation with the Magnolia reveals what I call *intimate inaccessibility*: a form of intimacy experienced through the intensity of solitude.¹⁸³ That is, the pain of inaccessibility, which the Magnolia elaborates to the story's narrator, becomes the affective force that does not allow for an intimate connection with the narrator, but instead creates an intense affective resonance between the narrator and flower. More than just playing hard to get, which would have to (through inaccessibility) express and promise a yet-to-be connection, the Magnolia's insistence on its solitude, loneliness, and

¹⁸¹ Fuller, *Essential*, 44.

¹⁸² Much could be said here about the relationship to a flower and its personification. For one, there is the location of the flower (being in the South) and reading the text from a hemispheric perspective would offer a different point of entry. In addition, scholars like Travis Foster are doing interesting and important work about the queer possibilities of relationships to plants. For a more historically imbedded understanding, the nineteenth-century text *Flora's Interpreter* offers a window into flower symbolism. See Sarah J. Hale, William Sharp, and Benjamin Bradley. *Flora's Interpreter, and Fortuna Flora* (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey and Company, 1850).

¹⁸³ From here on I will refer to the flower of the story as Magnolia, since though it is a personification of magnolias, it acts as a major character in the story.

inaccessibility to others become a means of expressing a resonance with the narrator who also cuts herself off (or at the very least, moves to a marginal position) from her relation to others in order to speak to the flower. Intimate inaccessibility leads to new forms of affect and relationality between flower and speaker, culminating in what Fuller calls a “mystic shudder”—a form of pleasure only possible through deep isolation. If we recall the moment in *Memoirs* where, in a letter to a friend, Fuller writes, “I do not wish to be, I do not wish to have, a mediator; yet I cannot help wishing when I am with you, that some tones of the longed-for music could be vibrating in the air around us,” then we might begin to see that the themes “Magnolia” expresses have been on Fuller’s mind for sometime.

Fuller’s visionary desire of a new form of intimacy (which she first expresses in her letter) at first manifests simply as a wish—that is until, in her fiction, she starts to envision what intimate inaccessibility might look like, and what erotic potentialities it might offer. How does one get to a state of intimacy where it vibrates in the air, occurring between bodies without their mediation? In Fuller’s “Magnolia,” the answer seems to be, or the possibilities seem to be located, in mysticism and the ways it demands that one move into a deeper state of solitude to experience new forms of pleasure and intimacy. By exploring the movement into solitude, “Magnolia” begins to illustrate the potentiality of a queer pleasure in *becoming* occult. While this might seem as convoluted as it seems unclear, reading “Magnolia” (then “Yucca” and “Leila”) demonstrates how Fuller’s work offers a means for thinking about isolation, intimacy, and mysticism through a queer lens.

Of course, reading a text about solitude and queerness demands that we address the antisocial thesis of queer theory. After all, the Magnolia does seem antisocial, when she opines:

I am indeed of the race you love, but in it I stand alone. In my family I have no sister of the heart, and though my root is the same as that of the other virgins of our royal house, I bear not the same blossom, nor can I unite my voice with theirs in the forest choir. Therefore I dwell here alone, nor did I ever expect to tell the secret of my loneliness.¹⁸⁴

No family, no siblings, and no reproduction or “blossom” like other flowers, the Magnolia seems to fit into many aspects of antisocial thesis. To summarize, this thesis argues that queer desire is what happens when there is a refusal of the social, especially as that social role relates to the political and politically efficacious life of the citizen through normative heterosexual reproduction. As Leo Bersani in *Homos* argues, “*homo-ness itself necessitates a massive redefining of relationality*.” More fundamental than a resistance to normalizing methodologies is a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known.”¹⁸⁵ Other than Leo Bersani’s *Homos*, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* stands as one strongest proponents and expansions of this thesis. As Peter Coviello aptly summarizes:

both [scholars] are salutary in the force of their refusal of bucolic visions of queer belonging, and in their accounts of the value of certain kinds of inadmissibility within, and elemental antagonism to the coherence of the social.¹⁸⁶

That said, numerous scholars have debated, modulated, and refuted this thesis.¹⁸⁷ The problem with this thesis, and for applying it to an author like Fuller, becomes evident when it argues that there is something essentially antisocial about desire, especially homoerotic desire. It argues that

¹⁸⁴ Fuller, *Essential*, 46.

¹⁸⁵ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties*, 226.

¹⁸⁷ For an extensive discussion of the implications of the antisocial thesis for queer theory, see Robert Caserio, et al. "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 819-28.

the homoerotic formations of desire cannot help but turn away from sodality. While it seems anti-social, the Magnolia's desire does not seem to refuse sodality, but instead to look for a new secret relationship.¹⁸⁸ With "Magnolia," my reading focuses on the movement into a state of isolation and inaccessibility more than it does with an already isolated figure. "Magnolia" illustrates a figure in transition, one who chooses to move into a state of isolation, pain, and inaccessibility, even though she used to express "profusion" towards others (existing in a sociality where her "heart swelled with pride and pleasure").¹⁸⁹ By a careful reading of the affective dimensions of isolation and inaccessibility as they relate to mysticism, we might ask: what if, when moving into an antisocial form of desire, one ends up *not* finding the no-future or self-shattering formations that a scholar like Edelman argues for, but instead finds a new means of being in the present moment along with a self *expansion* beyond the boundaries of the ego? What if one finds a mystic experience?

Whereas the majority of the antisocial thesis focuses on figures who are already alone, already isolated or cut off from normative forms of sociality, Fuller's intimate inaccessibility allows us to become more intimate with the process of becoming anti-social or inaccessible. That is, although Fuller's text never argues for a fully pleasurable isolation, "Magnolia" points to the pleasures of moving towards pain in a way that refigures it. The Magnolia emphasizes that she used to be a flower that was hyperbolically social but has now moved into a state of solitude. This solitude is not a pure hermitage, but a sociality of solitude. When describing how she became solitary, the Magnolia informs us:

¹⁸⁸ In this respect, scholarship like Chris Nealon's *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) would illuminate the sort of connective longings that occur in the text.

¹⁸⁹ Fuller, *Essential*, 47.

for a while, my heart swelled with pride and pleasure. But as years passed, my mood changed. The lonely moon rebuked me as she hid from the wishes of man, nor would return till her due change had passed. The inaccessible sun looked on me with the same ray as on all others; my endless profusion could not bribe him to one smile sacred to me alone. The mysterious wind passed me by to tell its secret to the solemn pine.¹⁹⁰

The “lonely moon,” the “inaccessible sun,” and the “mysterious wind” push the Magnolia towards solitude. The Magnolia, indeed the entire earth and its inhabitants, are familiar with the moon, sun, and wind, and yet these are aspects of the material world which remain inaccessible. These two heavenly bodies and the wind will always be inaccessible to the flower, and so the Magnolia’s profusion will not create connection. Instead, the Magnolia experiences greater intimacy with these inaccessible aspects of nature by moving into a similar *state* of inaccessibility, by becoming “lonely” “inaccessible” and “mysterious.”

Before the moment of transition from sociality to solitude occurs, where the Magnolia becomes solitary, she first imagines isolation as a *space*—something she can move into, although this soon fails her. She first looks to the earth:

At last this feeling grew more painful and thrilled my very root. The earth trembled at the touch of a pulse so sympathetic, that ever and anon it seemed, could I but retire and hide in that silent bosom for one calm winter, all would be told me, and tranquillity, deep as my desire, be mine.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

The Magnolia experiences a visceral resonance with the earth, where it trembles “at the touch of a pulse so sympathetic,” but this alone does not transform the Magnolia. Instead it only allows a resonance of longing between she and the earth. After this, she turns heavenward:

And turned my eyes to the distant stars. I thought, could I but hoard from the daily expenditure of my juices, till I grew tall enough, I might reach those distant spheres, which looked so silent and consecrated, and there pause a while from these weary joys of endless life, and in the lap of winter, find my spring.¹⁹²

Each of these beautiful moments of longing in the text illustrates the intensity of a desire for isolation. However, Fuller figures this all as a failure—each moment reaches a great emotional height (“deep desire” “trembled” “weary joys”), and each seems to offer some kind of consolation or imagined solace, but in both passages the Magnolia fails to find a new form of solitude because she views inaccessibility through a limited paradigm: dyadic and spacial intimacy. For the flower to experience any kind of isolation that would offer new forms of pleasure, she cannot think of her longing for isolation as being isolated *somewhere* or *with something*. Instead, isolation must be refigured beyond these relational structures, and when this is accomplished, isolation becomes transformative and mystic. Moreover, the isolation the flower figures as transformative and mystic is a queer pleasure. Rather than moving into a space to find isolation, the flower experiences a *becoming* occult. It is not about going into an isolated space or form of relationality: it is about becoming other-than her previous sociality. This is similar to being antisocial, but only in that it refigures the social. The intimate inaccessibility that the flower soon experiences refigures the social as a web of occult correspondences resonating in mutual isolation.

¹⁹² Ibid., 48

The moment when the Magnolia experiences becoming occult as a transformative and mystic experience occurs shortly after her efforts with the earth, sun, and moon. She goes on:

But not so was my hope to be fulfilled. One starlight night I was looking, hoping, when a sudden breeze came up. It touched me I thought, as if it were a cold white beam from those stranger worlds. The cold gained upon my heart, every blossom trembled, every leaf grew brittle, and the fruit began to seem unconnected with the stem. Soon I lost all feeling, and morning, found the pride of the garden black, still, and powerless.

As the rays of the morning sun touched me, consciousness returned, and I strove to speak, but in vain. Sealed were my fountains and all my heart-beats still. I felt that I had been that beauteous tree, but now only was—what—I knew not; yet I was, and the voices of men said, It is dead; cast it forth and plant another in the costly vase. *A mystic shudder of pale joy then separated me wholly from my former abode.*¹⁹³

The passage begins like the previous two involving the earth and the stars. The flower expresses longing and some type of connection with another element of nature (here the “sudden breeze”) that resonates in material bodies (“trembled” again, mirroring the experience of sympathy with the earth). But things have clearly changed.

Though it “touches” the Magnolia, the “sudden breeze” does not shutter or tremble in sympathy. The breeze has an undeniable physical connection with the flower, but lacks the materiality of the connection that flower had with the earth. The breeze becomes intimate with the Magnolia, but in a way that also remains inaccessible. Unlike her experience with the earth,

¹⁹³ Ibid. my emphasis

the Magnolia cannot touch the breeze back. Both intimate and inaccessible, the breeze's relationship to the Magnolia offers a new way to think about touching, since normally to be touched is by necessity to touch back.¹⁹⁴ Fuller's description of the wind touching the flower starts to illustrate what intimate inaccessibility might feel like. Moreover, Fuller's description of the wind's touching is the first moment in the passage where she begins to hint at something strange outside of nature—at a peculiarity or queerness in the breeze. The breeze is not just wind, but a “cold white beam from those stranger worlds.” What Fuller means by “stranger worlds” remains unclear: she could simply be referring to the moon or starlight, or she could be hinting at something otherworldly. If Fuller is referring to the moon, she very well might be imagining an isolated and occult world. In a 1839 journal entry describing a mystical experience, she notes “My head wrapped in my Shawl I would listen to the music of the earth then raise it and look straight into the secrets of the heaven. I fail the moon. Thoughts on lunacy. How could Swedenborg think children were in the moon.”¹⁹⁵ Either a “cold white beam” from the moon, or a stranger world, this experience nevertheless does not *invite* the Magnolia into that world, but signals both her distance from it (the beam comes from a space she cannot be) as well as signals an intimate relationship to that world, the breeze/beam of light transforms her. Moreover, unlike the other passages, this transformation announces itself as unapologetically painful.

In the previous passages where the flower fails, she expresses longing as a desire for positive affect: with the earth she wants “calm” and “tranquility,” with the stars she wants to “pause from weary joys” and to find her “spring.” But in the transformative passage with the breeze, the affective dimensions are bleak: she becomes “brittle” “unconnected” “black” and

¹⁹⁴For more on this idea, see Eve K. Sedgwick. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁵ Fuller, *Essential* 8.

“powerless.” These descriptors of the Magnolia’s new state (seemingly so dire that men declare “It is dead; cast it forth”) are also the new affective dimensions that lead her to finally say, “A mystic shudder of pale joy then separated me wholly from my former abode.” “Cold” “dead,” “separated,” “brittle,” “powerless,” “unconnected”—and yet, completely transformed.

This moment in the text ends in the same way that the passage on the Magnolia’s relation to the earth began, with a body vibrating with affect. However, whereas the previous moments of trembling were due to the possibility of a connection, of a “pulse so sympathetic,” the Magnolia now shudders with the pleasure of being in correspondence with inaccessibility. In addition, unlike the previous moments of trembling, Fuller describes this shuddering as mystic. The “weary joys of endless life” have now been replaced by a “pale joy” of separation. This “pale joy” is possible for the Magnolia because she has now become mystic, hidden, and inaccessible. Fuller takes time to explore the first steps in a mystic separation where one moves towards “acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.”¹⁹⁶ Moreover, in her emphasis on the necessity for the Magnolia to rethink her paradigm of isolation, Fuller has begun to illustrate the necessity of a queer relation to solitude, where its most painful aspects can be reimagined, not into pleasure exactly, but into a “pale joy”—into a muted pleasure that retains some of the pain of isolation. All that said, only in “Leila” will Fuller express the culmination of mystic isolation that leads to a “unitive experience [that] involves a phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity.”¹⁹⁷ While in “Magnolia” the flower can share her inaccessibility, allowing the narrator of the story to experience intimate inaccessibility with her, only in “Leila” does Fuller find a complete and vibrantly erotic expression of the queer

¹⁹⁶ Gellman.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

possibilities of mystic isolation. But to get there we must, (as Fuller says in “Magnolia”) “Take a step inward, forget a voice, lose a power; no longer a bounteous sovereign, become a vestal priestess and bide thy time in the Magnolia.” Taking a step inward and forgetting one’s voice and power seem like sure ways to be disconnected. But for Fuller, these are not forms of disconnection at all, but are in fact the gateways to Fuller’s “distant worlds of light”—corresponding objects and worlds that vibrate in a shared and intimate isolation

Before Fuller moves on to fully exploring the erotics of mysticism and solitude in “Leila,” she has one other short meditation on a different flower that deserves some mention. In “Yucca Filamentosa,” unlike “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain,” there is no dialogue with the flower, but instead Fuller observes and comments on its relation to the moon. Differences aside, the two flowers illustrate intimate inaccessibility. While the essays might seem odd in their focus on objects that are “inaccessible” as a means to new forms of intimacy, their themes map Fuller’s thoughts on the subject, giving her ground to elaborate on this sort of relationship when it reaches its mystic apex in “Leila.”

In “Yucca Filamentosa,” Fuller opens the essay, “Often as I looked up to the moon, I had marveled to see how calm she was in her loneliness.”¹⁹⁸ At first this calm loneliness seems different from the constant shuddering in “Magnolia,” but this calmness in a state of isolation acts to mute the otherwise painful aspects of being isolated, and is therefore analogous to “the pale joy” the Magnolia feels. Moreover, in part the calmness of the moon is possible because isolation hides it “from the wishes of man.” Since the moon is so isolated, Fuller looks to

¹⁹⁸ Fuller, *Essential*, 50.

connect to it indirectly through symbols, for which she turns to flowers.¹⁹⁹ She writes, “I was sure there must be some living hieroglyphic to indicate that class of emotion which the moon calls up.”²⁰⁰ By being a “living hieroglyphic” of the emotion the moon “calls up” the Yucca becomes a symbol of affect, as well as a symbol for the moon more generally, thus representing both the moon and its “calm loneliness.” Moreover, by being a “hieroglyphic” of this calm loneliness, the Yucca marks an intimacy with the moon’s isolation and solitude, though not with the moon itself. While the moon maintains a state of calm loneliness, it is intimate with the Yucca through that shared emotion.

In “Yuca,” Fuller’s views on intimate inaccessibility start to complicate relationality further, thus anticipating “Leila” more fully through the paradoxical image of the moon as a childless mother for the lonely:

At night the flowers were again as beautiful as before.—Fate! Let me never murmur more. There is an hour of joy for every form of being, an hour of rapture for those who wait most patiently.—Queen of night!—Humble Flower!— how patient were ye, the one in the *loneliness* of bounty,—the other in the *loneliness* of poverty. The flower brooded on her own heart; the moon never wearied of filling her urn, for those she *could not love as children* [...] —Remember the Yucca; wait and trust; and either Sun or Moon, according to thy fidelity, will bring thee to love and to know.²⁰¹

The flowers occupy a time of blooming (night) that isolates them from a more typical blooming time, which makes them appear to be failures in daylight. Whereas the speaker first misreads the

¹⁹⁹ See *Flora’s Interpreter* for some insight into the significance of flower symbolism in the nineteenth century.

²⁰⁰ Fuller, *Essential*, 50.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

flowers' failure, she later concludes that this instead a form of patience. The "Humble Flower" becomes a "Queen of night," under the "calm loneliness" of moonlight. Moreover, the moon, though motherless, treats the flowers as children, although Fuller phrases it strangely, "the moon never wearied of filling her urn, for those she *could not love as children*." It remains unclear if moon is filling the urn of the flower (its petals are shaped into small cups) or if the moon is filling up a figurative urn of moonlight for the flower. Either way, those the moon "could not love as children" motivates this exchange. Fuller's phrasing also signals both the potentiality of this relationship while simultaneously pointing out its limits. The moon does not tire of filling her urn for the flower, or filling the urn of the flower, because it is done out of a motherly love—but this is a love both for the flowers as a kind of child of the moon while recognizing that they could never be children of the moon fully because of the its isolation. In this conclusion of "Yucca," Fuller's language begins to hit the limits of relationality. An isolated moon, a lonely speaker, and flowers that bloom in the solitude of night—how can we think of this relation without recourse to familial structures? For Fuller, the answer seems to be to both imitate those structures while calling attention to their limits. The isolation of the moon creates this limit, but isolation also creates the very potentiality for there to be a new mode of relationality. For Fuller, this tension is not resolved, so much as it is elaborated upon through her most dynamic meditation on solitude and mysticism: "Leila."

Invocation and Magic in Fuller's "Leila"

"Magnolia" and "Yucca" represent important steps in Fuller's views on mysticism, solitude, and eroticism. However, becoming occult and experiencing intimate inaccessibility is not where the pleasure ends or merely becomes "pale joy"; in fact, this is where the erotic pleasure of her mysticism begins.

Whereas the relationships Fuller's speakers have with flowers, wind, and celestial bodies are strange, imaginative, and fantastic, in these stories she offers tangible objects as examples of intimate inaccessibility, only alluding to mysticism and occult practice vaguely. In "Leila," occultism comes to the forefront, as do mystic states, when Fuller spends the bulk of the text describing ways of invoking, summoning, and conjuring Leila that involve magic, alchemy, and religious visions. "Leila" perhaps best evinces how Fuller uses ideas and themes from Western occult traditions to re-imagine herself, desire, and sexuality.²⁰² More specifically, Fuller employs occult imagery to articulate queer relationality. The occult is not merely a proxy for larger ideological or religious structures, it operates as its own structure that Fuller draws upon to articulate the erotics of mysticism, and it offers a relationality that is hidden and irreducibly ineffable, yet remarkable for its affective palpability. While the emotional intensity of "Leila" is almost tangible, Fuller still articulates this intensity as potentiality. In this way, Fuller's work, in its sustained attention to the emotional intensity of the narrative, allows a deeper understanding of what queer relationality *feels like*—an important intervention for understanding it.

What, then, does the story of "Leila" accomplish? At first glance, it seems the text is part of Fuller's larger project of personal myth making. For example, within *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller invokes numerous mythological figures as a way of trying to rethink women's position within society. Fuller's use of classical mythology was not taken lightly, as her references to classical pagan deities brought with them implications of alternative religious

202 Versluis agrees with me on this point. He writes, "it is in Fuller's bizarre quasi-autobiographic work 'Leila' that we find the merging of Fuller's millennialist esotericism with magic" (155). However, Versluis then goes on to virtually ignore the text, merely gesturing to it as an example without offering any sustained engagement. Part of this is symptomatic of his work more generally—which tends to be expansive surveys of the "American Renaissance." It is my hope here demonstrate that these texts need to be attended to with the skills of close reading to fully appreciate the work they are doing.

structures. Reviewing *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845, Orestes Brownson wrote, “She [Fuller] is greatly taken with Isis, Sita, Egyptian Sphinx, Ceres, Proserpine. Would she recall these ancient heathen deities, their ancient worship filled with obscene rites and frightful orgies?”²⁰³ In spite of such remarks, Fuller remained committed to writing about (sometimes directly and at other times allusively) classical pantheons. As a result, Jeffrey Steele, who gives the most sustained reading of “Leila,” argues that the text “reads like a compendium of myths” where “Fuller’s imaginative exploration of the Goddess turns into a mythic exposition of the lesbian imaginary”; thus by creating “a field of eroticized images around the image of Anna, Fuller transmutes them into a profound mythic narrative of psychological dissociation and regeneration.”²⁰⁴ Steele offers a strong reading of “Leila” that situates the text within the context of Fuller’s relationship to Anna Baker, as well as within the way she uses goddess myths more generally. While illuminating, Steele’s reading becomes so concerned with demonstrating how other texts, ideas, mythologies, and Fuller’s personal life inform “Leila,” that he cannot give close attention to the nuances of Fuller’s language and the important ways that her *own* linguistic choices articulate a philosophy beyond the mere sublimation of same-sex (what he calls lesbian) desire into mythological narratives. To that end, for a scholar like Steele, the most important moments in the text have meaning only in the ways that they relate to and modulate outside mythologies within a psychoanalytic framework.

Unlike Steele, and many other scholars, I’m not as interested in tracing out all the autobiographical aspects of the text. In fact, doing so, I believe, risks making for a facile reading of “Leila”—leading to easy readings of recognizable homoeroticism rather than looking for the

203 Orestes A. Brownson, “Miss Fuller and Reformers,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* (April 1845). In *Critical Essays on Margaret Fuller*, Ed Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980)

204 Steele, *Transfiguring America*, 83, 89.

moments of the text that force us to consider a queer relationality. By “queer” I mean forms of relation that are neither clearly homoerotic, nor part of a more normative (male-female) erotics. “Leila,” does not offer easy answers, but instead highlights the fundamental ambiguity and open potentiality of erotic relations. This queer eroticism is complicated even more because we don’t know with whom it is taking place. At times, the more mystic passages will insist that Leila is a spirit (e.g. something to be invoked). In other moments, Leila is the object of the narrator’s desire, then later she becomes conflated with the identity of the narrator. Leila seems both part of the narrator, outside the narrator, a spirit, and sometimes a physical being. Regardless, there is an erotic investment in her, so where is this erotics occurring? Between bodies? Within a single bifurcated identity? Or within a mystic trance that is somewhere in between these? Leila draws us in, spellbinds us, and draws the narrator in, clearly—yet always remains ambiguous. At times, the erotic pull of the text seems homoerotic, at times magical, at others purely religious. Leila excites, puzzles, and arouses the narrator by moving between all these modes of excitement and relation. Nevertheless, she remains a mystery. I think it would be a mistake to make all of these other aspects of desire and relation bow under the sign of the homoerotic or the psychological sublimation of desire. In the thematic confusion and frenetic use of erotic, religious, and occult images, “Leila” *asks, even demands, that we relate to the text queerly*. And given Fuller’s interests, mysticism offers one of the best ways to do just that.

The text opens by announcing the mystic nature of Leila. Fuller writes, “I have often but vainly attempted to record what I know of Leila. It is because she is a mystery, which can only be indicated by being reproduced.”²⁰⁵ Like many mystic writers, Fuller struggles to report her experience, and has to confront the problem of ineffability. As Jerome Gellman notes: “Several

²⁰⁵ Fuller, *Essential*, 53.

responses to this problem are possible for the mystic. One is to avoid speech altogether and remain silent about what is revealed in experience. Mystics, however, have not been very good at this.”²⁰⁶ Not only are mystics not very good at this, they are blabbermouths. Many mystics can’t seem to stop talking about their experiences, even though each mystic knows that attempting to communicate the ineffability of the experience will often lead to either failure or only partial success. For the mystic, language becomes a place of vainly attempting to communicate their experience—but it remains the only way to do so. Rather than simply giving up, the difficulty of communicating the mystic experience leads to a diverse use of language. For a writer like Amos Bronson Alcott, for example, language becomes almost unintelligible with his attempts to articulate something he believes to be inexpressible. For a writer like Ethan Allen Hitchcock, alchemy becomes a way to try to express mystic transformation, but even this does not capture his experience, as he makes clear.²⁰⁷ While there are many ways around this problem, as Gellman notes, rather than imitating her peers, or turning to traditions like *ad infinitum* negations, or apophatic theology, which Fuller would have been familiar with from her reading of Meister Eckhart, Fuller instead offers a text that highlights ineffability through relationality and occlusion, while insisting on its affective tangibility.

²⁰⁶ Gellman, Jerome, "Mysticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

²⁰⁷ For example, On November 12th 1866, Hitchcock entered the following in his personal journal:

I wish to say that I saw, a moment since, what the Philosopher’s Stone signifies. I do not omit a statement of it from any desire to make it a mystery. My relation to it is still to be determined. A great number of passages in books of alchemy seem perfectly clear now. I have nowhere told what it is or even what I think it is. It is a kind of revelation, but, when seen, has an effect something like looking at the sun. Personally, I have much to fear from it, before I can look forward to its benefits. I have nothing to unsay in my books, and have but this to add that they are studies in the One Thing.

See Ethan Allen Hitchcock. *Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 482-83.

Fuller does not get around the problem of the ineffability of the mystic experience through moving away from it. Instead she highlights it as a relation that is not inherently ineffable, but appears so to those not within it. Fuller isolates, or makes the relation occult, pointing to it as an occluded experience. You're either inside it and get it, or you're outside of it and it appears mysterious.²⁰⁸ Again, Fuller opens, "I have often but *vainly attempted to record* what I *know* of Leila," signaling to the reader that her knowledge of Leila is not in doubt, only that its successful communication is uncertain. In other words, by highlighting the gap between knowledge of Leila and her textual transmission, the opening creates the first of many occult structures in the narrative. While later I will stress *occult* in the sense of "relating to magic, alchemy, [...] or other practical arts held to involve agencies of a secret or mysterious nature," here I wish to stress the word's meaning as "not apprehended, or not apprehensible, by the mind; beyond ordinary understanding or knowledge; abstruse, mysterious; inexplicable."²⁰⁹ At first Fuller's descriptions of Leila (composed of her consistently stressing her inability to do so) might

²⁰⁸ More might be said here for the ways homoerotics would demand increasingly new modes of recognition. That is, with the crystallization of homosexuality as an identity category, there also came new modes of "reading" others subjects as "in the family." The way that these ways of recognition circulated had as much to do with the discourses of the law and psychoanalysis as they did with lesser known discourses within, for example, immigrant communities in New York City in the late nineteenth-century. One text that illustrates this brilliantly is *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (Ralph Werther, *Autobiography of an Androgyne*. Ed. Scott Herring (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008.)) The art of cruising, however, also points to the remaining ambiguity of erotic recognition. For Fuller, ambiguity becomes a defining force that she uses to enclose the speaker's relation to "Leila." For the narrator, Leila is not ineffable or mysterious the way she is to outsiders. With the emphasis on mystery, Fuller protects the relation—not by keeping it in the closet, but by demonstrating how its very nature allows it to remain occult and secret even when exposed. As I will argue in the end of this chapter, doing so begins to point to the fragility of queer worlds and relations.

²⁰⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary* Third edition, March 2004; online version. In the end, I hope to conflate these two meanings to illustrate how they operate in tandem to create an erotics of queer spectrality.

seem nothing more than a rhetorical device: the use of *adynaton*.²¹⁰ But as the narrative progresses, the impossibility of a textual record becomes the very structure through which Fuller articulates her erotics. As the narrator goes on to describe “Leila,” the reader gets a piling up of different occlusions, disappearances, specters, glances and partial sightings. The relationship between these various occlusions, their erotic draw for the speaker, and the mystic and occult knowledge they offer her, allows Fuller to articulate the intimate inaccessibility of the mystic experience as it relates to new erotic potentialities. Moreover, Fuller's occlusions—that is, making something occult (hidden) while conflating it with the act of invocation through occult (magical) practice, will move towards the construction of an erotics that *precedes* any sort of actuality—issuing from what Fuller calls the “back-ground of being.”

Fuller makes the relation to Leila occult through calling attention to how:

[m]ost men, as they gazed on Leila were pained; they left her at last baffled and well-nigh angry. For most men are bound in sense, time, and thought. They shrink from the overflow of the infinite; they cannot a moment abide in the coldness of abstraction; the weight of an idea is too much for their lives.²¹¹

This passage illustrates that often the effect of Leila is painful, baffling, and anger producing, though she is none of these things for the speaker. This split in the emotional and mental effect Leila has for those in relation to her not only creates a new form of intimacy with the speaker (who can relate to her in a way that is affectively pleasing), it also signals the need to think of relating to this figure in ways that are radically outside of a sense of stability. If we “cannot a moment abide in the coldness of abstraction,” then we cannot relate to Leila. Instead, acclimating

210 Classical rhetoric defines *adynaton* as “a declaration of impossibility, usually in terms of an exaggerated comparison. Sometimes, the expression of the impossibility of expression.”

See <<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Figures/A/adynaton.htm>>

²¹¹ Fuller, *Essential*, 54.

to a sense of groundlessness is needed to relate to Leila: we need to move outside “sense, time, and thought” to be comfortable with the “coldness of abstraction” and the “overflow of the infinite.” This kind of language, with the relentless abstractions Fuller throws at the reader, can be maddening as it becomes almost impossible to say what or who Leila is or represents. But discomfort with ambiguity is exactly what Fuller criticizes. Only in relating to these abstractions and ambiguities without frustration can the reader start to get a sense of the affective and erotic experience Fuller describes.

This opening is, in some sense, arguably homoerotic, though. With Fuller placing “men” in one position and the speaker (whom critics have assumed to be both female and a kind of proxy for Fuller) in another position, she draws a clear distinction between women’s private relations among themselves, and men’s public relations to them. The text may then start off as homoerotic, but what we might read as a homoerotic relation soon becomes queer as the narrative moves on. That said, scholars have been divided on how to read sexuality in Fuller. While reading lesbian desire and identity in Fuller does risk, as Bonnie Zimmerman has argued, ahistoricism and reductionism in lesbian theory, I am more inclined to agree with Mary E. Wood when she argues:

we need to keep examining our assumptions about historical shifts. To claim that lesbianism and lesbian identity did not exist before there was an explicit medically-oriented language to describe them as deviant is to suggest that lesbianism emerged full-blown in the twentieth century.²¹²

Scholars like David Halperin and Peter Coviello have demonstrated that shifts in sexual identity

²¹²Mary E. Wood, "'with Ready Eye': Margaret Fuller and Lesbianism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature." *American Literature* 65.1 (1993): 1-18.

are much more of a complicated spectrum.²¹³ With the spectrum of sexual identity and desire, the full range of hues, and the subtle shifts therein deserves careful attention, especially as new forms of a solidified identity around sexuality were starting to be felt (either as dreaded or celebrated possibility) for people in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.²¹⁴ Wood goes on to argue, “The writings of Margaret Fuller reveal the ways that heterosexuality struggled to assert itself in nineteenth-century American discourse against women's desire for each other,” and that writing, “in the 1830s and 1840s, Fuller exposes the cultural limitations of women's romantic friendships even as she attempts to bring them into written discourse.”²¹⁵ I disagree with this later point on cultural limitations. While Fuller may have indeed been struggling against the cultural limitations of the time, I am unconvinced romantic friendships were only being “attempted” to be articulated in written discourse. Such an argument assumes that Fuller’s writing is either not up to the task of capturing what she is really feeling (what is *actually* occurring between women) or it assumes that Fuller’s cultural circumstances were so completely limiting that they blocked the expression of relationships that we would *now* recognize as romantic or erotic. Instead, it might be more productive to ask how the culture Fuller took part in was possibly liberating for the expression of desire. Even more important, Fuller’s cultural atmosphere might have *created* forms of desire that are now almost illegible. Fuller’s opening in “Leila” calls attention to the importance of mystery, occlusion, and illegibility in creating new erotic relations, and her interest in occultism opens up a space for queer relationality, not necessarily what we would call, or even recognize as, lesbian.

In addition, the complexity of the affective response Leila produces in the speaker allows

²¹³ David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²¹⁴ See Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties* for a strong account of this

²¹⁵ Wood, #.

the text to escape any easy definition of erotic relation. How Leila registers emotionally for the speaker of the text becomes clearer, though no less strange, as the narrative goes on. After describing the frustration men experience with Leila, Fuller writes:

But, I Leila, could look on thee;— to my restless spirit thou didst bring a kind of peace, for thou wert a bridge between me and the infinite; thou didst arrest the step, and the eye as the veil hanging before the Isis. Thy nature seemed large enough for boundless suggestion. I did not love thee, Leila, but the desire for love was soothed in thy presence. I would fain have been nourished by some of thy love, but all of it I felt was only for the all.²¹⁶

While others experience frustration, Leila creates solace for the speaker. For the speaker, Leila becomes the means of gaining mystic gnosis when she becomes a “bridge” to the “infinite” where the speaker approaches the “veil hanging before the Isis.”²¹⁷ Recalling Gellman’s definition of a mystic experience as a “unitive experience [that] involves a phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity, where the cognitive significance of the experience is deemed to lie precisely in that phenomenological feature,” the mystical significance of these images becomes more apparent. Leila has a “nature” that seems “large

²¹⁶ Fuller, *Essential*, 54.

²¹⁷ Isis is a prominent goddess in Fuller’s writing, and she would become more important as a symbol of secret knowledge later in the nineteenth century, especially for Theosophy when Helena Blavatsky would publish *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, a text that would be her first major work for the Theosophical movement. In fact, so popular was the image of an unveiled Isis for esoteric philosophy that Blavatsky had to change the title of her work. She had intended to title the work, *The Vile of Isis*, but this title was already taken by a Rosicrucian work published in 1861. See William W. Reade, *The Veil of Isis, Or, the Mysteries of the Druids* (London: C.J. Skeet, 1861) and H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Pasadena, Calif: Theosophical University Press, 1972). Moreover, Fuller’s use of Isis was situated within a larger frame of Egyptomania in the nineteenth century. For some of the implications of this and critical race studies, see Scott Driskell Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (New Americanists. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

enough for boundless suggestion,” one that blurs what or who she might be. Moreover, through bringing a “kind of peace” she offers a “unitive experience” for the speaker, which becomes more apparent later in the story.

Beyond the obvious fact that Leila is figured as female and numinous, Fuller’s opening description of her as a mystical form of union differs from more traditional accounts of mystic experiences when it comes to love. Fuller highlights her inability to completely unite with Leila, which is odd because her understanding of mysticism in her journals is unitive.²¹⁸ At times she will seem to have a mystical unitive experience with Leila, but in other moments this becomes incomplete because of Leila’s inaccessible and occult nature. Fuller ends this passage saying, “I did not love thee, Leila, but the desire for love was soothed in thy presence. I would fain have been nourished by some of thy love, but all of it I felt was only for the all.” Fuller complicates love between the speaker and Leila. The speaker does not love Leila, and Leila only has love for “the all,” which although it includes the speaker is not limited to her. Therefore, this is unlike a more traditional account of mystic union.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is a draw that the speaker feels towards Leila, and this soon becomes a desire to experience something beyond the state of a dyadic love.

If love, in the sense of direct love between two subjects, is not possible with Leila, then what does the speaker experience in this relationship? Well, for one, Leila seems to be everything:

For she ever transcends sex, age, state, and all the barriers behind which man

²¹⁸Unfortunately, Fuller’s journals have yet to be fully published. However, Steele does offer some excerpts about Fuller’s unitive experiences in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*.

²¹⁹For a detailed account of mystic union within the Christian tradition, see Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially the second chapter, “Variations on Full Union and Rapture.”

entrenches himself from the assaults of the Spirit. You look on her and she is a clear blue sky, clod and distant as the Pole-star; suddenly this sky opens and flows forth a mysterious wind that bears with it your last thought beyond the verge of all expectation, all association.²²⁰

If Leila is so ineffable that she “transcends sex, age, state” if she is “beyond the verge of all expectation, all association,” and holds so much possibility for a unitive and mystic experience, being a “mysterious wind” that takes all thought beyond its limitations, how does one think about her, how does one associate with her, how does one even experience her at all?²²¹ Fuller has made it clear that any conventional form of relation will not work, not even love in the dyadic sense seems to offer completion. If anything, Leila becomes a *force*, the same word that Fuller’s peers would use to describe her. How do we describe a force? How do we relate to it? For Fuller, the answer seems to lie in occult practice. And so she turns to the occult in her fullest and most direct writing on the subject: she turns to magic.

Fuller turns to what she calls “art magic.” Magic and occultism come to the forefront of what I would call the invocation scene in the narrative. Until this point, with the nebulous wording, and use of occultation as a means of description, “Leila” has had an ambiguous tone to it, but Fuller does not explicitly mention the occult until she explains how the narrator relates to Leila in her absence. The occult arts become the medium through which Fuller articulates queer relationality. When Leila seems to have disappeared from the text, Fuller writes:

When I cannot look upon her living form, I avail myself of the art magic. At the hour of high moon, in the cold silent night, I seek the center of the park. My daring is my vow, my resolve my spell. I am a conjurer, for Leila is the vasty

²²⁰ Fuller, *Essential*, 54.

²²¹ With the image of the wind, it’s hard not to be reminded of this as it occurs in “Magnolia.”

deep. In the center of the park [...] lies a little lake and still it looks up steadily as an eye on earth should to the ever promising heavens which are so bounteous, and love us so, yet never give themselves to us. As that lake looks at Heaven, so look I on Leila. At night, I look into the lake for Leila. I gaze steadily and in the singleness of prayer, she rises and walks in its depths. Then know I each night a part of her life; I know where she passes the midnight hours.²²²

Two aspects of this passage stand out, both of them occult: the hidden (occult as secret) nature of this moment, and the magical (occult as supernatural) aspects. First, the speaker looks for Leila in the “cold silent night” in the center of a park where she can be hidden to avail herself of the “art magic.” Therefore, she moves into an unoccupied space, at a time (midnight) where she is hidden, entering an occulted space and time to perform an occult act. This act, the “art magic” is not so much an invocation of Leila as a presence, but as a potentiality for a queer relation, since the speaker is clear that she “cannot look upon” Leila’s “living form,” some other aspect appears. Therefore, magic summons something else *like* presence. Or rather, magic makes an aspect of Leila present only through her physical absence: the absence of Leila’s living form opens up the possibility for the speaker to relate to her presence in a radically queer and magical way. By invoking Leila, but not invoking her “living form,” occult art, the “art magic” in this passage, allows the narrator to feel a potentiality of presence that is not actualized as a fully physical being—she can gaze at Leila even when she is not present to be gazed at, she can relate to her queerly.

In the moment at the lake, the narrator’s magic invokes some aspect of Leila—although both what is invoked and how it is done remains unclear. Answering how Leila is invoked first

²²² Ibid.

involves looking at what Fuller means by “art magic.” The passage argues for a magic that is a linguistic manifestation of affect. The emotions that the speaker experiences in approaching the lake, her “daring” and “resolve,” transform into linguistic acts, a “vow” and “spell” respectively. Therefore, unvoiced affects become acts of speech, but Fuller never mentions what the words of this invocation might be—leaving whatever words might be uttered unvoiced. Fuller never reveals how a sense of daring becomes a vow, or how being resolved transforms into a spell. Fuller effectively keeps the magic of the passage occult by emphasizing language's power to become “art magic” while also never telling the reader what such a language might be. The knowledge of the spell remains occult, so by occluding the details of the spell the speaker uses to “conjure,” highlights the occultism of the invocation. This works in the other direction as well—if we don’t know what the spell is we don’t know why the speaker feels daring or what she is resolved to do. Fuller invites the reader into the scene, but what occurs between the speaker and Leila remains, on some level, inaccessible.

Complicating this, it becomes clear that the speaker is not conjuring Leila as someone to be in relation to, but as *something* to experience. If Leila “*is nothing*” and if her “living form” is absent in this invocation, what exactly is the narrator summoning? The most obvious answer might be that the narrator is calling forth a spirit—but Fuller is getting at something else here. When the narrator says, “I am a conjurer, for Leila is the vasty deep” I would venture to argue that Fuller is alluding to Shakespeare's *Henry IV Pt. 1*, specifically to Glendowen's line, “I can call spirits from the vasty deep.”²²³ Unlike the line in Shakespeare, however, the narrator is not

²²³Shakespeare. *Henry IV Part I*. (3.1.52). I'm going a bit out on a limb here, as no other critic, so far as I can tell, has noted any such allusions. In addition, in Jeffrey Steele's edited collection, he does not mention this in his footnotes. This is a little surprising to me, because later in the text Fuller also very clearly echos language from *The Tempest*—alluding to famous lines by Prospero and Caliban. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*. eds

calling Leila *from* the “vasty deep”—Leila *is* the vasty deep. Leila is not something that is invoked *out* of that space, or out of an otherworldly realm into reality, instead Leila becomes that space. She is the vasty deep. Moreover, Leila’s being the vasty deep transforms the speaker into a conjurer.²²⁴ She does not say, “I am a conjuror of Leila who is the vasty deep,” but “I am a conjurer, for Leila is the vasty deep.” To relate to the “vasty deep,” too be able to call it forth, she speaker must be in the position of a conjurer.

While this is a scene of invocation, of drawing something into a more intimate relationship, it highlights an irreducible distance. The speaker “cannot look” on the living form of Leila, and isolated from her she must gain distance from any contact (at least discursively) by moving into a “cold silent night.” In addition, the whole scene takes place where there is a relationship to “the heavens” that points to their isolation, while illuminating their simultaneous intimacy with the earth (“steadily as an eye on earth should to the *ever promising* heavens which

G B. Evans, and J J. M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

²²⁴ Of course, the racial dimensions of this term are hard to ignore, but it is difficult to know if Fuller was aware of them, and if so to what extent they would have had influence on her view of the occult. It would seem that Fuller was more interested in Western hermetic traditions and is not using the work in the way it would resonate in African-American literature in the late nineteenth century. However, knowledge of the African-American folk tradition of hoodoo was at least in circulation well before then, as a work like John George Hohman’s 1820 *Pow-wow’s: or, Long Lost Friend* makes evident. But again, with Fuller, we can only speculate. Shirley Moody-Turner gives an important summary of how this word would resonate later in the nineteenth century in her chapter “Folklore and African American Literature in the Post-reconstruction Ear” in *A Companion to African American literature* (U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010):

A highly symbolic ritual, conjure offered those who believed in its power a way to influence aspects of their daily lives that otherwise seemed beyond rational control. In black folk tradition, the conjure doctor was one skilled at reading the traditional signs. He or she presided over the conjure ritual, his or her power to affect change was mirrored in his or her manipulation of symbolic icons (209).

This is exactly what Fuller does in Leila—manipulating symbols of goddesses like Isis and Diana, and then working with a figure like Leila to open up a new space to influence desire beyond “rational control.” For more on the conjure woman in the African American literary tradition, see Kameelah L. Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

are so bounteous, and love us so, yet *never give themselves to us*.” The relationship between the heavens and the earth, ever promising but never fully given, becomes the structure of the intimacy that conjuring supplies, “As that lake looks at Heaven, so look I on Leila.” While the speaker conjures some aspect of Leila to gain an intimacy not possible with her “living form,” she also feels a necessary isolation: she is alone in a silent space, cut off from contact with others, even from Leila herself—but *this* is the space where she becomes intimate with what remains otherwise inaccessible: the potentiality of relation as potentiality—the vasty deep of queer possibility.

Like the heavens, Leila becomes “ever promising” of a love never given, but which seems to exist nonetheless. Fuller is not talking about unrequited love, nor is she speaking of a love that can be consummated—she articulates something else entirely. Like the atmospheric love Fuller spoke of in her letter (“some tones of the longed-for music could be vibrating in the air around us”) Leila offers an intimacy that does not rely on actualization. Instead, Fuller illuminates a mode of relation that is felt in “the threshold between doing and not-doing” an intimacy that is felt even though it remains always a potentiality.²²⁵

In addition, the images of scrying in the passage further illustrate queer relationality. Here, the narrator begins to move towards a sense of what this might look like—and moreover, *why* such a mode of relation might be important. At first, the narrator’s scrying isn’t immediately obvious. However, careful attention to the way she describes Leila’s response to “art magic” makes this clear. Fuller writes, “At night, I look *into* the lake for Leila I *gaze steadily* and in the singleness of prayer, she rises and walks *in* its depths.” Passages such as this have spurred some

²²⁵ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22.

critics to assert that Leila is a messianic figure.²²⁶ But Leila isn't walking *on* water, she is walking *in* it. The narrator's art magic calls Leila forth so that she “rises,” as an image, no doubt, but she also remains submerged, walking within the depths of the lake. The paradox of rising while staying submerged illustrates Leila's ability to be and not be simultaneously. Like the act of scrying into a mirror, water, or crystal ball, an image rises before the viewer, but in that moment the image does not become actualized—instead it represents queer relationality—something that may or not move into being.²²⁷ Leila rises into the scene here, but she does so while remaining part of the vasty deep, while remaining submerged.

All this said, although Leila remains elusive and ephemeral, such ephemerality does not impede the narrator's knowledge of her. Through a knowledge that others do not have access to, a knowledge that is esoteric, the narrator experiences intimacy with Leila. After she calls Leila forth through scrying and art magic, the narrator states, “Then know I each night a part of her life; I know where she passes the midnight hours.” Again, Fuller chooses occultation over revelation—keeping the knowledge of the midnight hours hidden. By stressing her ability to “know” Leila without having to have her present, the narrator expresses an understanding of Leila's ability to open new modes of relation. Moreover, this knowledge of Leila begins to work the way gnosis does in mysticism: the mystical experience allows one to know something that would otherwise be impossible. In her short stories on flowers, Fuller seemed to be gaining gnosis in an abstract sense, gaining insight into the intimacy possible through isolation, but as “Leila” draws to a close, the speaker moves into an intimacy with this figure, or force, by coming into contact with ephemerality and occult spaces more directly.

²²⁶ See Steele, *Transfiguring America*

²²⁷ There is the additional possibility here, because the narrator is looking into a moonlit lake, that Leila might be a reflection—thus making her an aspect of the narrator herself.

As the story moves on, the speaker gains greater knowledge of and intimacy with Leila, all while contacting an irreducible inaccessibility. Describing the ephemerality of this figure, she writes:

I have seen her among the Sylphs' faint florescent forms that hang in the edges of life's rainbows [...] Ever she passes sudden again from these hasty glories and tendernesses into the back-ground of being, and should she ever be detected it will be in the central secret of law. Breathless is my ecstasy as I pursue her in this region. I grasp to detain what I love, and swoon and wake and sigh again.

Leila seems to be slipping away. She is “faint”; she is on the “edges” of rainbows (themselves ephemeral), and all of this is “hasty.” Though Leila becomes so faint that she moves into the “back-ground of being,” the speaker becomes breathless not with effort as she pursues “her in this region” but breathless with ecstasy. Reading the passage aloud, demonstrates that the whole passage has a breathless quality with the repetition of fricatives. The “faint florescent forms” repeats an unvoiced fricative—imitating short exhalations, and the passage repeats this with the unvoiced fricative repetition with “central secret.” The breathless quality of the passage culminates in the speaker swooning, only to wake and sigh again.²²⁸ Breathless, swooning, passing in and out of consciousness, grasping to “detain what [she] loves,” the text becomes erotic with language describing a body in ecstasy. This is, however, not an ecstasy caused by the contact of another body, but by the slipping away, the disappearance, the faintness of the object. The erotic relationship here is one with what Fuller calls the “back-ground of being,” which

²²⁸ I would be willing to guess that this is an allusion to *The Tempest*, when Caliban pines “in dreaming,/ The clouds methought would open, and show riches/ Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,/I cried to dream again. (*The Tempest* 3.2. 135-) In addition, later it seems Fuller references Prospero’s lines “But this rough magic/I here abjure;” (*The Tempest* 5.1.51-2) with her line “I cast aside my necromancy.”

always remains inaccessible for the speaker. Inaccessible, yet intimate, the “back-ground of being” becomes a source of ecstasy, pleasure, and tenderness. Part of the reason I call this queer relationality, rather than a homoeroticsm, is that while Fuller clearly makes this a relationship towards a female being, it is also a relationship that extends to the back-ground of that being, to something that Fuller imagines before Being itself, before the body. Fuller expresses an ecstasy that is possible in relation to ephemerality, to subdued images invoked through magic, to aspects of being that are only possible when the physical body is absent. In short, Fuller shows us what it means to fall in love with relationality itself.

“Leila” doesn’t just end with the background of being. It goes on to describe an extended passage of the speaker following Leila into the earth for alchemical transformation. Fuller writes, “There in the secret veins of earth she thinks herself into fine gold, or aspires for her purest self, till she interlaces the soul with veins of silver [...] Let me gaze myself into religion, then draw me down, —down.” Whereas before Leila was a way for the speaker to erotically connect with a queer possibility, at this point in the text, the relationship that might have been called lesbian or queer and an erotic relation with divinity start to conflate. For example, once in a space of gazing into religion, Leila’s touch suddenly makes boundaries dissolve in a highly erotic image of fluidity that both calls attention to the sexual fluids of the aroused body while at the same time illustrating the mystic experience of union when Fuller writes:

At her touch all became fluid, and the prison walls grew into Edens. Each ray of
particolored light grew populous with beings struggling into divinity. The

redemption of matter was interwoven into the coronal of thought, and each serpent form soared into Phenix.²²⁹

Boundaries become paradises, and once again the text returns to the image of a rainbow that Fuller used earlier. However, this time it is full, “populous with brings struggling into divinity.” In the end, this “struggling into divinity” has two meanings. First, it is the struggle to find a mystic contact with the divine, that mystic union where one feels a dissolving of the self and is, to use Fuller’s language, “taken up to God.” Second, it also means to struggle into one’s own divinity, an alchemical transformation of perfection (“she thinks herself into fine gold”). Fuller’s life, so inundated with her turning to goddesses like Isis and Diana in her Boston conversations and in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, illustrates a larger project of mapping out female divinity. This is not just an internal divine nature or an external divine nature one can contact, it is a divinity that offers new erotic forms of relation. One can speak to flowers, one can experience intimacy with the moon, the wind, with cold beams of light—the world is open to new queer relations. But this intimacy comes at a cost. For Fuller, there is always something inaccessible, something lonely about all these new forms of pleasure and erotic relation. The mystic experience for Fuller, both isolated and deeply connected to new objects and forces, offers a way into a new relationship with the divine that is erotic, ephemeral, and queer.

What does all this mean for the ways Fuller was thinking about the occult? The occult becomes not only a way for Fuller to give voice to how she was thinking about desire it also allows for an occlusion of that desire. In “Leila,” everything always seems to be just on the cusp of being, or coming into being, the specter of Leila (be it a projection into a past or a not-yet-real future) allows Fuller to articulate an erotic attachment that, because it is always in a process of

²²⁹ Fuller, *Essential*, 57.

disappearance, because it is always a possibility that does not need to become actualized to be known or felt, cannot then be disrupted.

But why all this isolation, why such a relishing of becoming occult, why must the Magnolia remove herself, and why must Leila be constantly hidden? What is the point of intimate inaccessibility? Peter Coviello, in a reading of Jewett and solitude points out that these queer forms of isolation might signal fragility. Describing Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*, he writes, "whether or not she sacrifices queer antisociality on the alter of queer sociability—her more pressing concern in *Firs* is plainly with the fragility of those worlds."²³⁰ So too with Fuller. In the end, mysticism and mystic experiences (as Fuller expresses them in her fiction) offer a powerful example of queer world making: the formation of new relations, new worlds, imagined, real, or somewhere between the two, offers up new ways to think about how we might experience isolation, how we might discover new forms of affiliation, and how we might learn new modes of erotic connection. Unlike Alcott, whom I will explore in the next chapter, Fuller realizes the painful fragility of such worlds, as well as the "mystic shutter" and "pale joy" those worlds might offer.

Fuller's writing allows queer worlds to remain inaccessible and impervious to actualization. As sexual identities began to solidify around erotic desire in the late nineteenth-century, the inaccessibility and rich ephemerality of Fuller's erotics would, like Leila, become harder to find. Fuller's queer worlds are those "distant worlds of light" whose very distance keeps them from being actualized, but which also allows them to be fragile, to be ephemeral, and to "hang in the edges of life's rainbows." The true "art magic" in Fuller's work is how she imagines (or invokes) erotic worlds that are like "the ever promising heavens which are so

²³⁰ Coviello, 99.

bounteous, and love us so, yet never give themselves to us.”

CHAPTER 3

“NO GEM BEHIND”: DIVINE INTIMACY IN ALCOTT’S “ORPHIC SAYINGS” AND FRUITLANDS

Esoteric Father, Famous Daughter

Most readers familiar with nineteenth-century America probably remember Amos Bronson Alcott for two things: failing and having a daughter who didn’t. Bronson Alcott created a school that would cause scandal to the point where he had to close it and stop teaching, he founded a utopian community that was as unpleasant as it was unsuccessful, and he wrote prose that was met with confusion, frustration, or laughter. His daughter’s efforts were a different story. Louisa May Alcott first met success when she served as a nurse for the Union Hospital in D.C. This experience would lead to the revision and publication of her letters from her time there as *Hospital Sketches*. Louisa May’s other writings would show promise, but she became best known for *Little Women*. One reviewer for the *Eclectic Magazine* would write that *Little Women* was “the very best of books to reach the hearts of the young of any age from six to sixty.”²³¹ And in reaching the hearts of so many, Louisa May was ultimately able to do what her father could not.

This is not to say that Bronson Alcott did not reach the hearts of those around him, especially his peers whom were invested in Transcendentalism. But when it came to his influence on his family, and especially his daughters, Alcott found himself in a more complicated

²³¹ Clark, Beverly Lyon, [Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews](#) (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76.

situation. Critics, for example, have remarked on the absence of the father in Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical narrative *Little Women*. As Geraldine Brooks notes:

Biographers have made much of the fact that the father in *Little Women* is largely absent, although the rest of the fictional Marches are closely based on Alcott family members [...] the father in the novel is down South—"away where the fighting was"—from the first page of the novel, and when he finally limps home from the Civil War, more than a hundred pages later, Louisa May sends him off to his library and more or less closes the door.²³²

Attempting to make sense of this lacuna, Brooks goes on:

To read Bronson Alcott's journals and letters is to understand her [Louisa May's] difficulty: the truth about her father's character was far too odd and unorthodox to be shoehorned into an idealized, moralistic tale for Victorian children. Bronson Alcott was even more original, courageous, and visionary than his more famous contemporaries: the most transcendent transcendentalist of them all.²³³

Bronson Alcott was indeed odd and unorthodox, qualities that manifest not only in his journals but also in his public writing. For Louisa, dealing with a father who was "the most transcendent transcendentalist" does not mean that she simply removed him from her fiction. The oddities of Alcott's character do not get erased from his daughter's narrative at all, but instead they are there from the very beginning— and like many things occult and esoteric, they can be both out in the open and a little hard to find.

²³²Brooks, Geraldine. "Orpheus at the Plough; Life and Letters." *The New Yorker*, Jan 10, 2005. 058, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/233154485?accountid=10267> (accessed July 29, 2013).

²³³ Brooks.

In the second chapter of *Little Women* the girls put on a small Christmas pageant full of magic, invocation, spells and seduction. Both comical and fantastic, the scene offers a glimpse into the play world of the March sisters, while at the same time illustrating a rich imaginary world full of esoteric and occult images:

Out came Meg, with gray horsehair hanging about her face, a red and black robe, a staff, and cabalistic signs upon her cloak. Hugo demanded a potion to make Zara adore him, and one to destroy Roderigo. Hagar, in a fine dramatic melody, promised both, and proceeded to call up the spirit who would bring the love philter.²³⁴

While Louisa May Alcott could have taken these images from any number of sources, this scene serves as a reminder that she was the daughter of a man who had a deep and sustained interest in esotericism, both philosophically and practically. When we think of *Little Women*, we don't think esotericism, and we probably don't think Bronson Alcott, as each occupies such a minor role in the narrative. But for Louisa May's father, esoteric texts were at the center of his intellectual life, and his daughter was certainly no stranger to this.

As a cause of her father's trip to England, Louisa May grew up with the most extensive library of esoteric and occult literature in America. In 1842, with the aid of Charles Lane, Bronson Alcott would acquire the library of James Pierrepont Graves.²³⁵ *The Dial* offers this

²³⁴ 20, Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women* (Bantam Classics). 1868. New York: Bantam Books, 1983.

²³⁵ James Pierrepont Graves (1777-1842) was an English mystic who, like Alcott, was also invested in education reform. In 1838, he would found Alcott House, which was both a utopian experiment as well as a progressive school. As the name indicated, Graves was influenced by Alcott's work on education. For More on Graves, see Latham. There are also descriptions of both Graves and Lane in *The Dial* under the article "English Reformers." See *The Dial* 3 (1843): 227-. In this article, *The Dial* also makes Graves's esoteric investments clear:

description, “His library is the most select and rare which I have seen, including books we have sought with so ill success on our side of the water.”²³⁶ Alcott and Lane would add to this collection, which was brought back to Concord, eventually giving the Transcendentalists the “best library of Western esoteric books in America.”²³⁷ This library would become central to Alcott’s utopian experiment at Fruitlands, as Sterling F. Delano notes “Fruitlands featured an extensive collection of books that Alcott had brought back from his visit to England in 1842, which occupied one hundred feet of shelf space on the first floor of the Wymann farmhouse. Both Anna and Louisa were avid readers [...]”²³⁸ Delano does not note the contents of this library. However, a list of some of its books was published in *The Dial* in 1843, where the magazine would proclaim “the arrival of this cabinet of mystic and theosophic lore is a remarkable fact in our literary history.”²³⁹ Some of the books included in this collection were *The Divine Pymander of Hermes Trismegistus* (London, 1650), the entire works of Böhme in English, including the William Law edition, which is full of mystic illustrations. Edward Taylor’s *Theosophick Philosophy Unfolded* (London 1691), as well as texts dealing with magic, such as Cornelius Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy*, Roger Bacon’s *Opus Magus* and *Mirror of Alchymy*.²⁴⁰ We can only speculate if Louisa May Alcott ever read these texts, and if she did, the esoteric and occult texts that surrounded her do not seem to have influenced her writing to any major degree. However, she grew up in an environment where esoteric and occult literature formed the basis

At the same time he had some peculiar opinions, resembling the German mystical and metaphysical speculations, hard to be understood, and to which few in general are willing to listen, and still fewer to subscribe; but his sincerity, and the kindness of his disposition always secured for him a patient hearing (230).

²³⁶ “English Reformers” 230.

²³⁷ Versluis, 120.

²³⁸ Delano, 253.

²³⁹ *The Dial* (April 1843), 545.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

for her father's thought, and as Catherine L. Albanese notes, the content of Alcott's library offers insight into the centrality of occult and esoteric philosophy not only for Alcott and Lane's vision of utopia, but for understanding the intellectual environment of Transcendentalism more broadly.²⁴¹

Nevertheless, as much as Bronson Alcott read, and as erudite as he tried to become, his fascination with occultism would be received in the same manner that *Little Women* paints such interests: fantastical, spectacular, but ultimately nothing but playful, childish and comical fantasies. In *Little Women*, Louisa May portrays the March sisters as fooling around with their show of magic. From the start, the reader can see through the silliness of it all when Meg comes out, "with gray horsehair hanging about her face, a red and black robe, a staff, and cabalistic signs upon her cloak." We know that Meg is no mage, draping herself in gray horsehair to appear like some sagacious hermit. And though she wears a cloak that has "cabalistic signs," the only power, the only magic, in this scene is in the girls' collective imagination. As the play goes on, the girls move between serious magical declarations and childhood playfulness. Set pieces are unsteady, and costumes and hair come undone throughout the play. But there is magic in this opening scene of *Little Women*, and it is not too far off from the mysticism that would fascinate Bronson Alcott. The magic is in the girls' collective effort to build a world imbued with magic and mystery even while they seem to fail to make a show of it; the magic of the scene lies in the girls' willingness to imagine a world where they can make do by the power of imagination alone.

²⁴¹ Catherine L. Albanese. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, Albanese writes:

Lane and Alcott brought Greaves's large library of almost a thousand books, and other works that they added, to Fruitlands-replete with Boehmian and Hermetic titles, including works on magic and alchemy. Hermes Trismegistus was certainly there, and so was Cornelius Agrippa. The library offered a large hint about where the Fruitlands founders' passion lay (172).

In their small Christmas pageant, the girls offer up a kind of utopia: a world where they can safely live out sentiment and seduction. It is a comical world, to be sure, but it is also a playful one— silly in its effort to flaunt its powers of spectacle, but nonetheless full of magic. If only Bronson Alcott could have brought the same sense of playfulness to his own imaginative pursuits, to his own utopian visions, then perhaps he would have found a world more hospitable to his visionary desire.

Like the March sisters, Bronson Alcott would ultimately fail in his efforts to create a world built upon mysticism. From his blundering attempts to create a school based on the principles of German Romanticism, to the embarrassing and risible publication of his “Orphic Sayings” in inaugural issue of *The Dial*, to his failed utopian experiment Fruitlands, Bronson Alcott never seemed to have gotten things right. By all accounts, he was a man so concerned with looking heavenward to the world of “Ideas” that he couldn’t see where he was going, and so found himself repeatedly stumbling in a world that demanded attention to things like money, rent, public reputation, and raising children who were more often an example of kids being kids, than of the “illuminated text-books” of “Spirit” he wanted them to be.²⁴²

Fumble about as he might, Alcott found that many of his peers nevertheless praised his idealism, even if conditionally so. Emerson and Hawthorne were the most generous. Emerson

²⁴² As Alcott would write in his section “Childhood” in *Table-Talk*, “Children are illuminated text-books, breviaries of doctrine, living bodies of divinity, open always and inviting their elders to peruse the characters inscribed on the lovely leaves. He who cannot divine their significance intuitively and truly, forfeits his claim to name them his or conduct their training during their tender and telling years” (58). If children were indeed illuminated textbooks, then Alcott was not always the closest reader. For more on Alcott’s views of his own daughters and their temperaments growing up, Alcott’s journals serve as an extensive and detailed record of his observations.

called Alcott a “God-made priest” and a “world builder.”²⁴³ Hawthorne would praise Alcott in a short story, “The Hall of Fantasy,” writing:

There was no man...whose mere presence the language of whose look and manner, wrought such an impression as that of this great mystic innovator. So calm and gentle was he, so holy in aspect, so quiet in utterance of what his soul brooded upon, that one might readily conceive his Orphic Sayings to well upward from a fountain in his breast, which communicated with the infinite abyss of thought.²⁴⁴

Hawthorne offers some insight into the strangeness of Alcott’s interests and work by calling him a “great mystic innovator.” Thoreau, however, was more reserved in his assessment, being less impressed with Alcott’s mysticism than Hawthorne. After spending a day with Alcott, Thoreau describes him in his journal, “He is broad & general but indefinite.”²⁴⁵ Each of these assessments by his peers are insightful: Alcott was a world builder, in many practical as well as more metaphysical ways, and he would, like Hawthorne’s description, come to think of himself as a “great mystic innovator.” But in all his endeavors of world building, be that a world of education or of a text, Alcott could never seem to be anything *but* indefinite.

Of all his peers, Margaret Fuller (who worked with Alcott at his Temple School) would be the most sagacious in her assessment, seeing beyond the mysticism and indefinite nature of Alcott’s life and work. Fuller was able to get to the heart of what makes Alcott so frustrating, but also to what might make him interesting for a reader invested in queer relationality. Frustrated with Alcott’s methods of teaching after working with him at the Temple school, she would write

²⁴³ Ralph Waldo Emerson to Frederic Henry Hedge, Concord, 20 July 1863, in *Letters* II, 29.

²⁴⁴ Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Mosses from an Old Manse: Volume I*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 2000. Internet resource.

²⁴⁵ Thoreau, *Journal*, 1842-1848, 223

a critique of his methods but not inform him of this until three years after doing so.²⁴⁶ Her most incisive criticism would come as a backhanded compliment, “The break of your spirit in the crag of the actual makes surf and foam but leaves no gem behind. Yet it is a great wave Mr. Alcott.”²⁴⁷ Beyond being an acerbic quip on Alcott’s “spirit,” Fuller’s remark is more penetrating than it might initially seem.

Fuller figures Alcott’s spirit as a wave breaking on the “crag of the actual” rather than as a wave coming into the shore and dissipating. With Alcott, actuality, or “the actual,” becomes a steep and sudden cliff that breaks the otherwise metaphysical aspirations of spirit. This interaction between the potentiality of “spirit” and the actuality of a material world does not consume or dissipate what Fuller calls Alcott’s spirit, nor does it produce anything we can immediately point to as a result of this interaction; there is no “gem” left behind. Instead the interaction produces a “great wave” and “surf and foam” — phenomena that, while physical, are themselves fleeting and evanescent. Therefore, when Alcott’s spirit meets the actual it does not produce anything of value (a gem) but it does produce *something*, “surf and foam.” That is, something ephemeral but loud and flamboyant in its ephemerality.

This chapter examines what it means to think of something (here Alcott’s texts, but also his utopian experiments) as being “great” while leaving “no gem behind.” Fuller points out the grandness of Alcott’s proclamations while also insisting that they have little or no substance (the break of a wave, the surf and foam), and therefore produce nothing. Fuller’s comments describe a queer mode of relation that I call a flamboyantly nonproductivity. Alcott’s prose thus exhibits a paradox; it doesn’t produce anything (often hardly even a logical point to follow) but it

²⁴⁶Matteson, John. *The Lives of Margaret Fuller: A Biography*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012), 123.

²⁴⁷Amos Bronson Alcott, “Scripture for 1840,” *Amos Bronson Alcott Papers*. Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 11 30.10 (10).

nevertheless places us in relation to *something*, even if that something amounts to only ephemeral textual noise. In this way, Alcott's flamboyant production (writing) of prose that remains nonproductive (gives the reader nothing to follow or take away) offers a new way to think about our modes of relation. While strange, this is not necessarily queer until we understand *what* Alcott flaunts. Alcott's prose flamboyantly demonstrates, or attempts to demonstrate, a relation with divinity that transforms both objects and time into a perpetual state of fluid becoming.²⁴⁸ Prose that attempts to not only advocate a phenomenology of fluid mode of relation, but which is just as concerned in showing off that it is doing so, can make finding what constitutes the erotic or what counts as queer especially difficult when reading Alcott. But again, his fascination with esoteric traditions helps make this task more plausible. The density and (to be frank) sloppiness of Alcott's prose demands approaching his work with a wider lens if we are to get a glimpse at the queer way his work approaches the world. That said, like Fuller, I want try to maintain that Alcott's writing leaves "no gem" behind. Alcott's prose focuses on flaunting intimacy rather than in sharing it, relying on public scorn as a marker for the achievement of gnosis and intimacy with 'Spirit.'²⁴⁹

Reading Alcott in this way requires that we wear two hats: theoretical and historical. My goal is therefore two-fold: first, I offer a close reading of Alcott's prose, specifically focusing on how he uses occult and mystic themes in his writing in a way that flamboyantly shows off a

²⁴⁸ Alcott's reading of German mysticism and general interest in other occult texts leads to his own writing on objects as having a hydraulic quality, as flowing into or out of being. Alcott's writing not only speaks to a hydraulic aesthetics thematically, but it does so formally as well—making it at times frustratingly difficult to ascertain his point. However, by attending to his aesthetics, a few things start to become clear in his work: For one, his view of concepts and objects returns time and again to esotericism. Therefore, to understand Alcott's thought, we must have some knowledge of the esoteric traditions he was drawing on. Furthermore, Alcott's insistence on his intimacy with objects and matter as being in flux and flowing into each other as well as toward the subject offers us a new way to think about relationality.

mystic relationality grounded in esoteric discourse. Alcott's work posits a world where objects and affects are vibrant with divinity, where they exist in a matrix of correspondence, and where marginal subjects (for Alcott, the mystic) are able to reform their relationship to time through intimacy with what he calls the flood tide of the soul. I call Alcott's prose flamboyant because he does not share this world with the reader, but rather places her at a distance; she has to have Alcott's imagination, Alcott's affective response, Alcott's view of the material world and time to understand his intimacy with divinity, and he's emphatic that we simply do not get it. In short, his prose wants to show off this intimacy, but only towards occluding others from taking part in it. Moreover, the view of the world that Alcott offers really does leave no gem behind, as Fuller aptly states, which leads me to my second goal: I end by interrogating the relationship between Alcott's interests in esoteric and mystic texts Fruitlands, where textual non-productivity becomes a ban on sexual reproduction. For the second part, I offer a decidedly more historical reading of Alcott. However, in looking to the "real world" implications of his interests, I want to end by thinking through the relationship that esotericism had to utopian goals, especially for the body and desire. Looking at the relationship between Alcott and Lane and the philosophical underpinnings of Fruitlands, I end by suggesting that their utopian experiment offers a glimpse into what a nineteenth-century proto-queer family might look like: a non-reproductive family arrangement that "leaves no gem behind," but which positions itself towards an imagined future of queer relationality.

Flamboyant Style and Mystic Intimacy in Alcott's "Orphic Sayings"

This section first explores the esoteric influences on Alcott's style by examining "Orphic Sayings," as well as some even lesser known moments in full-length works like *Table-Talk*. I'll discuss how the esoteric work of German mystics influenced Alcott, as well as the reception of

his work in the nineteenth-century. While establishing historical influences and reception for Alcott's work can give insight into what he might have been trying to accomplish, it does not offer much traction as to what to do with the strangeness of his prose. Therefore, I will then turn to a reading of the style of his work to offer close readings of how he treats objects. Doing so allows for a reading of Alcott that explores the queer possibilities of his style, as well as the new modes of relation his work opens up.

Unlike his peers (Emerson, Hawthorne, Fuller, Thoreau), little literary criticism exists on Alcott. Although there is a decent body of scholarship on his life—focusing on his role as an educator within the Transcendentalist tradition, as a father, and as a peer of other important thinkers—there is very little scholarship that examines Alcott's written work. The only scholars, to my knowledge, to comment extensively on Alcott's interests in esoteric traditions are Arthur Versluis and Catherine L. Albanese, neither of whom are literary critics. Both Albanese and Versluis' extensive knowledge and work on esoteric traditions allows them insight into the influences that inform Alcott's work.

Before turning to a textual example of Alcott's esoteric and occult interests, a more general view of his life demonstrates just how invested he was in these philosophies and practices.²⁵⁰ In her expansive and detailed study of what she calls "American metaphysical religion" Catherine L. Albanese, in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of*

²⁵⁰ Versluis, 118, 120. Versluis points to Alcott's letters as one example:

My studies for many years have lain in the direction of the Mystic authors, Jacob Behmen being a favorite, and, as I judge, the best mind of these last centuries. I was fortunate, when in England, in 1842, to find not only his works in Laws' [sic] edition, but most of the works of his disciples; Taylor, Pordage, Frances Lee, Law and others.

Versluis then goes on to argue that Alcott's interests were more expansive than German mysticism, "Because it is clear that Alcott was drawn to Bohmean theosophy and arguably knew more about it than anyone else in America at the time, it is not surprising that Alcott's interests also included alchemy and other esoteric traditions."

American Metaphysical Religion, offers an insightful history of Alcott's life. For one, his educational views and his vision of educational reform came, "through an immersion in the theosophy of Jacob Böhme, especially as mediated through the seventeenth-century English mystic John Pordage, and it brought with it a fascination with alchemy."²⁵¹ Albanese also notes that when studying Alcott's utopian pursuits, we need to remember that the "overt primitivism of Fruitlands, however, belied its literary grounding in the Hermetic tradition."²⁵² Beyond the literary and philosophical pursuits of esotericism in the Hermetic tradition, Alcott also shared an interest in the more popular manifestations of occult practices like spirit-contact, though this relationship was conflicted. Albanese goes on:

Bronson Alcott was interested in spirits. In a letter to his mother, Anna Alcott, in 1848, he told her that "as we are Spirits in Bodies, so we communicate with the Spirits in our own, or friends' Bodies, as we seek to become pure— which is but another name for being spiritual." He quoted Andrew Jackson Davis, the spiritualist seer from Poughkeepsie, New York, in the same letter and later visited Davis and his wife in New York City in 1856, attending a dinner with them about a week later where Fourier and freedom were discussed. More visiting and conversation on spiritualism with Davis came the following month, and afterwards Alcott continued to meet Davis and other spiritualists. Clearly, he was fascinated by their talk and ideas, and as Frederick C. Dahlstrand has noted, Alcott found links between his own magnetic theories of spiritual energy and the discourse of spiritualism. Yet in the end, Alcott would come to repudiate the

²⁵¹ Albanese, 164.

²⁵² Ibid., 171-172.

widespread practice of spiritualism as superstition and to find the populace at large credulous and their pursuit of spirits paganizing²⁵³

Alcott's involvement with esoteric and occult literature and practices was varied and extensive, ranging from the reading of little known esoteric and magical texts to the widely circulated discourse of spirit-contact. However, as Alcott's distrust of the popular movement of Spiritualism makes clear, he was more invested in theories and philosophies in their most abstract manifestations (especially as tied to mystic philosophy in the Hermetic tradition) than he was in exploring what the greater majority of the American population at the time found interesting about the occult. Alcott's relentless fascination with abstraction would influence the way he wrote about his esoteric and mystic viewpoints.

One of the best places to start as an illustration of Alcott's more mystic and esoteric investments is also one of his most embarrassing and least accessible, his "Orphic Sayings"—a text that would become the prime example of why *The Dial* was ridiculed.²⁵⁴ So strange, unclear,

²⁵³ Ibid., 179-180.

²⁵⁴ In his "Orphic Sayings" Alcott is also in debt to a German text, though in translation. In 1836 James Freeman Clark translated and published a short set of poems from Goethe titled "Orphic Sayings from Goethe" in *The Western Messenger*. After Clark gives his translations of three poems ("Destiny," "Chance," "Love") he gives a short reading of "Destiny," where he points to astrology "First comes Destiny, an idea, on which many philosophies and religions have been founded. The astrologers saw the future fate of the individual written in the heavenly house" (61). While Alcott's "Orphic Sayings" would place emphasis on a radically new future that breaks with the past, and the mystic power one gains from intimacy with his soul, Goethe's "Orphic Sayings" are closer to Alcott's writing about astrology in *Table-Talk*. Goethe (and to some extent Clark) opens with:

According as the sun and planets saw
from their bright thrones the moment of thy birth
Such is thy Destiny; and by that Law
Thous must go on—and on— upon the earth.
Such must thou be. Thyself thy cans't fly
So still do Sibyls speak, have Prophets spoken.
The living stamp, received from nature's die [sic],
No time can change, no art has ever broken

and befuddling where texts like “Orphic Sayings,” that a publication like *The New Englander* would tauntingly ask:

Shall we say any thing [sic] here of the DIAL?—the Dial, with the mystic symbols on its face, looking up not to the sun, but to the everlasting fog in which it has its being? Who Reads the Dial for any other purpose than to laugh at its baby poetry, or at the solemn fooleries of its misty prose.’²⁵⁵

If critics viewed *The Dial* as ridiculous, foggy, mystic, and infantile—then Alcott’s “Orphic Sayings” only made these accusations easier. In a review of *The Dial*, the editors of *The Knickerbocker* would take issue with Alcott especially:

we see no more of the “Orphic Sayings” and rejoice in the good taste of Mr. Emerson in clipping them at “Number One.” Such papers have but “once-readers.” There was not a half dozen clear ideas in the whole performance. The main impression of the reader was, that the writer had gone out of his wits, and that he had had no great journey to go, to get past their confines. Mounted on airy stilts of abstraction, he walked in the clouds, illuminated by a ‘sunshiny flash and a moonshiny haze.’²⁵⁶

Even Alcott’s more sympathetic contemporaries like Octavius Brooks Frothingham felt perplexed reading “Orphic Sayings.” In his 1876 *Transcendentalism in New England*, after praising Fuller’s criticism and Emerson’s work, Frothingham turns his attention to Alcott’s work,

If Alcott is writing in response to these “Orphic Sayings” then he is also taking a very different stance than Goethe. Alcott was obsessed with breaking away not only from the confines of his birth, but of time himself. If he saw himself as having any Destiny in way Goethe/Clark writes of it, then he saw it as a destiny that would break apart from law, time, and nature. He saw his destiny as finding a new time, new laws, and a more perfect nature. In a word, Eden.

²⁵⁵ “Prolegomena” *The New Englander* No 1 January (1843): 7

²⁵⁶ “Editor’s Table” *The Knickerbocker* 16.5 (November, 1840: 451).

“Alcott sent in chapters the ‘Orphic Sayings’ which were an amazement to the uninitiated and an amusement to the profane.”²⁵⁷ The popular treatment of Alcott’s texts, and the “Orphic Sayings” especially, as either laughable or unintelligible has, it would seem, also stopped them from receiving focused critical attention. Though a few critics have commented in passing on their importance, none except Versluis have given them sustained attention.

How then do we approach such a text? The most useful suggestion lies in the nineteenth-century itself.²⁵⁸ Turning back to Frothingham’s work, in his chapter on Alcott, (fittingly called “Alcott: The Mystic,” echoing Emerson’s *Representative Men*) Frothingham argues that the key to understanding the “Orphic Sayings,” lies within its stylistic influence. Defending Alcott against charges made by others that his thinking was foggy and unclear, Frothingham writes, “Yet the thought was intelligible, and even simple. In ordinary prose it would have sounded like commonplace. It was the mystic phrase, and the perpetual reiteration of absolute principles that made the propositions seem obscure.”²⁵⁹ As Frothingham argues, we need to be as attentive to Alcott’s style, to the “mystic phrase,” as much as we are to the mystic content of his work.

Comprehending the style of Alcott’s “mystic phase” demands an understanding of the mystic tradition he was in conversation with. For example, a passage from “Orphic Sayings,” begins to make sense once the mystic traditions Alcott draws upon become clear. For example, Alcott writes:

²⁵⁷ Frothingham, Octavius Brooks, *Transcendentalism in New England* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons), 1876, 133

²⁵⁸ Of course, there were contemporaries of Alcott’s that did not treat his work with such derision. For example, in 1840 Rhoda Newcomb wrote to her son, calling the “Orphic Sayings” “full of the highest wisdom” (<http://www.alcott.net/alcott/home/champions/Newcomb.html?index=1>) Newcomb is considered a minor figure, who was part of Fuller’s conversations, as well as in touch with Alcott. See “Conversations” *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, 355.

²⁵⁹ Frothingham, 259.

The popular genesis is historical. It is written to sense not the soul. Two principles, diverse and alien, interchange the Godhead and sway the world by turns. God is dual. Spirit is derivative. [...] Unity is actual merely. The poles of things are not integrated: creation [not] globed and orbed. Yet in the true genesis, nature is globed in the actual, souls orbed in the spiritual firmament. Love globes, wisdom orbs, all things. As magnet the steel, so spirit attracts matter which trembles to traverse the poles of diversity, and rests in the bosom of unity. All genesis is of love. Wisdom is her form beauty her costume²⁶⁰

Without an understanding of German mysticism, a passage like this “makes no sense whatever.”²⁶¹ However, examining the mystical tradition he draws upon, demonstrates that Alcott’s references are less obscure than they initially seem. For example:

The classical medieval mysticism of Tauler and Eckhard emphasizes the imageless transcendent divine unity, toward which the contemplative ascends. The Protestant mysticism of Böhme likewise emphasizes this divine love and wrath, both of which derive from transcendent divine unity. And the English Böhmean mystic John Pordage (whose work Alcott had read, as we shall see) speaks of the contemplative ascent to the divine using the visionary image of a globe. For Alcott to write that “Nature is globed” or that souls are “orbéd” is for him to rephrase Pordage, and to reiterate the traditional mystic understanding of correspondences between man a microcosm and nature macrocosm, both of which

²⁶⁰ Alcott, A. Bronson. http://www.alcott.net/alcott/archive/editions/Orphic_Sayings.html

²⁶¹ Versluis 154

have their origin in the divine, the perfection of which is symbolized by the orb or globe.²⁶²

In light of such a textual tradition and influences of other mystics, Alcott's "mystic style" appears less foggy, though not nearly as clear as his critics would have liked. Alcott's style remains surf and foam, and it is uncertain if it leaves anything behind. Though Versluis offers important work for the history and context of the text, he nevertheless goes on to write off Alcott's prose, "Unfortunately, as is more often the case than not, Alcott's phrasing is grotesque and virtually incomprehensible even for those who are familiar with his sources."²⁶³ Grotesque and incomprehensible, maybe, but instead using this as a reason to turn away from Alcott's work, I would suggest that we can mine rich critical possibilities from this mystic style that is not simply virtually incomprehensible, but flamboyantly so.

A passage about orbs and poles might seem like an odd place to start to talk about sexuality. Part of what makes this passage erotic, as well as mystical and queer, has to do with the way Alcott's stylistic incoherence is flamboyant about that incoherence. Alcott's prose is not interested in communicating so much as it is in showing off the intimacy it has with what he calls Spirit. "Orphic Sayings," revels in an exhibitionist fantasy of divine intimacy. Alcott's writing exhibits an intimacy with divinity that becomes incomprehensible to those outside of it, flamboyantly displaying erudition and gnosis to the point of occluding what it is speaking about. If we are reading this for queer style, Alcott's prose isn't the love that dare not speak its name, it's the love that speaks its name in tongues. That said, I am not simply arguing for a reading of Alcott's prose as having a queer style because of its flamboyance. (This in and of

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

itself does not strike me as enough to make such an argument tenable). Alcott's prose is queer because it is flamboyant about a *marginal intimacy* and queer forms of relationality.

While the later parts of "Orphic Sayings" illustrate this flamboyant intimacy, they never become overtly sexual, nor do they ever become concretized into a subject. Rather than being an interpretive problem, however, this can open new ways to read for a queerness that does not rise to the level of a discourse, but which instead manifests through style. Jordan Stein has advanced one of the most provocative and productive arguments on this point. In his discussion of the ways scholars might read queerness in texts that do not manifest signs of what we would not call homosexuality or even sexuality at a discursive level or even at the level of identity categories, Stein makes the following argument concerning readings that rely on a discursive and identity-bound reading of queerness. He proposes a reading practice that:

aims to collect into the history of sexuality versions of queerness that never accede to discourse. By "queerness" I refer to a variety of social, sexual, or stylistic aberrances distinguished by some particularity irreducible enough that they would be difficult to collect into generic categories. Such queerness might categorically or experientially overlap with "homosexuality" but would not be reducible to it [...]²⁶⁴

Going on, Stein argues that there are advantages for reading sexuality through an aesthetic lens:

One advantage of thinking about sexuality in aesthetic terms is that style generally requires an inductive analysis, beginning with evidence and working toward categories, whereas a discursive analysis more often begins with categories and collects evidence into them. Such deductive methods are questionably suited for

²⁶⁴ Stein, 213-14. See also Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

chronicling sexuality's history because the things to which "sexuality" refers are profoundly ephemeral (and often maddeningly unlocatable). It is not just a lack of discourse that could make "frank" claims about probable homoerotic relations fail to appear frank—such claims, then as now, can and do fall below the radar of existing discourses, due to the epiphenomenality, the incoherence, the experimental quality, or the epistemic plasticity of what such claims may refer to—due, in short, to what Richard Poirier, also writing about style, has called a "struggle to do something impossible." This is to say, too many phenomena that might, for scholarly purposes, profitably count as "sexuality" necessarily fail to be the kinds of phenomena around which an identity, a genre, or some other category might be organized.²⁶⁵

Stein offers an exciting approach for thinking about sexuality in a period like the nineteenth-century, though it is also a difficult one in that it requires a critical practice that does not look for strict categorical evidence. Instead, Stein's stylistic reading of sexuality demands a commitment to reading incoherence and ephemerality in a text while arguing for queerness without reducing it to an existing theoretical category. It's a tall order, but one that Stein is able to fulfill in part because he offers a reading of a text (*The Blithedale Romance*) which has stylistically queer moments that interact and exist alongside moments that scholars invested in gay history would point to as more easily recognizable or at least more amenable to categorization. Alcott's text does not offer any such background for his stylistics. Instead, it requires a focus on how stylistic flamboyance produces a queer relationship or intimacy with divinity: a relation that he seems to paradoxically flaunt in order to keep it occult.

²⁶⁵ Stein, 213-14.

Alcott's *Table-Talk* offers a more accessible place to start exploring his understanding of intimacy than the cryptic "Orphic Sayings." The prose style in *Table-Talk* appears even more unsteady than "Orphic Sayings"; whereas in "Orphic Sayings" Alcott consistently fumbles about with syntax and flaunts abstruseness, in *Table-Talk* he offers some moments of clarity. A section titled "Ephemerics" illustrates this:

I remember how my young fancy was charmed with the astrological picture fronting our annual almanac, representing the influences of the planets over the several members of the human body, their signs and aspects, and in what good faith the monthly prognostics of the weather were consulted for the guidance of rural affairs. And whatsoever of superstition or of credulity may have been intermingled with the current faith, there was a kind of wholesome piety implying a living affinity between man and the elements, an occult sympathy at least existing between mind and matter, which one must respect if not accept as genuine. It was an ancient doctrine handed down from remote forefathers, repeated in the annual calendars, celebrated besides by the poets from Hesiod to the last mottos of verse for the successive months throughout the year, and which, moreover, neither faith nor science has yet set aside."²⁶⁶

While there is much to unpack here, the title of the section is perhaps the best place to start. Many sections in *Table-Talk* seem to address ephemerality more directly. For example, Alcott will talk about "Becoming," "incarnation," and something he calls "metachemistry" where "Everything is fluent and aflame."²⁶⁷ All of these exhibit a more ephemeral nature than the almanac Alcott references. But the farmer's almanac *would* count as printed ephemera. In

²⁶⁶ Alcott, Amos Bronson, *Table-Talk*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877), 67.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

turning to ephemera for occult knowledge, Alcott undoes expectations for the origins of this type of knowledge. Rather than an ancient book, or some extensive tomb, Alcott finds this “ancient doctrine” in ephemera (the almanac).²⁶⁸ Rather than concretized in a bound volume or a library, ephemera become the site of occult knowledge. And for Alcott, this knowledge is one of secret intimacies, of esoteric relations.

The intimacy or “occult sympathy,” that Alcott argues as existing between men and planets, illustrates one of the central tenants of esoteric thought: the theory of correspondence, which he would have been reading in writers like Emanuel Swedenborg.²⁶⁹ Alcott does not just replicate this; his own language elaborates on the nature of correspondence. First, the knowledge of “occult sympathy” is not a knowledge he receives logically; instead he realizes it through a

²⁶⁸ It’s hard not to be reminded of Thoreau’s work in the “Reading” section of *Walden* where he makes reference to the heavens and reading:

However much we may admire the orator's occasional bursts of eloquence, the noblest written words are commonly as far behind or above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds. There are the stars, and they who can may read them. The astronomers forever comment on and observe them.

Thoreau is referring to the “distance” between spoken and written language, turning to a heavenly metaphor to illustrate this. However, his insistence “There are the stars, and they who can may read them” is an interesting one, because he obliquely references astrology. As he goes on, however, he makes no mention of the texts (either of astronomy or astrology) that would offer this kind of knowledge. In fact, Thoreau becomes more and more empathic about texts that are not ephemeral, expounding upon the benefits of classical literature. Alcott differs in his emphasis on ephemera as a place of wisdom, even conflating it with the classical authors that Thoreau attempts to distance from what he calls The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity.” (see “Reading” <http://thoreau.eserver.org>.)

²⁶⁹ For more on the defining aspects of esoteric thought, see Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany (State University of New York Press, 1994). Moreover, this is not just a correspondence between the human body and planets, but between parts of the human body and planets, reflecting an older early modern understanding of correspondence. While I’m unsure what sort of almanac Alcott would have been reading, or which kind would have been in circulation in the nineteenth century (though this would be a possible avenue for further research) Versluis in *Esoteric Origins* does give some good sources for the place of astrology in early America.

kind of magic where the object he views momentarily takes away his own agency. He writes, “my young *fancy* was *charmed* with the astrological picture.” This piece of ephemera charms, or spellbinds, his imagination (his “fancy”) on a level that, while within a text, is not discursive, since he is viewing an illustration. Going on, he writes, “there was a kind of wholesome piety implying a living affinity between man and the elements, an occult sympathy at least existing between mind and matter [...].”

Alcott’s modifiers are telling, the picture’s illustration of astrological correspondence does not create a standard religious piety or reverence, it creates “a kind of” piety—giving rise to something like piety but with a difference. In other words, esoteric knowledge creates a religious piety that both participates in and departs from more normative forms, giving us one of the first instances of Alcott’s use of esoteric phenomena to articulate something a bit queer or deviant. This slight difference in affect allows for a non-prosaic relation to divinity, and in “Orphic Sayings” Alcott becomes more and more emphatic about showing this off. Moving on, he ends by informing the reader that the knowledge he receives from the illustration in the almanac is not itself ephemeral, but historical, “It was an ancient doctrine handed down from remote forefathers, [...] and which, moreover, neither faith nor science has yet set aside.” This passage illustrates some of the central esoteric themes of Alcott’s prose in, what for Alcott will be, some of the most direct language we find: a doctrine of correspondence between mind and matter, correspondence which create an “occult sympathy,” and knowledge of this occult relationship as being ancient and, so far, standing up to science and faith. All this from a picture in printed ephemera. Alcott’s insistence that he receives (is charmed by) knowledge of the “occult sympathy” between mind and matter, men and planets, through *his* fancy, gives the first intimations of what will become the flamboyant style of “Orphic Sayings.” Alcott points out that

he has access to occult knowledge only through the power of *his own* imagination, and that having this knowledge creates intimacy with “distant forefathers.” In short, he’s quick to tell us he and Hesiod are close because they share a secret knowledge that can remain occult even when published in something as widely circulated as an almanac.

“Orphic Sayings” shares none of the clarity of the short “Ephemerides” from *Table-Talk*, but does offer the most productive material for understanding both Alcott’s flamboyant style, as well as just what he is so excited to flaunt. One passage in particular demonstrates Alcott’s flamboyance as well as his insistence (which “Ephemerides” also demonstrates) that what he is showing off is a secret. Alcott writes:

Great is the man whom his age despises. For transcendent excellence is purchased through the obloquy of contemporaries; and shame is the gate to the temple of renown. The heroism honored of God, and the gratitude of mankind, achieves its marvels in the shades of life, remote from the babble of crowds.²⁷⁰

It’s hard not to argue that Alcott is being a little autobiographical here, or (given his insistence on his occult knowledge and esoteric insight, that he’s prognosticating). Alcott figures negative emotional responses as a makers of what he calls “transcendent excellence.” Paradoxically, transcendent excellence is secret (“in the shades of life” “remote” and within a “temple of renown”) but it is also public (we know if we have attained it is *not* through the affective contours of the relationship itself, but through the societal response to this relationship). The intimacy Alcott seeks out can only be achieved as an occult sympathy; it is a hidden relationship beyond the “gate” of the “temple of renown”; one also finds it “in the shades of life, remote from the babble of crowds.” Nevertheless, it *must* have the babble of crowds, even if that babble is

²⁷⁰ Alcott, “Orphic Sayings.”

“the obloquy of contemporaries” to mark it as being heroic. Moreover, shame becomes the means for Alcott to enter what he calls this “temple of renown.” If popular scorn and derision are necessary markers for the intimacy Alcott seeks out in “Orphic Sayings,” then he actively invites obliquity and shame through an aggressive flaunting of divine intimacy, making this figure into a “hero.”²⁷¹

Alcott figures divine intimacy by identifying what it is not, drawing a distinction between the mystic and what he calls the “worldling.”²⁷² For Alcott, intimacy with divinity not only leads to becoming heroic and open to scorn, it also makes one a mystic. In the section titled “Mysticism,” Alcott writes:

Because the soul is herself mysterious, the saint is a mystic to the worldling. He lives to the soul; he partakes of her properties, he dwells in her atmosphere of

²⁷¹ More could be said here with regards to shame and queer structures of feeling. The conversation on shame as it relates to nonnormative sexuality, the politics of GLBTQ studies and queer theory is extensive. A useful entry point is the book *Gay Shame* edited by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. As Steven Low points out,

Many of the contributions to *Gay Shame* were inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay titled ‘Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity,’ published in the inaugural issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1993) and republished in the volume. Sedgwick argues that shame is the foundational affect that promotes identification, specifically queer identification. Furthermore, Sedgwick’s essay posits that “shame both derives from and aims toward sociability” and is essentially an act of performance. Sedgwick concludes by asserting that shame “generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an essence.”

Dealing with this affect from a queer theoretical perspective for the nineteenth-century demands other nuances, as we cannot speak of politics or identity in the same way. I bring up the debate here because Alcott uses shame as a way to outline his intimacy and identity as mystic. He reappropriates shame to find authenticity for the intimacy he experiences, and to make that intimacy occult. If we are thinking of this in terms of intimacy and the closet, then Alcott stays in the closet, but loudly. <http://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/orgs/e3w/volume-11-spring-2011/new-work-in-sexuality-studies/stephen-low-on-gay-shame>

²⁷² This itself recalls apophatic theology, which Alcott would have been familiar with from his reading within the mystic tradition.

light and hope. But the worldling, living to sense, is identified with the flesh; he dwells amidst the dust and vapors of his own lusts, which dim his vision, and obscure the heavens wherein the saint beholds the face of God.²⁷³

While not yet at the level of overt flaunting, (Alcott saves its most intense expression for an upcoming section) this passage exhibits a quality of self-righteousness. In addition, it advocates a virtual impossibility: what mystic constantly “dwells in [an] atmosphere of light and hope”? Even a mystic as well-read as St. John of the Cross is emphatic about what he calls the dark night of the soul. Alcott creates such a hyperbolic and perfect relation with divinity where the “saint beholds the face of God,” that he exposes the impossibility of doing so for most people, whom he describes as worldlings. In this way, he flaunts an impossibility for the reader, as well as invites scorn (which of course he reads as an indication of the worldling’s misunderstanding or jealousy for the mystic’s relationship to God and the soul). In sum, Alcott becomes an exhibitionist of intimacy—but rather than showing off worldly possession, or flaunting bodily pleasure, he becomes an exhibitionist of the ethereal.

The erotic and queer quality of such a passage has as much to do with the desire Alcott imagines the mystic to have as it does with the desire he wishes to incite in the others. For the mystic, Alcott imagines an unlimited intimacy with God. This intimacy with God is born out of a self-knowledge the mystic has for his relation to the soul (figured as female), so that the two become conflated. The mystic intimacy Alcott expounds upon is born out of a desire to “partake of [the] properties” of his soul. That is, it is a desire for knowledge of the self, but a knowledge which does not lead to anything, in the end only producing an “*atmosphere* of light and hope,” rather than giving one light and hope directly. The mystic’s desire for direct contact or gnosis of

²⁷³ Alcott, “Orphic Sayings.”

God leads to, oddly, an atmospheric relation: one “dwells” in it, rather than having a relationship to it. It’s a strange way to think about intimacy, but it also offers a queer way to do so. Alcott offers what at first seems a dyadic relationship, but one which never solidifies onto the desired object: we get atmospheres of light, not light, we see the face of God, but that face does not speak to us. Even when the text seems to offer direct contact with divinity, or offer an unparalleled intimacy, this intimacy turns out to be atmospheric and potential—Alcott’s mystic dwells in possibility, and his intimacy queers and understanding of intimacy as a direct interpersonal experience.

Thus far Alcott’s views of divine intimacy have manifested both as a unified occult sympathy between man and heavenly bodies, as well as an atmospheric relationship with divinity that obsessively focuses on ethereality. In both instances, the occult sympathy and the atmospheric relationship, Alcott draws a distinction between what he is able to experience, and what others have access to: his imagination gives him special access to esoteric truths (which, while in the open, are also occult) and his conception of the mystic draws off a minor position, separate from the worldling. In each case, Alcott positions his view as so special that it invites scorn, and so ethereal and unique that its reproduction would be, if not impossible, at least a means to attenuate its uniqueness.²⁷⁴ At this point, however, how Alcott stylistically flaunts this

²⁷⁴ I realize that as we move further into Alcott’s prose what is occult might not be immediately clear. While in a text like *Table-Talk* Alcott is a bit more emphatic as to what practices we might point to as recognizably part of the occult, his writing is not as concerned with these as, say, someone like Margaret Fuller. Alcott’s obsession with ethereality draws him to mystic writers in the Western Hermetic tradition, but this is more esoteric than occult. That is, it is a secret body of knowledge, or a means to gnosis. In this way, Alcott can think of his religious life as orthodox. When he is describing the astrological correspondence in *Table-Talk*, he is careful to avoid any heterodoxical implications this might have for a Christian, when he emphasizes that even the more popular occult art of astrology produces a kind of religious piety. That said, I maintain that the combination of Alcott’s careful acquisition of occult books and his reading of a mystic like Böhme demonstrates that even at his most abstract, he is still working within a tradition of

remains unclear. Understanding his flaunting involves a closer examination of the flamboyance of his style, specifically the flamboyant fluidity of his prose. This remains one of the more difficult parts of Alcott's work to unpack because of his willed abstruseness. However, if we understand the way that flamboyance both closes off a relationship while creating a spectacle of it—then we might gain insight into some queer possibilities within it.

It helps to be reminded that intimacy never exists as a pure dyadic relation, but is always positioned towards the social; one can be “open” about his intimacies or keep them secret. Alcott offers a third formation, however, something of an open secret: he flaunts his “secret”; he flamboyantly proclaims an intimacy to which only he has access. Doing so causes the social to have a very different formation around the flaunted intimate relationship. After all, Alcott does flaunt his occult sympathy as a form of pride that invites shame. Were this not enough, he figures the intimacy he flamboyantly illustrates as reshaping the whole phenomenological world. Flaunting becomes not just a means of showing off intimacy with divinity, it becomes a means for expressing a mystic view of objects that, through the abstruseness of style, resists reproduction: Alcott's style is so thick, so obsessive in its attempt to illustrate something beyond practical use that it resists reproduction, yet it is so flamboyant about all of this that it presents itself as the very thing we need to reproduce to gain access to a secret gnosis of the world that would refigure our relationship to it.

The section of “Orphic Sayings” titled “Originality” best illustrates Alcott's obsession with, and flaunting of, the unreproducible uniqueness of his divine relationality. Dense, obsessed

writers who were invested in the Western Hermetic tradition. Alcott's lack of more popular occult practices (as illustrated in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*) does not indicate a lack of interest so much as it demonstrates a scorn for what he viewed as popular and lowbrow. This becomes more apparent I believe in sections like “Originality” in “Orphic Sayings.”

with the fluidity of phenomena, and emphatic about the originality of Alcott's man in contrast to others, this section offers one of the strangest and most challenging moments in the text:

Most men are on the ebb; but now and then a man comes riding down sublimely in high hope from God on the flood tide of the soul, as she sets into the coasts of time, submerging old landmarks, and laying waste the labors of centuries. A new man wears channels broad and deep into the banks of the ages; he washes away ancient boundaries, and sets afloat institutions, creeds, usages, which clog the ever flowing Present, stranding them on the shores of the Past. Such deluge is the harbinger of anew world, a renovated age. Hope builds an ark [...] Thitherward the retreating tide rolls, and wafted by the gales of inglorious ease or urged by the winds of passion, they glide down the Lethean waters, and are not. Only the noble and heroic outlive in time their exit from it.²⁷⁵

This passage demonstrates some of the most important themes for Alcott's prose, as well as anticipates the position he would see Fruitlands taking. Alcott describes a world predicated on competing hydraulic forms of temporality, where time becomes manipulated by the uniqueness of a messianic figure.

²⁷⁵ This passage is also very similar to an entry Alcott made in his *Journal*. To this point, I have not found any scholarly comment on this point, perhaps because this text is so understudied. However, while the similarity is clear, the difference is important as it gives us some insight into Alcott's editing process. In addition, to be frank, it also signals that he *did* edit his writing, thought the "Orphic Sayings" might seem otherwise. Alcott's journal entry for April 5th 1839 reads:

Most men are on the ebb; but now and then a man comes ridding down sublimely, in high hope, from God, on the flood-tide of the Soul as it set into the coasts of Time, submerging old landmarks and laying waste the doings of centuries. A new man wears channels broad and deep into the banks of the Ages. He flood away ancient boundaries and sets afloat institutions, creeds, usages which clog the overflowing current of life, stranding these on the shores of the past (122).

Alcott figures the soul not as a static object, but as a hydraulic force in relation to time. First he figures most people as moving away from time, “most men are on the ebb.” It’s a messy metaphor, but Alcott argues that most people are on an ebb that moves away from time itself, which he calls the “coasts of time.” More than just fading into the past, Alcott writes off others as loosing their access to time itself, which he argues exists in its best state as an “ever flowing Present.” The same force that carries others away from time also allows Alcott’s messianic figure to move closer to this temporal shore, not only accessing it, but altering its structure. Alcott’s flood tide is both outside of time (it ebbs and flows outside of its limit, or “coasts”) as well as in relation to it (it leaves physical marks on it “channels” and “banks”). This force, divine and eternal in nature, is the “flood tide of the soul.” The soul becomes dynamic and hydraulic, and one’s relationship to his soul is a means of dramatically altering his relation to material and temporal phenomena. Not so much an object as a force, Alcott’s version of the soul reaches so deeply into time that it rewrites the past while creating a new future.

This force, or flood tide is itself flamboyant. It is so overwhelmingly powerful that it alters time, and it attracts attention from the grandness of its actions by “washing away boundaries,” “submerging old landmarks, and laying waste the labors of centuries,” and then sets afloat entire institutions. Moreover, the flamboyance of this passage is located in the willful exuberance of the soul. Alcott argues that the soul is a force that is not only powerful and monumental, but exuberant in the way it forcefully creates a perpetual newness. The originality and newness of Alcott’s man is flamboyantly destructive of anything that came before it. It must first erase all of the past by creating new temporal passage ways that wear “channels broad and deep into the banks of the ages.” The flood tide of the soul, this “original” force for Alcott “washes away

ancient boundaries, and sets afloat institutions, creeds, usages, which clog the ever flowing Present, stranding them on the shores of the Past.”

Margaret Fuller was correct; Alcott really does want to be a wave— loud, great, and magnificent, but he “leaves no gem behind” because he is more concerned with destroying anything that would be left behind in an attempt to occupy the “ever flowing Present.”

Beyond being flamboyant and original, Alcott’s messianic figure is also queer in his insistence on his non-reproductive and marginal position. The “deluge,” described in the passage, so powerful as to become “the harbinger of a new world, a renovated age,” is both a destructive force and one that Alcott places most people in opposition to. By turning towards an interior intimacy with his soul (“man comes riding down sublimely in high hope from God on the flood tide of the soul”) Alcott’s figure is so close to his soul that he can access its flood tide and reshape time. But unlike earlier where divine intimacy gave Alcott access to a past full of occult knowledge, Alcott’s new man is so “original” he can only give birth to the future through the destruction of the past. But unlike forms of anti-reproductively that scholars in queer theory have explored, for example Leo Bersani in *No Future*, Alcott’s figure offers *Only Future*: a futurity that is only possible by the complete erasure of the past, a future that has to “unclog” the “ever flowing Present” to allow it to access a future that will never be legible as any sort of past, since Alcott’s flood tide would quickly erase that. Alcott offers a temporal flow from the eternal space of the soul that has to constantly erase the past to allow it the space to move into a new and unique future. In short, his gnosis of Spirit, and his mystic intimacy with God creates annihilation, not birth. Annihilation not reproduction becomes Alcott’s means of moving into the future.

Though, on second thought, annihilation might not be the right choice of words. While the force of the soul in Alcott's prose is almost reckless in the way it undoes any landmark, indiscriminately lays waste to any labor in the past, and does not care what "institutions, creeds, [or] usages," it erases so long as it erases them, it nevertheless does produce something. It "wears channels broad and deep into the banks of the ages." But even this something becomes a kind of nothingness; these are channels within Alcott's figuration of time itself. The flood tide produces a means of moving through time differently. Alcott's new man, so intimate with the force of his own soul, has a different passageway through time. But, importantly, he does not move through that channel alone. After all, Alcott ends the passage saying, "Hope builds an ark [but] Only the noble and heroic outlive in time their exit from it." Alcott would not be speaking abstractly here, and would himself attempt to build an ark in the form of a utopian community: a ship that would allow him to sail towards "a renovated age." This ark, however, would be fragmented and full of holes, and Alcott would soon find himself not sailing on the flood tide of his soul, but drowning in the deluge of his own ambitions.

Fruitlands, Futurity, and the Queer Family

*"Believing the Spirit has so far established its nature in you, as to make you willing to co-operate with itself in Love-Operations, I am induced, without apology, to address you as a friend and companion in the hidden path of Love's most powerful revelations."*²⁷⁶

*"Poor Fruitlands! The name was as great a failure as the rest!"*²⁷⁷

Even when it came to moving from textual to social ambitions, Bronson Alcott would again find himself in his daughter's shadow. Not one piece of writing by Bronson Alcott serves

²⁷⁶ James Pierrepont Graves to Bronson Alcott, Letter 1837. Reproduced in Charles Lane, "A. Bronson Alcott's Works," 422.

²⁷⁷ Alcott, Lousia May, "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873), (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature* Vol 2, New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 2586.

as the best-known account of Fruitlands; instead scholars turn to Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats."²⁷⁸ "Transcendental Wild Oats" satirizes the Fruitlands community, and it is as brief as it is incisive about what made the whole experiment a failure. While cutting in its critique, Louisa May Alcott's short story does the same work as *Little Women*; it offers a small window into the esoteric underpinnings of the Fruitlands experiment. In a single sentence, Louisa May Alcott alludes to the esoteric pursuits of her father and Charles Lane, their utopian goals, and the way the physical conditions of daily life stood in deep contrast to these metaphysical desires. Describing how they were not supposed to use animal fat for their lamps, but how her mother would not budge on this point, rightly insisting she needed light to sew and read, Louisa May Alcott writes:

So "mother's lamp" burned steadily, while the philosophers built a new heaven and earth by moonlight; and through all the metaphysical mists and philanthropic pyrotechnics of that period, Sister Hope played her own little game of "throwing light," and none but the moths were the worse for it.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Of course, there has been some very extensive biographical and historical work on Fruitlands. Richard Francis' *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and their Search for Utopia* stands out in particular as one of the most detailed, and is perhaps the best study to date. Francis also situates Fruitlands in a larger context in his previous book, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Claire Endicott Sears' *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands and Transcendental Wild Oats* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915) is a good source of culled primary material, though it is limited. As Francis points out, while sections of Alcott's journals have been published by Odell Shepard in 1983 (the edition is now out of print) this too is only a fraction of the sixty-two manuscript volumes held at Harvard's Houghton Library. In the "Sources" section of *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and their Search for Utopia*, Francis offers other avenues for finding material on Charles Lane and James Pierrepont Graves, though with Graves sources are even scarcer and less well-know. In sum, there is still important archival work to do be done in this area, especially by literary scholars who bring a different lens than historians, who have been the primary source of Alcott scholarship thus far.

²⁷⁹ Alcott, L.M., 2580.

Though Fruitlands was a farm, Louisa May Alcott points out that the men were “philosophers” who were not concerned with harvesting, instead obsessing over how they could with build an entirely “new heaven and earth by moonlight.” Alcott figures this as “metaphysical mists and philanthropic pyrotechnics.” It’s a telling image, a farm full of moonlit philosophy and a misty and mystical metaphysics that ignored physical conditions to its detriment. In other words, Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane were in the dark: each unable to see through the mists of their philosophy. They may have had a vision of building a new world, but the vision was never very clear, and they were often blinded by their esoteric commitments. In the end, it would be “Sister Hope” or Abigail Alcott who would, indeed, shed light on the situation, illuminating the utopian project’s failure, and enlightening others to the necessity of desire, the physical body, and the material world. All that said, Fruitlands, as “Transcendental Wild Oats” so aptly puts, “bore an invisible harvest”—but understanding what exactly that harvest was means understanding the vision Bronson Alcott had for his project, as well as how he planned to get there.

In a very literal way, esoteric philosophy was at the center of Fruitlands, since the community’s central possession was not an orchard, nor fertile land, nor even goods they could trade— but books. In “Transcendental Wild Oat,” Alcott writes:

The furniture arrived the next day, and was soon bestowed, for the principal property of the community consisted in books. To this rare library was devoted the best room in the house, and the few busts and pictures that still survived many fittings were added to beautify the sanctuary, for here the family was to meet for amusement, instruction, and worship.²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 2579.

Louisa May Alcott does not elaborate that part of what made this “rare library” rare was the nature of the books and manuscripts it contained: books on magic, esoteric philosophy, and mysticism.²⁸¹ When Emerson was visiting Fruitlands, the esoteric and occult literature was so blatantly obvious it gave him pause, Richard Francis writes that Emerson “was impressed by the thousand books they [Alcott and Lane] had brought with them, a combination of the Alcott House library and purchases Alcott himself had made in London and Derbyshire, but a little appalled by the unrelenting mysticism of their contents.”²⁸² I’m not sure appalled is the right word, though as Emerson’s writing in Margaret Fuller’s *Memoirs* clearly illustrates, he was at the very least deeply distrustful of esoteric and mystic texts. In his letter to his brother, William, Emerson writes:

Alcott & his friends Lane & Wright have safely arrived, & we expect Mr Lane & son (a boy of 9 or 10 years) to spend a few weeks with us. Lane seems to be quite a superior person. He is the author of the two pieces on Graves & on Cromwell, in the last Dial. They have brought out a thousand volumes, chiefly mystical & philosophical books,—which I saw safely through the Custom House forms yesterday, & tonight this cabalistic collection arrives in Concord. We shall scarcely need the moon any longer o’ the nights. They have brought 9 or 10 volumes of Mr Graves’s MSS, & some casts & prints of him & others, & what with these, & their wonderful selves, they hardly believe that they have left anything behind them in England.²⁸³

²⁸¹ One could object that she may not have known nor remembered the contents of the library having been so young during Fruitlands, however, she was such an avid reader she may very well have been puzzled by the contents. On this, we can only speculate.

²⁸² Francis, 97.

²⁸³ Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Emerson, Concord, October 26, 1841 *Letters* Vol. 3 93

If anything, Emerson might be somewhat snarky in his letter, calling Lane “superior” and “wonderful.” After all, once Fruitlands got underway, he hardly had a high opinion of Lane, and in the letter, it seems he hints at being somewhat suspicious of Lane’s devotion to Graves. Most telling, is his comment about not needing the moon any longer. Either Emerson imagines these cabalistic texts has having some phosphorescent radiation, or as glowing with a potential lunacy.²⁸⁴

While this collection of esoteric and magical texts was at the center of Fruitlands, its significance has nevertheless remained somewhat in the dark.²⁸⁵ In part, this is because there are no extensive records of the Fruitlands experiment.²⁸⁶ We know only a few things: the dietary habits were vegetarian, they refused to wear cotton because it was tied to slave labor and refused to wear wool because they would be “stealing” from the sheep, they were clueless about farming, and for its short seven months, many of the inhabitants, especially Abigail Alcott and her daughters, experienced extreme hardship. Informing the whole experiment was the philosophy of James Pierrepont Graves (1777-1842), the English mystic who founded Alcott House. We know very little of Graves, but we do know that he had many esoteric investments, as *The Dial* makes clear:

At the same time he had some peculiar opinions, resembling the German mystical and metaphysical speculations, hard to be understood, and to which few in general

²⁸⁴ Francis, 97. Francis believes Emerson imagines the texts to be glowing.

²⁸⁵ Emerson again mentions the library in his November 21st, 1842 letter to Frederic Henry Hedge, “Sooner or later we shall print some account of the rare & valuable mystical library of a thousand volumes.” Emerson, *Letters* Vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939.), 96

²⁸⁶ Within the Alcott manuscripts there are pages torn out of journals around this period.

are willing to listen, and still fewer to subscribe; but his sincerity, and the kindness of his disposition always secured for him a patient hearing.²⁸⁷

Graves's "mystical and metaphysical" speculations may have had few listeners, but Alcott and Lane's ears were open to what he had to say, especially when it came to the utopian promise of those esoteric theories.

In short, Graves promised nothing less than paradise on earth, the restoration of Eden. How this was to be accomplished, however, was as convoluted as it was queer. Again, Louisa May Alcott gives the best summary, "Pledged to the spirit alone, the founders anticipate no hasty or numerous addition to their numbers. The kingdom of peace is entered only through the gates of self-denial; and felicity is the test and the reward of loyalty to the unswerving law of Love."²⁸⁸ Eden was only to be achieved through a rigorous practice of self-denial, and for Graves this involved a deep suspicion of sex. Louisa May Alcott goes on:

The prospective Eden at present consisted of an old red farm-house, a dilapidated barn, many acres of meadow-land, and a grove. Ten ancient apple trees were all the 'chaste supply' which the place offered as yet; but, in the firm belief that plenteous orchards were soon to be evoked from their inner consciousness, these sanguine founders had christened their domain Fruitlands.²⁸⁹

Writing in retrospect, Alcott's wording of "chaste supply" is especially telling. Referring to this passage from "Transcendental Wild Oats," Richard Francis notes:

This was (ironically) less ironic and more literally true than she intended, since their [Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane's] commitment to what the Greavesians

²⁸⁷ Graves. See *The Dial* 3 (1843): 230.

²⁸⁸ Alcott, 2576.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

called the Antecedent, the world before the Fall encouraged a notion that perfection could be instantly rediscovered, a fascination with the ‘flash’ of germination rather than with the slow, earthly process of developing and ripening.²⁹⁰

For Graves, and thus for Alcott and Lane, a perfect future is actually the restoration of a lost past. Eden, what Graves called the Antecedent, although located in the past, but must become something one moves towards, and its temporal implications aside, chastity would soon emerge as a means for doing so. In addition, this imperative creates a paradoxical temporality, where the ideal future is a movement towards a past one has never lived. The Antecedent is not simply a wish to move back into the past, but a displacement of a perfected past into the future. Moreover, because the Antecedent is a past that has never been experienced, it exists only as a past potentiality. For Alcott and Lane, this prelapsarian space becomes a past potentiality that gets displaced into the future. Eden is both lost and yet-to-be.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Francis, 155.

²⁹¹ More research would need to be done here to investigate the relationship between Graves’s idea of the Antecedent and Jewish eschatology. Both the Talmud and the body of texts that make up some of the core literature and the Kabbalah share similarities in terms of their conception of Eden, though Graves seems to be more literal in his interpretation. In addition, because cabalistic thought influenced the thinking of a writer like Böhme, this could offer another avenue for study, in terms of the relationship between the Kabbalah and the Western Hermetic tradition. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, in England, the Kabbalah would become absolutely central to hermetic societies, especially The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, giving birth to what is now referred to Hermetic Kabbalah. See Howe, Ellic. *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order, 1887-1923*, (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972). For the rituals of the order, where one can see both the Victorian cultural influences, a fascination with Egypt, and the influence of the Kabbalah and Elphis Levi, see Regardie, Israel, Cris Monnastre, and Carl L. Weschcke. *The Golden Dawn: A Complete Course in Practical Ceremonial Magic : the Original Account of the Teachings, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (stella Matutina)*, (St. Paul, Minn., U.S.A: Llewellyn Publications, 1989).

Complicating this even more, Eden is lost, yet-to-be, *and* already present. To understand this, it helps to understand the Böhman thought that Graves drew upon, and which Alcott read extensively.²⁹² In *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art and Consciousness*, Arthur Versluis gives a good summary of Böhme's thought:

Böhme held that before the cosmos came into being, there was the *Ungrund*, or transcendent abyssal origin. From this emerged two realms, the dark-world of wrath and the paradisaal light-world, and after a series of catastrophes, a "third principle," physical nature. Human beings can participate in all three of these principles [...] Our purpose as human beings, simply put, is to transmute the wrath-quality of ourselves into paradisaal light and love.²⁹³

The way one transmutes himself into that state of light and love is through an intimacy with God, and thus a return to Eden. Böhme writes:

our whole religion consists in learning how to go out of dissension and vanity and to reenter the one Tree, whence we have come in Adam, and which is Christ in us. [Therefore] he who fully enters into this state of divine rest in Christ arrives through His at the perception of divinity. He then sees God in himself and everywhere; he speaks with God and God speaks with him²⁹⁴

This state of mystic union with God allows one to return to the Antecedent. For Alcott, as his "Orphic Sayings" made clear, this is also a state that stands in contrast to not only the physical

²⁹² As Versluis points out, "What is more, this little known association between Alcott and Protestant Bohmean mysticism, and possibly alchemy, suggests a deep filiation between Emersonian Transcendentalism and Protestant nonsectarian theosophy—including filiations between Alcott's Fruitlands experiment and earlier American Bohmean communities like Ephrata, in the eighteenth century—that certainly could bear further exploration." (123)

²⁹³ Versluis, Arthur. *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 69-70.

²⁹⁴ Böhme *Regener*, viii, 2 and *Mysterium Magnum* xlii, 63

world, but to time itself. The man who has returned to God, has, in restoring the Antecedent, also altered time, Alcott writes, “but now and then a man comes riding down sublimely in high hope from God on the flood tide of the soul, as she sets into the coasts of time, submerging old landmarks, and laying waste the labors of centuries.” Might sound good on paper, but within the context of attempting to make this happen, Fruitlands illustrates that the flood tide of the soul might be powerful enough to alter one’s understanding of time, but the world resists being submerged. In reality, Alcott’s flood tide was more of a trickle.

Whatever the power behind this force, Alcott would not just attempt to implement Graves and Böhme’s ideas in his writing, but do so in his daily life. If finding paradise was contingent upon intimacy with divinity, then in Fruitlands he saw that one way to attempt to restore the Antecedent was to restructure the nature of intimacy itself—attempting to make it increasingly ethereal and divine. Unlike other mystics, instead of using an erotic language to describe divine intimacy, Lane and Alcott become obsessed with the eradication of erotics and passion from intimate relations, advocating for what they called the consociate family.²⁹⁵ The Consociate family represented an effort to make the esoteric philosophy of Graves a lived experience. As Versluis writes, “Alcott remains alone among the Transcendentalists and, for that matter, in the entire American Renaissance, for of all things, his interests in practical esotericism and in making theosophy a part of lived experience.”²⁹⁶

Fruitlands was to restore an Edenic state through the new structure of the consociate family, and the guiding law of that structure was abstinence: abstaining from animal food, only drinking water, not using artificial light, and celibacy. The letter Lane and Alcott composed

²⁹⁵ In this way, Alcott and Lane differ from many writers who used erotic language to describe their relationship with the divine. See Halligan, Fredrica R, and John J. Shea. *The Fires of Desire: Erotic Energies and the Spiritual Quest*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992)

²⁹⁶ Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*, 123.

called “The Consociate Family” is confusing as to the message it wants to put forth about celibacy, since it places the family *and* celibacy at the center of the utopian project. It first opens with an image of two nesting birds: “As birds migrate to our latitude in the warm season, build and use their nests, sing a song or two, and as the cold approaches depart to a warmer zone, so man is sent from balmier climes to breed upon the earth.”²⁹⁷ The image is clear that the birds build their nest within a warm climate, where they will produce offspring, but leave this during the winter. Simple enough. But when applying this to human reproduction, Lane and Alcott turn the image on its head, so that human mating happens when people leave “balmier climes to breed upon the earth.” Human sexuality is figured in *opposition* to nature—birds mate in warm weather, but leave this when winter approaches, but humanity has left some sort of heavenly warmth (the “balmier climes”) to “breed upon the earth.” Therefore reproduction for humans takes place in some kind of cold climate—or at least cold in comparison to where it originated.²⁹⁸

The metaphor is unclear, and in that respect indicative of Alcott and Lane’s thinking on the subject. They desire a divine chastity as a means of securing their utopian future, yet they keep returning to the need for reproduction. It seems that to get back to Eden necessarily involves future generations, but doing so means engaging in sex. Lane would try to get around this issue by advocating for a marriage free of passion, saying that the ideal marriage was a

²⁹⁷ Quoted in Francis, 209.

²⁹⁸ Taking this further, Alcott and Lane might be playing with the idea of seasonality, where the earth is subject to seasonal shifts and a different time scale than the balmier climate (Eden or heaven) from which humanity has departed and where reproduction was not necessary. This might seem an odd way to figure heaven, in terms of seasonality, but in fact this was coming into popular discourse, especially among Spiritualists at the time, who called heaven the Summerland. see Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land*. (1868) (Los Angeles, Calif: Austin Pub, 1920).

“Union of Spirit selected pairs in sympathetic harmony.”²⁹⁹ Of course, it remains unclear if Lane saw the Alcotts as embodying this, and his letters seem to suggest otherwise. While marriage was a necessity, and the family the central structure of the consociate family, Lane and Alcott end the letter oddly saying that one should both be part of a family and not be. They conclude with a laundry list of rhetorical questions on the subject of abstinence:

Shall I warm my bathing water? Not if cheerfulness is valuable. Shall I clothe in many garments? Not if purity is aimed at. [...] Shall I teach my children the dogmas inflicted on myself, under the pretense that I am transmitting truth? Nay, if you love them, intrude not these between them and the Spirit of all Truth. [...] Shall I claim property in any created things? Shall I adopt a form of religion? Shall I become a parent? Shall I interest myself in politics? To how many of these questions, could we ask them deeply enough, could they be heard as having relation to our eternal welfare, would the response be “ABSTAIN!”³⁰⁰

Lane and Alcott advocate for what amounts to an impossibility. If any of these austerities were to be possible, they would only be able to occur in the “balmier climes” alluded to, and Fruitlands would prove insufficient to the task.

²⁹⁹ See Lane’s revision of Graves’s “Table of Circumstantial Law, published in the *Healthian* in 1842, quoted in Francis, 160. The table of “The Circumstantial Law,” lists different circumstances (Air, Food, Clothing, Habitation, Employment, Religion, and Marriage) and then lists them on a scale from best to worst (“Best, for the Spirit of Nature Love Conditions,” “Better, for the Soul, or Human Nature Light Condition,” “Good, for the Body, Life Conditions,” and “Bad, for all Nature Prevailing erroneous Conditions.”) Under the marriage column, the conditions from best to worst are listed thus, “Union of Spirit selected pairs in sympathetic harmony,” “Co-education or betrothment of Spirit selected pairs,” “Social intercourse of Families, Races and Nations,” and “Legal Bonds Animal Lust.”

³⁰⁰ *The New Age* 11.1 (November 1843): 116.

Rather than seeing Fruitlands as a failure, we might instead look for the “invisible harvest” of Alcott and Lane’s murky sketches of utopian relationality, a harvest gathered from the ways they imagine new forms of relation. Richard Francis pointedly asks:

What does the phrase “consociate family” mean, or imply? A transitional structure, there to be outgrown? Or a small-sized community mirroring—to an extent based on—the biological unit?³⁰¹

Answering this is impossible, but perhaps it is the “evasiveness and muddle” of Alcott’s vision which deserves critical attention and not dismissal. While his philosophy might leave no gem behind, the muddle itself becomes the “invisible harvest.” Fruitlands illustrates the struggle of visionary desire, the ways Alcott tries to imagine and flaunt new forms of relationality.

Fruitlands illustrates that Alcott’s vision never becomes clear. His shifting back and forth between flaunting a unique intimacy that only his visionary mystic can access, needing the structure of the family, and then advocating for a family structure without parents founded on abstinence, leaves the whole thing in a muddle: unclear, frustrating, and inexact. But these are the qualities that in turn open up a space for experimentation, for a queer mode of relationality. Alcott’s visionary desire forces a strangeness into his vision of the world, the future, and the family because it never settles into anything readily definable. The consociate family hijacks the affective life of the family structure (the passion around sexual reproduction), and turns this into abstinence for the sake of a desire for the Antecedent. The consociate family imagines a different kind of future, a different kind of family, but it can’t even seem to really see what that would be. On some level, this queers the family structure, not just because it makes it different, but because

³⁰¹ Francis, 209.

it does so in a way where it never gives us any working structure. Instead, Alcott's consociate family fumbles about, attempting to imagine an impossible past into a possible future.

Coda: "Lambent Flash" Alcott's Electric Vision

A close examination of Fruitlands and the esoteric impulses that acted as its unstable foundation illustrates that Alcott's "failure" was a vision "worth the having" because made space for new modes of relation. Moreover, Alcott's experiment makes clear that dwelling in possibility is not always pleasurable; oftentimes, existing in a state of possibility can be painful, confusing, or frustrating. It can invite ridicule and scorn as his "Orphic Sayings" demonstrates. It can mean a separation from others, and as "The Consociate Family" shows, dwelling in possibility can mean evasiveness, confusion, and murky metaphors. Yet each of these affective registers, and each of these texts (*Table-Talk*, "Orphic Sayings," "The Consociate Family") offers a new mode of relationality.

Unfortunately, even with the critical possibilities his work offers Alcott's writing remains understudied, in part because his life is often seen as somewhat abusive, "The fiasco of Fruitlands and the perception that he had abused his family there damaged Bronson Alcott's reputation permanently."³⁰² But within the satire "Transcendental Wild Oats," Louisa May Alcott gives space for her father's vision; she does not shun him, even while critiquing him. In addition:

Bronson was an unwavering fan of her writing, even when he was the butt of her satire. In her story "Transcendental Wild Oats," the Fruitlands episode is wittily revisited, including the unfortunate day when "some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away" right at harvest time. Rather than being offended, Bronson

³⁰² Brooks, 9.

praised "the boldness and truthfulness of her strokes... Louisa, in her story, makes the best of her materials." All the more unfair, then, that Alcott's reputation should have suffered on account of his daughter's success.

But Louisa wasn't the only Alcott able to make "the best of her materials." Bronson did so as well, though like the ephemera that offered him insight into occult sympathies, Alcott's materials would quickly fade.

But they did produce something. The greatest takeaway from Fruitlands was the invisible harvest of his queer possibility, a vision he would later describe as "clairvoyant."³⁰³ More than the esoteric philosophy of Graves that informed Alcott's thinking about utopian communities, or the library of esoteric and occult texts that sat at the center of the experiment, it was Alcott's own "clairvoyant" vision of Fruitlands that acted as motivation and the sustenance of his spiritual life. Alcott describes the experience at length in his journal.³⁰⁴ He writes:

Sometimes I was unable to relinquish studies, so delicious was thought to me, and sat up all night [...] I bathed in cold water, ducking head and shoulders for several times successively to the bottom of the capacious tub in which I stood, and poured water by pailfuls over the whole body, rubbing down briskly afterwards with crash towels, and practiced friction with the flesh brush.³⁰⁵ In the coldest

³⁰³ Alcott claims that he had the clairvoyant experience between February and March 1844. See Alcott, Amos Bronson "Bronson Alcott's 'Autobiographical Index'" ed. David P. Edgell in *New England Quarterly* 14.4 (December 1941): 704-15

³⁰⁴ Alcott, Amos Bronson. *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*. ed Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938). The journal entry is for February, 9th 1851, though as Alcott explains, in his "Autobiographical Index, the experience takes place seven years earlier. Alcott had the experience at the Lovejoy farmhouse near Fruitlands.

³⁰⁵ The flesh brush is what people would now call a "dry brush." It was a stiff bush one ran over his skin. The benefits were believed to be numerous. By the late nineteenth century there were become even more popular, and one by "Dr. Scott" was filled with magnets, playing to the interest in magnetism as a form of therapy. see *Scientific American*, Sep 17, 1881. See Also "Dr.

mornings there was a crackling and lambent flash following the passage of my hand over the pile of skin, and I shook flames from my finger ends, which seemed erect and blazing with phosphoric light. The eyes, too, were lustrous, and shot sparkles whenever I closed them. On raising my head from the flood there was heard a melody in the ear, as of a sound of many waters; and rubbing the eyes gave out an iris of the primitive colors, beautiful to behold, but as evanescent as a twinkling. It was easy to write prose while thus exalted and transfigured. I tasted mannas, and all the aromas of field and orchard scented the fountains, and the brain was haunted with the rhythm of many voiced melodies. I enjoyed this state for a couple of months or more, but was left somewhat debilitated when spring came, and unfit for common concerns. Most of what was written during this season of efflorescence is now lost, but the sweetness was secreted in the memory and abides as a honeycombed ear of my spiritual history”³⁰⁶

What happened to Alcott, and what was the result of this electric vision? In part, Fuller’s words would prove prophetic. Even Alcott’s greatest vision, one of his more powerful mystical experiences left no gem behind. Or rather, this gem would be only a lost treasure since the text

Scott’s Electric Flesh Brush," *South Australian Register* (Adelaide, SA: 1839 - 1900) 31 Oct 1885: 7. Web. 25 Jul 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article44538301>>.

³⁰⁶ Alcott, *Journals*, 240-41. Moreover, Alcott’s use of the flesh brush and cold water is telling, as Graves recommend both. Graves writes:

There are needed everywhere baths for health, but in the third dispensation they are indispensable. Shower baths for skin, and running with a coarse towel and a flesh brush all over, is necessary for health. Man feeds greatly by the skin, and particularly of the aromal atmosphere. The purer man is in Love, the less heavy solid food he needs, at least so little as to be only fruits of the finest quality.

See Greaves, James P, and Alexander Campbell. *Letters and Extracts from the MS. Writings of James Pierrepont Greaves* (London: J. Chapman, 1845) Internet resource. Letter of November 9, 1841

he produced during this time, “Prometheus,” was lost shortly after in Albany.³⁰⁷ Nevertheless, Alcott gained something from the experience; he had a moment of clear visionary desire. Richard Francis describes this moment beautifully, “Here is the landscape Alcott had imagined for Fruitlands, the fields and orchards, the fountains; here the conversion of hunger into manna; here in the cold white winter, a rainbow of colors, primitive ones: a vision of the original lost world.”³⁰⁸

More than just a vision of the lost world, Alcott’s moment of “clairvoyance” illustrates the nature of his aspirations and his view of the world: Alcott’s lost world is not just the Antecedent, it is not just an Eden that sits on a horizon for Fruitlands. For Alcott, the lost world, the world of his vision, is one where objects are “lustrous,” where vision itself becomes a source of light, so that the eyes shoot “sparkles.” And while it is a world full of “primitive colors, beautiful to behold,” they are “as *evanescent* as a twinkling.” That is, all that Alcott sees in the lost world appears to him only in an instant. It is evanescent —flashing into his vision as a possibility as quickly as it dissipates. In this respect, as marvelous as Alcott’s vision is, it remains just that—a vision. Where Alcott remained flamboyant in “Orphic Sayings,” flaunting his idea of a mystic intimacy, in his visionary desire for the “original lost world” he becomes flamboyant in a more literal sense: his body shoots off flames and sparks as he sees a world he hopes for, as he gets closer to the possibility of edenic relations.

Moreover, this vision offers some ways to think about the queerness of Alcott’s vision, in how it demands a future while refusing to be productive. He writes that his clairvoyant vision made him “unfit for common concerns. Most of what was written during this season of efflorescence is now lost, but the sweetness was secreted in the memory and abides as a

³⁰⁷ Alcott, *Journals*, 241. The manuscript was lost in 1844.

³⁰⁸ Francis, 261.

honeycombed era of my spiritual history.” Were I being less generous, I might say Alcott just wanted to get out of work, but more is going on here. His visionary desire forces him to confront what any visionary must: he must live in a world that is *not* the Antecedent, and Fruitlands would prove to him the resistance of the world to mystic aspirations. Moreover, he confronts the ephemerality of his “efflorescence,” but also, he finds out that something remains; something is carried forward into the future. Alcott calls this moment the “honeycombed era” of his spiritual history. Time becomes confused. This is not an era, but a moment— yet it is a moment that feels like an era, as if it might have been lived for a longer duration, as if it might have marked the start or end of something as important as the fall from Eden. But it doesn’t mark anything. Instead, these temporal distinctions remain only a memory for Alcott, a memory that demands it be carried into the future, and which resists ever being reproduced. What Alcott and Lane perhaps never realized, (how could they) was that the Antecedent they wanted to displace into their future was perhaps one of the queerest way to imagine being in the world: an impossible perfection that persists only as a honeycomb potentiality, a sweet occult knowledge, a hidden queer reationality.

APPENDIX I:

ASPECTS OF ESOTERIC PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

While identifying what counts as esoteric or occult remains contested and scholars have offered alternative terms (such as metaphysical religion), the following lists, taken from the work of Faivre and Versluis, illustrate some of the most agreed upon aspects of esotericism within Western Hermetic traditions. These are useful inasmuch as they offer us insight into some of the central commitments and paradigms that compose the categories of esoteric philosophy and occult practice.

1. A correspondence between humanity, nature, and divinity.
2. Nature as alive. (The cosmos is not full of dead objects that one can manipulate, but is filled with life).
3. Imagination and Mediations. (The imagination is a way to gain inner knowledge through symbol, gnosis, signs in nature, etc. and mediations are the symbols or means by which we gain this knowledge).
4. Experiences of Transmutation (either alchemical, such as lead into gold, or dramatic modifications of one's identity).

Faivre argues that these four characteristics are essential to esotericism, to which he then adds two “relative” characteristics that may not always appear:

1. Praxis of the Concordance. This shows up in a consistent tendency to try to establish common denominators between two different traditions or even more, among all traditions, in the hope of obtaining an illumination, a gnosis of superior quality.³⁰⁹
2. Transmission (such as from an adept to his disciple).

Versluis expands on these aspects of esoteric philosophy, listing four more qualities that come out of Christian Theosophy, starting with Jakob Böhme. The qualities that Versluis lists are especially important for understanding the esoteric roots of American Transcendentalism, since many of the movement's central authors (Fuller and Alcott especially) were avid readers of Böhme's work. Versluis lists the following:

1. The focus upon Wisdom, or Sophia.
2. An insistence upon direct spiritual experience, including visions.
3. Reading nature as a spiritual book.
4. A spiritual leader who guides his or her spiritual circle through books, letters, and oral advice.³¹⁰

While esotericism has definitive qualities, it can quickly become a bit of a laundry list, and the aspects Versluis and Faivre list can quickly intersect with other parts of religion that

³⁰⁹ Faivre, 14. One example that we might look to in the American context would be Margaret Fuller (Faivre doesn't touch on this, focusing on a longer history). Fuller looks for correspondences between Christianity, pagan deities, etc. In addition, the work of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky illustrates this (her writing was international in its scope and influence, but also important to those invested in the Spiritualism scene in New York in the 1870s) For more on this, see Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 1877 (Pasadena, Calif: Theosophical University Press, 1972).

³¹⁰ Versluis, 9.

most would not immediately peg as esoteric. Moreover, if we place esotericism in opposition to rational discourse, where it becomes just a contrast to the “pervasive Baconianism of the nineteenth century,”³¹¹ then it also can simply become a trash bin category, where everything not completely rational and scientific gets dropped in. But even this becomes quickly undone as the occult, even in its most mystic manifestations, would often use the language of science and rationality, as I have demonstrated with my discussion of intellect in my introduction.³¹²

³¹¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, 10.

³¹² Ibid., Albanese points out:

³¹²With ironies abounding, mysticism— which for Anglo-American Protestants was code for Catholicism, for abstract, impractical reasoning, and specifically for dogmatism with trappings of cultural naïveté and lack of proper criticism —this mysticism crept back into culture. Now, however, it came in an altered guise, bringing with it the glowing admiration for science that pervaded the Baconian universe. Far from the “folklorization” of the occult (as Butler would have it), a new urban and semi-urban American public, largely middle class and lower middle class, became invested in complex patterns of religious thought and practice, partially inherited from the past and partially created in the moment. This emergent religious thought and practice exploded occultism into a new and larger category. The work of the new American proponents of metaphysics was one of religious imagination, and they had been prepared for it not only by Catholic “superstition” and Enlightenment democracy, by scientific and popular Baconianism and a new print technology.

APPENDIX TWO:

FORMS OF OCCULTISM IN AMERICA

If occultism is the practice of esotericism, then what are those practices, beyond spirit contact? Arthur Versluis gives one of the best accounts of this, and though he does not necessarily label them as occult, each would become not just a type of occult practice in America, but would also find itself uniquely influenced by American culture.

First there is alchemy (which I address in my first chapter). Alchemy found a place in America from the colonial period. Walter W. Woodward's *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* offers an excellent account of this.³¹³ Woodward illustrates the importance of "occult philosophy" for early America, as well as how it allowed someone like Winthrop to have a different relation to Native Americans, since he used his work as an alchemist to figure himself as a shaman. Woodward even argues that there were structural and philosophical similarities between European occult practices and shamanism native to America.³¹⁴ We can also find examples of alchemy in the poetry of Edward Taylor. Beyond the colonial period, alchemical interests would persist well into the nineteenth-century, though their focus would change, which I discuss at length in Chapter One.³¹⁵

³¹³ Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

³¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

³¹⁵ Versluis, 28-29. Other forms of occultism that were popular in colonial America, and which also persisted into the present involved astrology and folk magic. Astrology represented pragmatic esotericism, especially an interest in the astrological correspondence for the cultivation of crops. Of course, within the religious context of early America, astrology for the purposes of farming or medicine was accepted, though this was not the case for fortune telling. While folk magic was popular in early America, there was also the fear of witchcraft. However: what we seen in these common practices against witchcraft is the widespread acceptance of magic among ordinary people: so long as magic was used to help and not to injure, many people from New England saw nothing in particular

Next, Theosophy would become important in America, especially as American Transcendentalists become fascinated by the work of Jakob Böhme. Even earlier than this, however, “The theosophical groups that came to America, mostly in the early eighteenth century and mostly to Pennsylvania, established some of the longest lasting and interesting semimonastic communities in the history of North America, the most well know of which was Ephrata.”³¹⁶ Beyond this, theosophy would find a resurgence in 1875 when Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society.

wrong with it. Thus we can say that the vast majority of colonists, including those who sought to stamp out witchcraft, lived in an essentially magical cosmos. Beyond the colonial period, folk magic persisted. This is an important aspect of the occult, but it is not the focus of this project. One of the most interesting examples is Pow-Wow, or the folk magic of the Pennsylvania Dutch. While the word, Pow-Wow is taking from Algonquian, this practice consisted (or I should say consists, since it is still practiced) of European spells (mainly using the Bible) as well as folk recipes and herbalism. The main text of this tradition is *The Long Lost Friend* by John George Hohman, which was published in 1819. See John George Hohman, 1820. *Pow-wow's: or, Long Lost Friend* (1971 reprint edition. Pomeroy: Health Research Books). For an informative summary of this tradition see David W. Kriebel's "Popwwing: A Persistent American Esoteric Tradition" <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Powwow.htm>>

Beyond this, Hoodoo and Louisiana Voodoo also represent an important tradition in American folk magic, for more on this see Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Voodoo in Louisiana is especially interesting with the rise of the Voodoo Queen in the nineteenth century, see Ina J. Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Laveaux is a fascinating figure who worked magic and charms for both rich white clients, as well as being credited for the successful escape of ex-slaves. For a detailed study about the rise of folk magic in relationship to esoteric philosophy, and how these two strands gave birth to contemporary practices of magic, it helps to move out of the American context. Ronald Hutton offers an excellent study that focuses on how the combination of nostalgia for the English countryside, Victorian ideas of nature, the importance of Romanticism, and a British fascination with European and Egyptian forms of esoteric philosophy and magic all combined with late nineteenth century magical societies to give birth to modern Witchcraft (or Wicca), as well as how this came into a dynamic relationship with feminism in the 1970s in America. See Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³¹⁶ Versluis, 13.

The Theosophical Society, and its central texts such as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, should be of special interest to scholars invested in critical race studies, post-colonial theory, and transatlantic scholarship. Theosophy drew upon Eastern philosophy, often in the form of an Orientalist fantasy, and advocated a convoluted doctrine of racial evolution. It borrowed from Indian and Buddhist religious thought while at the same time colonizing these forms of knowledge into a larger structure of spiritual hierarchy. For example, in *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky first writes about the evolution of the universe using Hindu cosmology, then in the second volume goes on to advocate the evolution of humanity through what she calls “root races.” In *Isis Unveiled*, she complicates this in the way she links magical abilities to race:

Magic being what it is, the most difficult of all sciences to learn experimentally — its acquisition is practically beyond the reach of the majority of white-skinned people; and that, whether their effort is made at home or in the East. Probably not more than one man in a million of European blood is fitted — either physically, morally, or psychologically — to become a practical magician, and not one in ten millions would be found endowed with all these three qualifications as required for the work. Civilized nations lack the phenomenal powers of endurance, both mental and physical, of the Easterns; the favoring temperamental idiosyncrasies of the Orientals are utterly wanting in them. In the Hindu, the Arabian, the Thibetan [sic], an intuitive perception of the possibilities of occult natural forces in subjection to human will, comes by inheritance; and in them, the physical senses as well as the spiritual are far more finely developed than in the Western races. Notwithstanding the notable difference of thickness between the skulls of a European and a Southern Hindu, this difference, being a purely climatic result,

due to the intensity of the sun's rays, involves no psychological principles.

Furthermore, there would be tremendous difficulties in the way of training, if we can so express it. Contaminated by centuries of dogmatic superstition, by an ineradicable — though quite unwarranted — sense of superiority over those whom the English term so contemptuously 'niggers,' the white European would hardly submit himself to the practical tuition of either Kopt, Brahman, or Lama³¹⁷

In this passage she draws on the ideas of phrenology, links power with race (though, does so in a way that both says that a white person would lack power, but only because of ingrained civility). She then complicates these relationships (racial, national, magical, religious) through a sweeping colonization of racial differences into a philosophy that highlights an orientalism mediated through Western hermetic philosophy. Theosophy in the nineteenth century has the potential to act as a rich archive for exploring race, the nation, colonization, and religion in this period.

When Theosophy came to America (through its of mixture of magic and science, Eastern philosophy and theories of racial evolution) it would find even stranger expression in figures like Pascal Beverly Randolph, a nineteenth-century African-American Spiritualist and “Sex Magician.”³¹⁸ Randolph would not only found one of the first secret societies based on esoteric philosophy in America, but would publish extensively on occult topics, from sex magic to clairvoyance. He is a fascinating figure in the history of American religion, sex, and Spiritualism, and deserves more sustained attention within scholarship on these subjects.

Randolph would go on to create the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis in 1858 the oldest Rosicrucian Order in the United States, which brings up another aspect of the occult in

³¹⁷ *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. 2, 635–6.

³¹⁸ John P. Deveney, *Pascal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

America—secret societies. Other than the Rosicrucian Orders, Freemasonry would be an important development. The history of both these organizations is extensive.³¹⁹ Of course, there has been much said about Freemasonry and esoteric connections to the Founding Fathers, most of it is deeply inaccurate. We know these groups influenced them, but it was highly indirect.³²⁰ Freemasonry had an impact “upon early American history and the founding of the United States, but this impact was not entirely due to the esoteric elements of Masonry,” though the esoteric elements were there.³²¹

As should be evident, esoteric philosophy and occult practice inundated American culture in the nineteenth-century and found new iterations on American soil. These other aspects of the occult are important for us to consider or, at the very least, keep in mind. Alternative spiritual practices in the United States were far more expansive and varied than scholarship on ghosts or mesmerism leads us to believe. By attending to these other forms of religiosity in the United States, we expand our understanding of American religious life and gain insight into common commitments of esoteric philosophy that manifested in varied and fascinating ways.

³¹⁹ John Michael Greer, *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2003).

³²⁰ Versluis, 48.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

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