

## Chapter 6

### The Importance of the Idea of the Masters

#### 6.1 Introduction to the Idea of the Masters as Legitimizing Authorities

Having discussed how knowledge and experience were treated from the theosophical perspective, we now turn to another significant legitimating category. That is the question of authority. While Madame Blavatsky, through her charismatic persona, expertise in esoteric knowledge and supersensory practices was the primary authoritative figure of the early movement; the theosophical system itself required a greater sense of special mission to gain persuasive advantage. In a historical context of competing minority groups propagating their own versions of esoteric or alternative forms of deviant knowledge, the theosophical movement needed a distinguishing doctrine or especially appealing premise to gain the plausibility advantage. This definitive theosophical position was revealed in perhaps the most audacious or radical of all the claims made by Madame Blavatsky. This was in effect a personalised and revised reinterpretation of the esoteric belief that there is a hidden but controlling order of specially qualified occult-trained, operatives who shape and influence world affairs. The keynote of the Theosophical Society was sounded when she boldly and assertively proclaimed that she was personally selected by supremely evolved and spiritually awakened representatives of an abiding but secretive hierarchy of adepts, to found a new spiritually oriented movement intended to counteract the prevailing dominant Western worldviews. These Masters of Wisdom, or Mahatmas as they were typically referred to, appeared in human form, but bodily incarnation was merely a necessary convenience. They were in fact preoccupied with implementation of facets of the cosmic evolutionary plan. The belief in a mysterious occult hierarchy covertly shaping or directing human affairs was not original, but with Blavatsky's interpretation, it provided a special legitimating validation. This allowed her followers to feel that they were part of an elite vanguard of occult-oriented pioneers, working towards a collective change of orientation to the world that was a necessary step in the process of human evolution.

When we turn to the topic of the Masters of Wisdom, the Mahatmas, Elder Brethren, Great White Brotherhood, or any of the other similar appellations, we touch upon perhaps the most controversial and defining of theosophical topics. The notion of

such a group of “perfected humans,” intent upon aiding or guiding humankind through the trials and tribulations of existence and towards a more spiritually evolved status has persisted for centuries, particularly in Rosicrucian and Masonic lore. However, through the efforts of Madame Blavatsky, the idea became entrenched in the fabric of the theosophical worldview, a principle of belief deeply ingrained in the self-referential sense of uniqueness and special elite status felt by members of the Theosophical Society. Although belief in the Masters, or conformity to their purported admonitions were not binding criteria for membership in the Society, they yet served significant supporting and legitimating functions. The presumption that there was a special connection between the operations of the Society and the will of superhumanly enlightened beings supplied a particular kind of transcendental justification to the objectives propagated by the Theosophical Society; as well giving special status to its system of beliefs, doctrines, ideas and values. If the objectives of the movement were believed to have been pre-defined and encouraged by the Masters, and the body of theosophical knowledge they allowed to be meted out was proportionate to the retentive capacities of individuals and societies, then those loyalists of the Theosophical Society who concurred would logically infer that they were at the forefront of the impending revolution in consciousness. And Blavatsky and others reinforced that assumption constantly.

Since the first early proclamations about the Masters, confusion and controversy often ensued when the topic was discussed. We shall look at the most common positions taken before further examination of the functions served. The credibility of these theories is not our major interest although we will explore a hypothetical scenario in which most of those opinions may be integrated as components of an inclusive theory. All have earnestly been believed to be accurate by respective supporters. We are more concerned about how theory and belief served a number of functions for the Theosophical Society, regardless of their possible credibility or factual basis. As a newly redefined enunciation of an older esoteric notion, the belief in the Masters acquired status as a myth. And as myth, the historical factors are rendered of secondary importance compared to its value as an abiding and confirming component of the belief system. Yet despite such mythic status, the Masters were represented as historical contemporaries, actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the theosophical enterprise. Thus questions surrounding the

credibility of the Masters significantly affected the way the movement was perceived by the public and by individual members desirous of personal contact. The Masters were defined as actual living entities, though in their mythic capacities were portrayed with characteristics far transcending the familiar, thus engendering mixed responses.

As well, we qualify our discussion by noting that since the purported Masters themselves (in their physical bodily forms) were allegedly accessible to very few individuals on a sporadic and irregular basis, it is more proper to refer to the “idea of the Masters.” It was the literary or verbal characterisation of this class of being that was familiar to most theosophists. Only the elite leaders laid claim to actually being individually entrusted with their mission and having personal relationships with the occult hierarchy. And often even that contact was usually alleged to occur through astral visitations, telepathic messages, or disputable occult communiqués. Blavatsky was the only figure who claimed a long-standing and personal relationship. Olcott and others at times believed they had been in physical meetings or had sighted a Mahatma in bodily form. However, in most instances, the circumstances were questionable and could not hold up to the scrutiny of a non-believer. Yet despite the ambivalence surrounding the Masters as physical entities, their importance lay in the image that was created and transmitted. It was the idea of the Masters (regardless of historical credibility or not) that served as a critical component of the theosophical schema. But before looking at the functional roles the belief in the Masters played, the main theories about their origin must be discussed.

As we have earlier noted in the previous chapter, Madame Blavatsky claimed that her first-hand communications with the Masters occurred originally in unusual states of consciousness, via dream and vision, (and possibly, through mediumistic trance and hallucinogenic stimulation)<sup>1</sup>. This initial private subjective cognisance was said by her to have been later confirmed satisfactorily in physical contact, communication, teacher-pupil relationships, primarily during the adventures and travels of her so-called “veiled years” of private life. This period roughly covered the years 1849, when she fled an impulsive and ill-conceived marriage, to 1873, when she arrived in New York and began

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<sup>1</sup> Blavatsky’s mediumistic communication with the purported disembodied figure known as “John King” during her involvement with spiritualism reveals an image with at least some prototypical “Master” characteristics.

to prepare for the mission she claimed was intended for her by the Masters. During this time span, which began when she was eighteen, she claimed to have spent most of her energies seeking spiritual and occult wisdom, travelling the world in search of such objectives.<sup>2</sup> Her movements (only some of which can be confirmed) begun in Russia, and were alleged to include stints in the following countries of her era. Turkey, Greece, Egypt, France, England, Canada, the United States, Mexico, South America, West Indies, Ceylon, India, Tibet, Kashmir, Ladakh, Burma, Germany, the Caucasus, the Balkans, Syria, Italy, Palestine, Lebanon. In responding to questions about her whereabouts and activities, she was usually either intentionally vague or self-righteously indignant about certain events and issues, including some of dubious historical veracity or suggestive of perceived moral or behavioural impropriety. Her personal recollections were usually expressed as a romantic and adventurous narrative, and indeed, biographical and fictitious blending is implied in the short stories and travelogues that she authored, such as *Nightmare Tales*, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*, *The Mysterious Tribes from the Blue Hills*, *The Durbar in Lahore*. The main point that she attempted to convey about those private years were that she was persistently preoccupied with a quest for first-hand knowledge of arcane and esoteric teachings; that she had without a doubt acquired a substantial measure through her varied experiences; and that what she had learnt and experienced could not be overtly revealed in its completeness to the profane public. Thus, she felt morally justified in not revealing all details of her life, and in using intentionally confusing methods to protect from the uninitiated and unworthy what she believed to be privileged information.

As well, through her lifelong eclectic reading and familiarity with a variety of alternative occult traditions, a broadly detailed conceptual and symbolic mass of materials was possibly available for embellishment or incorporation within a new system. A possible creative and imaginative fusion (consciously, unconsciously, or both) of subjective experiential elements with imagery and ideas pertaining to external literary, historical, and anecdotal sources may have been critical in supplying the input that was shaped into the theosophical myth. However, another strand of influence would tend to

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<sup>2</sup> See Cranston, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–60 for the orthodox theosophical interpretation of this period of travel. Also see Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 330.

suggest the Masters had more historical substantiality. That may have come from the recollections and ongoing input deriving from encounters and communications with actual historical personages. These possible sources of Madame Blavatsky's experience and knowledge of the Masters have generated most of the hypotheses and speculation.

## **6.2 Origins of the Idea of the Masters**

### **6.2.1 Theory 1 – the Linear Narrative as Primarily Historical Fact – the Orthodox Theosophical Position.**

The first of the three major explanations of the origins of the Masters is the view expounded by Blavatsky and held in essentials by loyal supporters. From that perspective, the Masters are believed to appear bodily in human form when necessary for their purposes, and while so incarnate and dealing with the non-enlightened, are somewhat constrained by the delimiting conditions native to this state. However, they more essentially are “perfected humans,” spiritually evolved beings far beyond the stature of normal mortals. Subsequently they have volitional control and mastery of their supersensory capabilities, as well as secret knowledge permitting what may appear to the non-initiated as miraculous phenomena to occur. These Initiates voluntarily incarnate in human bodies to stimulate spiritual evolution, secretly influencing world affairs and manipulating (within the confines of karmic law) conditions to enable more efficacious and widespread spiritual and moral progress. They often incarnate as esteemed and important historical (usually religious or morally paradigmatic) figures. However, they are obligated to work within the rules of cosmic law, and must therefore account for all significant variables. So their efforts may not be immediately apparent because of all the circumstantially mitigating factors they precognitively anticipate, and that force them into seemingly inexplicable and indirect processes of long-term planning. In other words, to those impatient for evidence and proof of the powers of the Mahatmas, a stock response was that they must work in their own inscrutable ways, factoring in all the extensive karmic repercussions of any actions undertaken. The creation of the Theosophical Society though was an explicitly planned operation, timed to coincide with the last quarter of the century, which was stated to always be a time for potential fermentation of spiritual ideas.

The Theosophical Society was created with a special destiny in mind. Its intended function was to propagate sacred beliefs and combat dogmatic religion and materialistic science, and to thus provoke and stimulate a change in values and worldview orientation. Madame Blavatsky was stated to be the primary interpreter and disseminator of this message, the trusted vehicle to transmit and convey the will of the Masters as best she could. Others in the Theosophical Society could likewise become chelas of the Masters if they obey their admonitions and properly dedicate themselves to the cause. Physical signs and communications would potentially be possible, but at the discretion of the Master. Two Masters in particular, Koot Hoomi and Morya, were said to be the major sponsors and contacts for the Society. Let us look at a pair of comprehensive definitions written well after the immediacy of the first formulations of the theosophical doctrine to see how the orthodox theory appeared after years of familiarity and acceptance. First this outlook from Alvin Boyd Kuhn in 1930.

The Masters whom Theosophy presents to us are simply high-ranking students in life's school of experience. They are members of our own evolutionary group, not visitants from the celestial spheres. They are supermen only in that they have attained knowledge of the laws of life and mastery over its forces with which we are still struggling. They are also termed by Theosophists the "just men made perfect," the finished products of our terrene experience, those more earnest souls of our own race who have pressed forward to attain the fullness of the stature of Christ, the prize of the high calling of God in Christhood. They are not Gods come down to earth, but earthly mortals risen to the status of Christs. They ask from us no reverence, no worship; they demand no allegiance but that which it is expected we shall render to the principles of Truth and Fact, and to the nobility of life. They are our "Elder Brothers," not distant deities; and will even make their presence known to us and grant us the privilege of cooperating with them when we have shown ourselves capable of working unselfishly for mankind. They are not our Masters in the sense of holding lordship over us; they are the "Masters of Wisdom and Compassion." Moved by an infinite sympathy with the whole human race they have renounced their right to go forward to more splendid conquests in the evolutionary field, and have remained in touch with man in order to throw the weight of their personal force on the side of progress.<sup>3</sup>

Another definition in 1933 by George de Purucker is as follows.

The mahatmas are perfected men, relatively speaking, known in theosophical literature as teachers, elder brothers, masters, sages, seers, and by other names.

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<sup>3</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Theosophy: A Modern Revival of Ancient Wisdom*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 1930, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/kuhnmahatmaletters.htm>>. (Accessed May 1, 2002).

They are indeed the "elder brothers" of mankind. They are men, not spirits—men who have evolved through self-devised efforts in individual evolution, always advancing forwards and upwards until they have now attained the lofty spiritual and intellectual human supremacy that now they hold. They were not so created by any extra-cosmic Deity, but they are men who have become what they are by means of inward spiritual striving, by spiritual and intellectual yearning, by aspiration to be greater and better, nobler and higher, just as every good man in his own way so aspires. They are farther advanced along the path of evolution than the majority of men are. They possess knowledge of nature's secret processes, and of hid mysteries, which to the average man may seem to be little short of the marvellous—yet, after all, this mere fact is of relatively small importance in comparison with the far greater and more profoundly moving aspects of their nature and lifework.

Especially are they called teachers because they are occupied in the noble duty of instructing mankind, in inspiring elevating thoughts, and in instilling impulses of forgetfulness of self into the hearts of men. Also are they sometimes called the guardians, because they are, in very truth, the guardians of the race and of the records—natural, racial, national—of past ages, portions of which they give out from time to time as fragments of a now long-forgotten wisdom, when the world is ready to listen to them; and they do this in order to advance the cause of truth and of genuine civilization founded on wisdom and brotherhood.

Never—such is the teaching—since the human race first attained self-consciousness has this order or association or society or brotherhood of exalted men been without its representatives on our earth.

It was the mahatmas who founded the modern Theosophical Society through their envoy or messenger, H. P. Blavatsky, in New York in 1875.<sup>4</sup>

With these definitions, we see that in the perspective of later years (both quotes coming approximately forty years after the death of Blavatsky), the potential for immanent contact is hardly suggested at all. As we shall see, during the period when Blavatsky acknowledged an ongoing relationship both on the physical and the astral planes, one of the dominant concerns of members was the opportunity to be invited into their presence, and given tangible and convincing proof of their authenticity. Preferably, on the physical plane, where it was hoped, rational and vigilant attentiveness on the part of the inquirer could convincingly verify and ascertain that status.

The process of establishing a credible legitimacy for the emerging ideational system required an alluring, captivating, and inspiring object of belief. Something to capture the imagination and galvanise those flirting with the theosophical option And this

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<sup>4</sup> George de Purucker, *Occult Glossary*, retrieved from Theosophical University Press Online, 1996, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/ocglos/og-hp.htm>>. (Accessed May 2, 2002).

crucial enticement for attracting prospective members and retaining the interest and commitment of the loyalists was the continued assurance that the Theosophical Society was a special and privileged organisation, created, sanctified, and endorsed by the Masters. This often meant that “evidence” or “signs” were useful (in fact, necessary for many), in assuring sustained belief and dedication. However, this initial claim of an ongoing and active relationship between the Masters and the Society eventually became the most contentious issue in future leadership disputes, as competing individuals each presented their own claims of Masterly endorsement. The acrimony and divisiveness of those conflicts, as well as the renunciation of Krishnamurti in 1929 of his assumed role of World Teacher effectively changed the tone of theosophical speculation.<sup>5</sup> Through most of the intervening years the Masters were discussed more as ideals or distant figures. Far less intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of the movement or occupied in training the Society elite as personal chelas. Some of the charismatic leaders still proclaimed personal relationships, but the references were more circumspect. However, the prototypical theosophical representation of the Masters was established by Blavatsky, and in essentials, has remained entrenched as a fundamental doctrine of the theosophical Society.

The main thrust of these standard descriptions of the Masters/Mahatmas is that they are “supermen,” or “perfected men,” yet at the same time, “members of our own evolutionary group,” “men who have evolved” to a higher plateau. They serve as paradigmatic role models, inspiring and encouraging even if considered in their more humanistic roles as “elder brothers,” “guardians,” and “teachers.” This orthodox theosophical position comes directly from Blavatsky’s portrayals (later substantially embellished by others claiming theosophical continuity), and represents an effort to humanise the supernatural by emphasising the Masters/Mahatmas as compassionate evolved humans. And, at the same time, trying to legitimate the belief and ideational

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<sup>5</sup> Extensive discussion of the Krishnamurti discovery, anointment, and eventual repudiation of the role of World Teacher takes us beyond our timeframe. However, the theosophical movement was decisively affected by the controversies engendered. For various perspectives, see Pupul Jayakar, *Krishnamurti: A Biography*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986. Mary Lutyens, *Krishnamurti: The Years of Awakening*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975. Arthur. H. Nethercott, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, Chicago/London/Toronto: University of Chicago Press, 1963. Gregory Tillet, *The Elder Brother*, New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982. Roland Vernon, *Star in the East: Krishnamurti, the Invention of a Messiah*, New York: Palgrave, 2000.



system with a special transcendent status by showing that the Mahatmas intended the Theosophical Society to set the example and lead the world in achieving further spiritual evolutionary objectives. Theosophical speculation has been dominated by this double image of compassionate, concerned, human elder brethren who are yet more authentic and active on non-physical planes of existence and part of a majestic occult hierarchy.

This traditional theosophical outlook therefore becomes an especially important quasi-private source of assurance and confidence for those attuned to the formally enunciated worldview. It presumes belief in the literal and factual existence of the Masters on the physical plane, but merely as a necessary convenience for compassionate purposes. While potentially accessible to the specially chosen and qualified few, they yet retain truer, more essential and transcendent identities that are far beyond the average capacity of comprehension. Their historical manifestations are purported to have been of the highest and most revered exemplary spiritual and progressive historical figures.<sup>6</sup> And their supreme spiritual status places them on a loftier level than normal humans, with powers and knowledge far beyond the scope of the average person. “They possess knowledge of nature's secret processes, and of hid mysteries, which to the average man may seem to be little short of the marvellous.” As such, they acquire a certain mythical identity, although historical and human connections are always reiterated. They are thus pictured as humans who have ascended the last rungs of the evolutionary ladder, but in fact are idealised and heroic figures. And a further facet of the mythic image is the belief that they have been perpetually active through the entire history of the species, constantly involved in some (usually surreptitious) way during most seminal historical events. Finally, the special role of the Theosophical Society is linked to the hierarchy of Masters, via Blavatsky's self-proclaimed role as prophetess of their message.

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<sup>6</sup> A multitude of important historical figures have been claimed as Masters by various expounders of this belief. Mostly religious founders, enlightened social reformers, past philosophers and mystics. Unanimity over core personages often dissipates when favourites of specific groups or individuals are accorded especial prestige or status. For a popular public presentation of the concept in 1889 by a one-time member of the Theosophical Society, see Edouard Schure, *The Great Initiates: Sketch of the Secret History of Religion*,. 2 vols. London: William Rider and Son, 1920.

### 6.2.2 Theory 2 – Historical Figures Known to Blavatsky as Disguised Models – Johnson’s Contention

Another perspective, most recently propounded by Johnson<sup>7</sup> and seconded by Godwin<sup>8</sup> is that Blavatsky primarily modelled the Masters upon actual people she had known and who had a great personal influence on her in one way or another. Johnson carefully constructs a conceivable case wherein he distinguishes thirty-two historically identifiable individuals as variously either being the actual Masters (known solely as living physical entities) or serving as prototypical models or sources of inspiration for Blavatsky’s creative embellishment. These individuals played a variety of roles at different stages of Blavatsky’s life, mostly serving as sources of knowledge and stimuli for choices she made. Johnson primarily sees the most important of these teachers, mentors, sponsors, as having their own agendas and reasons for aligning themselves with Blavatsky, ranging from large scale altruistic objectives to personal political motives and the desire to effect social reform and change.

He reverses the orthodox theosophical position, in which the historical persona was thought to be the secondary facet of the Mahatmas identity. From the position inculcated by Blavatsky, the physical body and personality of the Master was only a small and minor indicator of the essential inner spiritual being. His real substantial identity was that of the spiritually advanced and maximally evolved entity, utilising specific corporeal bodies for the necessary purposes pertaining to his role. Johnson suspends judgment about such possible speculation and only concentrates on the historical facts as best he can ascertain. His own hypotheses however are often based on speculative leaps and logical inferences, at times connecting people and events only through circumstantial evidence or conjecture.<sup>9</sup> However, the overall portrayal of Blavatsky’s influences, teachers, sponsors, does merit serious consideration in hypothesising about the sources of her belief in, and portrayal of, the Masters.

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<sup>7</sup> See K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Godwin, op. cit., p. 366.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson’s theories have provoked many critical responses from proponents of the orthodox theosophical position. For example, see Daniel H. Caldwell, *A Closer Look at Some of K. Paul Johnson’s Arguments Concerning H.S. Olcott’s Testimony About the Masters*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online,

Johnson provides this overview of how he defines and characterises the Masters, and the parameters of his study.

The definition of “Masters” ... is based on objective, measurable factors. Most of these characters were authorities in one or more spiritual traditions; others were accomplished writers. They helped prepare HPB for her mission as a spiritual teacher and/or sponsored the Theosophical Society from behind the scenes. Although their teachings and example affected HPB’s development, the extent of their influence was usually a secret. In a few cases the argument for their acquaintance with HPB is speculative, but usually the fact of a relationship is well established and the real question is its meaning. Because their “spiritual status” and psychic powers are inaccessible to historic research, these alleged criteria of “Mahatmaship” are treated with agnosticism. No claim to exhaustiveness is intended; surely HPB’s quest was influenced by many persons yet to be discovered ... the mystery of the Masters remains elusive. HPB deliberately concealed her personal history ... <sup>10</sup>

The Masters so considered are thus only identifiable by “objective, measurable factors.” This would automatically bracket out alleged occult, and hypothesised psychological elements of the mix, which would be considered supplemental to, or juxtaposed with, the primary historical figures. There is though, still an aura of inscrutability and ambiguity with these persons, because they allegedly operated secretly or obliquely. And Blavatsky sustained the cloak of mystery by continual reference to their alleged extraordinary powers and superior compendium of knowledge.

If Madame Blavatsky wanted to disguise or protect actual historical personages as Johnson suggests, then incorporating what information was deemed important into the broader ideational edifice was a matter of creative literary construction and careful exposition, with clever concealment of sensitive data. He says that his theory is not exhaustive, implying that there are other factors than the historical, which collectively contribute to the final theosophical image of the Masters. Johnson’s efforts are specialised, concentrating only on what can be discerned from the historical records about the possible identities of the Masters.

Looking exclusively at the Masters as possible historical figures variously connected or acquainted with Blavatsky, Johnson stretches the theosophical definition of “Master” to virtually include all categories of known personal influence. These consisted

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2002, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/johnsonparanormal3.htm>>. (Accessed May 20, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

of religious and occult teachers, peers in pursuit of esoteric knowledge, scholarly contacts and correspondents, selected friends, travelling acquaintances, political and social figures, and family confidants. Listing the thirty-two so-defined Masters roughly in the order they came into Blavatsky's life, he distinguishes the following individuals.<sup>11</sup>

The first person qualifying for status of Masterly influence was Blavatsky's grandfather, Prince Pavel Dolgorukii, who was a Rosicrucian Freemason and maintained a large library, of which the young Helena availed herself. Another early Russian influence was Prince Aleksandr Golitsyn, also a Freemason and grandson of a religious prophet (of the same name) who suggested she venture abroad for the acquisition of occult knowledge.

In her early travels, she met in Cairo Albert Rawson, an American author, explorer and artist, also seeking out occult knowledge and who became a travelling companion. In later years he became an important inaugural member of the Theosophical Society. While in Egypt she also met Coptic magician Paolos Metamon, whom Johnson feels was the prototype for "Master Serapis Bey." Also while travelling she befriended Agardi Metrovich, a Hungarian opera singer and a member of the radical Italian Carbonari political group. They travelled together extensively during the 1860's in Eastern and Southern Europe, and reports of an intimate relationship including a period of marriage persistently circulated. As well, Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian nationalist reformer and anti-cleric was said to have been an acquaintance and a potential Master.

Another associate from her travels in Egypt was Louis Maximilien Bimstein, later more renown as occultist "Max Theon." As well, Jamal Ad-Din Al-Afgani travelled to destinations Blavatsky also visited during the same time frame. He was known as the "Sage of the East," being a political activist, social reformer, student of Persian and Sufi philosophy, and interested in occult subjects. James Sanua, a journalist and author exiled to Paris was a disciple of Afgani, versed in Sufism and Masonry, and politically active as a sympathiser of Carbonari ideology. Another travelling companion was Lydia Pashkov, a fellow Russian who was a correspondent for *Le Figaro* in Paris. She was part of the Afgani circle, and had travelled together with Blavatsky and Sanua.

Johnson believes that Ooton Liatto was one of two adept visitors to Blavatsky and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. XI-XIII.

Olcott in New York, and subsequently became the figure known as the Master “Hilarion.” He was a Cypriot magician with primary interest in the Ottoman regions, and may have been acquainted with Blavatsky in Greece and Egypt during her travels in the years 1870–1871. Marie, Countess of Caithness was a financial contributor to French Theosophy, having contributed twenty-five thousand francs for Blavatsky to spread theosophical teachings in France. She was the first president of the Societee Theosophique d’Orient et d’Occident in 1883, and combined feminist sympathies with occult and spiritual interests.

The renowned explorer, linguist, and author Sir Richard Burton was a friend of Blavatsky during his later years and became a Fellow of the Theosophical Society in 1878. His expertise in Sufism, Isma’ilism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Tantric Buddhism, the Kabala, and his mastery of Asian languages and of disguises made him a respected source of personal knowledge and experience. Abdelkader was a friend of Burton, a Masonic Sufi with an interest in mystical and altered states of consciousness. He led a confederacy of Algerian tribes in a war against the French and also is credited with saving the lives of thousands of Christians from a hostile mob in Damascus. Raphael Borg communicated with Blavatsky and Olcott in the 1870s and 1880s. He was British consul in Cairo and established the Masonic Star of the East lodge as well as two political parties.

James Peebles was a travelling American lecturer, involved in many organizations and movements, including Freemasonry, Spiritualism, and Free Thought. He introduced Olcott and Blavatsky to leaders of both the Hindu reform movement the Arya Samaj and Sinhalese Buddhism. Charles Sotheran was a long-time associate of Rawson, and also a founding member of the Theosophical Society. He was a British émigré to New York, where he became a respected journalist. He was a member of Freemason and Rosicrucian organizations. He knew Blavatsky in Europe before the founding of the Theosophical Society. Mikhail Katkov was the Russian publisher of articles written by Blavatsky, and a dominant figure in Russian journalism. He opposed British control of India, supported French models of democracy, and believed that Russia had a special destiny in its relations with Asia.

Swami Dayanada Sarasvati was the founder of the Arya Samaj. This organization was interested in both social reform and a return to a purified Indian religious system,

featuring his interpretation of the Vedas. At first he and his organization were thought to be allies of the Theosophical Society, but conflicts of intentions and beliefs eventuated in open hostility and mutual recriminations. Shyamaji Krishnavarma was a disciple of Dayanada, who went to Oxford to teach Sanskrit, but became a political activist and founder of the Indian Home Rule Society.

Ranbir Singh, the Maharaja of Kashmir, is said to be the model for the Master “Morya.” He was an active political, social, religious, educational, and cultural reformer and innovator. He sponsored some of Blavatsky and Olcott’s travels, and their association served mutually beneficial purposes. His genuine interest in theosophical objectives coincided with practical political and social ambitions, while his sponsorship helped effectively legitimise the theosophical presence in India.

Sirdar Thakar Singh Sandhanwalia is claimed by Johnson to be the real identity attributed to the Master “Koot Hoomi.” He was the founder of the Singh Sabha reform organization, intent on purging the Sikh religion of superstition and corruption, and on political reform in India. Opposition to Christian missionaries was a sympathetic theme reiterated by Blavatsky, and entrenched in the theosophical position. The usefulness of allying themselves with the Theosophical Society was in the potential influence that might be exerted on British interests in India and as a cover for more covert political ends. By identifying the two major Mahatma sponsors of the Theosophical Society, “Morya” and “Koot Hoomi” respectively as Ranbir Singh and Sirdar Thakar Singh, Johnson sees a particularly special connection between the political objectives of these Sikh leaders and their need to subtly utilise the Theosophical Society as a vehicle at least partially intent upon contributing to those goals. Johnson identifies the October and November 1880 Punjab meetings between Olcott, Blavatsky and these Sikh leaders as the time when the infamous Mahatma correspondences began to appear. Those purported letters served important legitimating purposes as we shall see, and, according to Johnson, were at least partially explainable as an act of collusion between these “Masters” and Blavatsky.

Another figure qualifying as a Master was Maharaja Holkar of Indore. He was a ruler of a central Indian state who had shown an initial interest in theosophy, paying Olcott and Blavatsky’s travel expenses in 1883. However he apparently lost interest and

finally refused to see Blavatsky even though he had sent her an invitation to his palace. Bhai Gurmukh Singh was a close associate of Thakar Singh, a co-founder of the Singh Sabha. A respected scholar, he remained loyal to the theosophical movement even after Blavatsky's death. Baba Khem Singh Bedi was a co-conspirator with Thakar Singh against the British. He was a wealthy conservative aristocrat who did not impress Blavatsky.

Sirdar Dayal Singh Majithia was a model for the Master "Djwal Kul" according to Johnson. He was an influential journalist who started the Lahore Tribune, and was a strong influence on public opinion in the Punjab. He favoured liberal education, reformed religion, and women's rights. He was present in Lahore when important meetings took place between Olcott and others, and appeared at the 1884 annual Theosophical Society convention. Connections from that convention led to the formation of the Indian National Union, which later became the Indian National Congress. Surendranath Banerjea followed Mazzini's political views, but rejected violence. Based in Calcutta, he was the founder of the Indian Association and a co-founder of the Indian National Congress.

Sumangala Unnanese was the High Priest of Sinhalese Buddhists, and proudly witnessed Olcott and Blavatsky's public conversion to Buddhism. He accepted the position as Honorary Vice-President of the Theosophical Society. Sarat Chandra Das was an expert scholar of Buddhist literature and had travelled extensively in Tibet. He retrieved a number of rare Buddhist texts and was in friendly correspondence with Olcott, who assumed those texts were made available by the Masters. Das was later revealed to have been an intelligence agent working for the British government. Ugyen Gyatso was a Buddhist lama from Sikkim, a travelling companion with Das in his ventures to Tibet, and also employed as a spy, with expertise in surveying. He may have been introduced to Olcott in Darjeeling. Sengchen Tulku was the spiritual minister of the Panchen Lama, and host to Das when he visited the Tasholhunpo monastery. He presented Das and Gyatso with forty volumes of Tibetan manuscripts in 1879. When they returned in 1881, he authorised them taking two hundred manuscripts and block-prints back to India. His interest in cultural exchange with the outside world may have extended to authorising Das to show Tibetan scriptures to Blavatsky and Olcott. Possibly access to these genuine

Tibetan writings may have led to a certain reluctance on Blavatsky's part to utilise this source fully because of possible contradictions and anomalies with her previous alleged and disputable "Tibetan" materials. When Das later published his Tibetan discoveries, the repercussions for Tulku were tragic. Intense anger at the revelations led to Tulku's torture and execution. The final Master Johnson describes is Swami Sankaracharya of Mysore, an Advaita Vedantist guru, of whom Theosophical Society officer T. Subba Row became a disciple. A potential association with the Adwaita Society was negated when Blavatsky was publicly accused of fraud and Row withdrew from the Theosophical Society.

This list of direct and indirect contacts, friends, associates, teachers, and influences reveals a wide source of possible models and prototypes for the finished theosophical portrayal of the Masters. However, whatever the possible degree of accuracy or error in Johnson's speculation, he himself concludes that the historical dimension will unavoidably be blended with other constructive factors. This is his assessment.

In fact, HPB's life provided continued encounters with spiritual teachers of various traditions and nationalities. Her pilgrimage took her from Masonic Masters to Sufi sheikhs, from Kabbalah to Vedanta, from Spiritualism to Buddhism in no particular order. From early childhood to the end of her life, she was constantly adding to her store of occult learning. Her Theosophy was a brilliant synthesis of elements from dozens of unrelated sources. But she mythologized her search for the Masters in such a way that her real quest remained secret. Due to her adolescent fascination with the mysterious world of occult Masonry, in which hidden Masters sent unquestioned orders from unknown Oriental locations, she presented her experiences according to an elaborate hierarchal model. In truth, her Masters constituted not a stable hierarchy but an ever-evolving network.<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's acknowledgment that the theosophical presentation of the Masters may be based on a fusion of different contributing elements still presumes that the historical component is the root source of the composite. The "ever-evolving network" primarily consists of the influences of real people. This perspective, while illuminating and valuable, is one of the three major positions. We have already discussed the orthodox theosophical vantage point, where the Masters are envisioned as part of a grand hierarchal cosmic operation. The historical position of Johnson accounts for people, events, diverse relationships and forms of human interaction that strongly impressed

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



Madame Blavatsky. And which collectively, once treated through Blavatsky's creative faculties, may have contributed to the personalisation of the image given to the Masters.

### **6.2.3 Theory 3A – Intentionally Created Fictional Figures – Controversies Surrounding the Hodgson Report**

The third perspective has mostly been adopted by critics, both in depth where discussed, and more commonly, in the superficial and casual stereotyping based on public gossip and innuendo. That vantage point sees the Masters as purely or primarily imaginative figures, with little or no historical substance. There in fact are two versions of this perspective. The first is more hostile and accusatory, claiming that the fiction was perpetuated mostly deliberately and consciously, to further ulterior ends. The second would more likely equate the imaginative creation of the Masters to largely unconscious or spontaneous processes and motives. As well, opinions from these perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as both unconscious and conscious factors could together produce the kind of fictional product claimed by such critics.

There is no doubt though, that in the history of the theosophical movement, the most serious, far-reaching, and damaging accusations of intentional fraud came from the investigation conducted by Richard Hodgson on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research in 1884.<sup>13</sup> That investigation, and the questions surrounding the origins and composition of the alleged communication by the Masters to Society functionaries and associates (mostly the so-called “Mahatma Letters” and other similar productions) polarised many in the Society and further tarnished the public reputation of Blavatsky and the movement. The explicit conclusions of fraud by Hodgson provoked a still active defence based upon a different reading of events, as well as counter-accusations of premeditated motives of revenge, an incompetent investigator, and use of unreliable evidence.<sup>14</sup> In the end, faith in Madame Blavatsky's version of events and a point-by-

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<sup>13</sup> See The Society for Psychical Research Committee, *Report of the General Meeting of the SPR on May 29, 1885: Hodgson's Report on Madame Blavatsky (Meeting 1)*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/spr52985.htm>>. *Report of the General Meeting of the SPR on June 26, 1885: Hodgson's Report on Madame Blavatsky (Meeting 2)*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/spr62685.htm>>. (Accessed May 12, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See, Walter A. Carrithers, Jr., *Obituary: The “Hodgson Report” on Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Foundation, 1963, < <http://www.azstarnet.com/~blafoun/obituary.htm>>.

point refutation based on criticism of the motives and methods of the accusers and the investigator eventuated in further entrenching polarised positions. The devout believers kept their faith, and claimed a counter-conspiracy, based on motives of revenge, while the sceptics rested their case on belief in Hodgson's original charge of a conspiracy initiated by Blavatsky of manipulation and fraud.

Madame Blavatsky's verbal and written assurances of personal connection to the Masters provided an initial impetus of extraordinary and special credibility for the ideas and beliefs she was proposing, and helped gain a degree of public interest and attention. The importance of the idea of the Masters was substantiated by claims that Blavatsky herself was in communication with them and directly acting on their orders. This statement reflects that captivation of interest in the early formative years of the movement.

H.P.B. in her first challenges to public thought hinted at the existence of great and wise Men, who are possessed of super-human knowledge and power. Presently she began to write of a Great Brotherhood of such wise Men, with some of Whom she was in constant touch... Visitors to H.P.B. soon became aware that in and through her were displayed unusual phenomena, the power to accomplish which she attributed to one or more of Those to Whom as Teachers, she looked for guidance, and Whom she served with such intensity of purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Madame Blavatsky thus initially established her own authoritative basis of credibility by claiming a real relationship to the Masters that entailed the production of extrasensory phenomena at hers and their discretion. However, to the coterie of early Society associates, supporters, and workers who dealt with her directly or were considered potentially valuable allies, the desire for continued direct and tangible evidence and proof of the Masters existence persisted. During the growth phase of the movement, there appeared a steady stream of seemingly inexplicable phenomena alleged to be directly or indirectly produced by or attributable to her or the Masters. These included alleged materialisations and psychic delivery of messages to selected persons in diverse locations. As well, what were thought to be similar sudden, secretive, unexpected and mysterious appearances by the Masters themselves (or their "signs") were also testified to on some occasions. For the most part, the significant objects that were of most

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(Accessed May 23, 2002).

importance were allegedly produced by an occult process of production called “materialisation,” in which tangible objects seemingly appear and coalesce out of the air. The most frequent of these items included letters, often addressed to important societal figures like Colonel Olcott and A. P. Sinnett. Others who were involved on a shorter-term basis were also occasional recipients or observers of such messages and signs, believed to be coming from the Masters. Blavatsky’s explanation was that they were “precipitated” directly by, or on the orders of, the Masters. Messages to Olcott and Sinnett were much more frequent and sustained, while most communications to others occurred during particular moments when they were actively involved with specific critical issues pertaining to the Society.<sup>16</sup> The contents of most of these letters dealt with both abstract theoretical and philosophical questions, as well as opinionated commentary concerned with the minutiae of the society. The individually addressed letters were personal in tone, often referring to private concerns and questions of the recipient. The most well known of these letters were compiled and classified as *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, and have been the object of extensive scrutiny and analyses from first appearance until the present day.

A number of incongruities, inconsistencies, and suspicions about the authenticity of these letters and other manifestations arose and were voiced in due course. One case involved what appeared to be an act of direct plagiarism on the part of the Masters. An article written by Mr. Henry Kiddle and published in the spiritualist journal *The Banner of Light* was later reproduced virtually verbatim in one of the letters from a Master. At first this was dismissed as irrelevant, but when demand for an explanation persisted, a response was forthcoming. The obtuse, laboured, and convoluted explanation given in another Mahatma letter is a cleverly crafted exercise in excuse making. Written with a seeming air of nonchalance, the blame is attributed to a combination of carelessness, imperfect psychic operational procedure, and accidental transference of words.

The letter in question was framed by me while on a journey and on horse-back. It was dictated mentally, in the direction of, and "precipitated" by, a young chela not yet expert at this branch of Psychic chemistry, and who had to

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<sup>15</sup> Ransom, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> See for example, A. O Hume, *A. O. Hume on Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/hume1884.htm>>. (Accessed May 22, 2002).

transcribe it from the hardly visible imprint. Half of it, therefore, was omitted and the other half more or less distorted by the "artist." When asked by him at the time, whether I would look it over and correct I answered, imprudently, I confess—"anyhow will do, my boy—it is of no great importance if you skip a few words." I was physically very tired by a ride of 48 hours consecutively, and (physically again)—half asleep. Besides this I had very important business to attend to *psychically* and therefore little remained of me to devote to that letter. It was doomed, I suppose. When I woke I found it had already been sent on, and, as I was not then anticipating its publication, I never gave it from that time a thought...

Two factors are needed to produce a perfect and instantaneous mental telegraphy—close concentration in the operator, and complete receptive passivity in the "reader"—subject. Given a disturbance of either condition, and the result is proportionately imperfect. The "reader" does not see the image as in the "telegrapher's" brain, but as arising in his own. When the latter's thought wanders, the psychic current becomes broken, the communication disjointed and incoherent. In a case such as mine, the chela had, as it were, to pick up what he could from the current I was sending him and, as above remarked, patch the broken bits together as best he might ... So I, in this instance, having more vividly in my mind the psychic diagnosis of current Spiritualist thought, of which the Lake Pleasant speech was one marked symptom, unwittingly transferred that reminiscence more vividly than my own remarks upon it and deductions therefrom. So to say, (the "despoiled victim's"—Mr. Kiddle's utterances) came out as a "high light" and were more sharply photographed (first in the chela's brain and thence on the paper before him, a *double* process and one far more difficult than "thought reading" simply) while the rest—my remarks upon and arguments—as I now find, are hardly visible and quite blurred on the original scraps before me...

Well, as soon as I heard of the charge—the commotion among my *defenders* having reached me across the eternal snows—I ordered an investigation into the original scraps of the impression. At the first glance I saw that it was I, the only and most guilty party—the poor little boy having done but that which he was told...

I transcribe them with my own hand this once, whereas the letter in your possession was written by the chela. I ask you also to compare this hand-writing with that of some of the *earlier letters* you received from me. Bear in mind, also the "O.L.'s" emphatic denial at Simla that my *first* letter had ever been written *by myself*. I felt annoyed at her gossip and remarks *then*; it may serve a good purpose *now*.<sup>17</sup>

In this explanation, a complex chain of causal factors, especially the difficulties of occult transmission methods, are proposed. As well, the fallibility of human conduct also is blamed for the mistake. Other suspicions about such purported Mahatma letters

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<sup>17</sup> A. T. Barker, ed. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, New York/ Melbourne/ Sydney/ Capetown:

included questions about inconsistencies in handwriting, or the methods of delivery and reception. Blavatsky consistently claimed that the communications were legitimate messages from the Masters, and developed a standard explanation with some minor variations. Her story echoed the basics of the explanation proffered by Master Morya in the last citation. This was that the Masters expressed their thoughts indirectly or directly via the occult means most appropriate at the moment. This involved telepathically imprinting their thoughts directly onto paper or first transmitting them psychically to a chela, who later would commit them to writing. Madame Blavatsky herself often claimed to be the psychic amanuensis, serving as the passive receptacle to the thoughts of the Master, who transmitted them through the ether, onto the permanent psychic database of cosmic memory, or “akashic record,” where she could first cognise their content, and then translate them to words and transcribe them herself. Delivery of these letters usually was via the process of psychic osmosis called precipitation, in which occult techniques defying the constraints of space and time were used to disassemble and reassemble the atoms of the letter. Often these messages would seemingly appear out of thin air, found dropping from ceilings, hidden under cushions, behind other objects, in unusual or unexpected locations. And at times, they seemed to display foreknowledge and private information about the intended recipient. Sinnett was the beneficiary of many of those letters, and confessed that the entire process was not the unequivocal and indisputable form of communication he had envisaged. He noted that Madame Blavatsky often played a direct role in the production of the letters.

The letters were not, in the beginning, what I imagined them to be – letters actually written by the Master and then forwarded by occult means either to Madame Blavatsky or deposited somewhere around the house where I should find them. They were certainly inspired by Koot Hoomi (all in the beginning bore his signature) but for the most part, if not always, were dictations to a competent clairaudient amanuensis, and Madame Blavatsky was generally the amanuensis in question.<sup>18</sup>

Such phenomena and explanations provoked cynicism and suspicion, or reverence and awe, depending on the perspective of the individual. However, the onus on Blavatsky to prove that she was not the primary originating source of those communications became

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Rider and Company, 1948, pp. 422–424.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

much more urgent after public accusations of fraud. A former acquaintance from Egypt, Emma Coulomb and her husband Alexis, accused her of being the mastermind of a hoax in which they were accomplices doing her bidding.<sup>19</sup> In desperate financial straits, they had sought help from Blavatsky, and had been reluctantly hired as household workers at the Theosophical Society headquarters at Adyar, India. In their accusations, they claimed that Blavatsky had engineered a number of the phenomena attributed to the Masters, and revealed details about the alleged method of operations. As well, they discussed a wooden cabinet built by Mr. Coulomb adjacent to Blavatsky's living quarters at Adyar. They alleged that manipulative mechanisms were used in deceiving visitors into believing that occult forces were operative. These included the building of secret compartments and false walls, the use of cracks in ceilings to drop letters from, and so forth. Another claim they made was that an improvised human-shaped bust manipulated on a pole was constructed on Blavatsky's orders and used under certain difficult lighting conditions to convey the appearance of a materialised Master. This Mahatma replica was referred to as "Christfolo," and allegedly brought out at opportune moments to reinforce impressions and suggestions of occult visitations. As well, the Coulobms' confessed to using other accomplices and methods of operation during their tenure with Blavatsky. She however categorically denied all accusations and claimed that all the stories had been fabricated, based on motives of resentment and jealousy. Theosophical supporters pointed out that the couple had a history of impropriety and were also working in conjunction with local missionaries, known enemies of Blavatsky and eager to discredit her. Critics of Blavatsky countered by accusing her of calculated deceit.

While this conflict was unfolding, the Society for Psychical Research sent first-time investigator Richard Hodgson to investigate the situation. After a methodical but controversial examination (his first for the Society), Hodgson concluded that Blavatsky had indeed been the perpetuator of fraud. He opined that the Masters were mere imaginative fictions, invented by Blavatsky, who, with other co-conspirators, set about the process for the purpose of deception.

The moralising may be left to the reader, who will see how collusion with a few

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<sup>19</sup> See, Emma Coulomb, *Theosophy. Madame Coulomb v. Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/coulomb1884b.htm>>. (Accessed May 13, 2002).

confederates has been sufficient for the generation of a large mass of Theosophical phenomena, and who will no doubt be wondering what has induced Madame Blavatsky to live so many laborious days in the fantastic work of imposture we have exemplified. This last problem was much more difficult of determination than the problem of how the Mahatma letters were integrated. Was the Theosophical Society but the aloe blossom of a woman's monomania? Was this strange, wild, passionate, unconventional being "finding her epos" in the establishment of some incipient world religion? Such a hypothesis was strongly negated upon a better understanding of her character. There are forms of personal sacrifice and aspiration, the absence of which from Madame Blavatsky's conduct absolutely precluded any classifications where she might appear as belonging to the St. Theresa type. She is indeed a rare psychological study, almost as rare as a Mahatma (with whom she confused herself on one occasion, saying, "I had to correct" instead of "The Mahatma had to correct"). She was terrible exceedingly when she expressed her overpowering thought that perhaps her "twenty years' work" might be spoiled through Madame Coulomb, and she developed a unique resentment for the "spiritualistic mediums" whose trickeries she "could so easily expose," but who continued to draw their disciples while her own more guarded and elaborate scheme was in danger of being turned inside out. And I dare prophesy that the Theosophical Society will survive any process of turning, notwithstanding Madame Blavatsky's own sad utterance concerning herself that she was "played out."<sup>20</sup>

Hodgson's report was detailed, entailing two hundred pages, mostly devoted to investigation of the handwriting of selected Mahatma letters, the physical quarters at Adyar, interviews with Blavatsky, members, associates, critics, and accusers. It seems though his conclusions were to some degree conditioned by his personal impression of Blavatsky, whom he saw as a "rare psychological study." A seeming lack of empathy with her ambitions perhaps left him at a loss to account for the motives of "the wild, passionate unconventional being" In trying to determine the grounds for her behaviour and comprehend her persona, he was forced to veer away from more obvious lines of hypothesis and grasp for speculative explanations. His instincts led him to deduce a theory in which Madame Blavatsky was believed to be a Russian spy. By trying to make an argumentative link between Blavatsky's reactions to, and commentary on Russian current affairs, and the pattern of her past travels, he concluded that her activities were motivated by unknown political ends. Such logic has been used as an example of his fallacious reasoning and prejudice. At the time though, it was not altogether an

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Hodgson, *The Theosophical Society. Russian Intrigue or Religious Evolution?* Retrieved from Blavatsky Archives, 1999, <[http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/hodgson11.htm#\(3\)](http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/hodgson11.htm#(3))>. (Accessed May 3,

unreasonable line of speculation given Blavatsky's intentional mystification about her past, her sympathetic (and often patriotic) references to Russian life, and some of her politically active acquaintances. However, the mass of investigative data compiled by Hodgson does not necessarily depend on this line of speculative reasoning to make a case suggesting episodes of fraud. And accusing Hodgson of a premeditated vindictive agenda seems a somewhat simplistic dismissal of his work. Before he began his investigation it was surmised that he approached his task with a non-confrontational attitude. Hodgson had been recognised as at least vaguely sympathetic or neutral to the theosophical orientation beforehand, and even was considered to be acting without malice by Blavatsky in the course of his questioning.

In all fairness to Hodgson, it should be repeated that when he arrived in India to commence his investigations at the TS headquarters in Adyar, his attitude was one of friendliness, not scepticism and suspicion. British friends who knew him just before he came to India said he carried around in his bag Sinnett's *Occult World* and spoke with enthusiasm as to its Theosophical teachings.<sup>21</sup>

It would seem likely that suspicions of deception must have been aroused for Hodgson to develop signs of hostility and distrust during the course of the investigation, Or awareness of incongruities and inconsistencies may have occurred as details were discovered, testimony was taken, and conclusions were formed. Perhaps some of his suspicions were reinforced by the actions of Blavatsky's associates at Adyar too. For instance, a crucial piece of evidence in the charge of deception was the presence of a wooden cabinet with a secret compartment that her accusers say Blavatsky utilised in staging false phenomena. However, it was quickly destroyed almost immediately upon notification of the charges by a group of Theosophical Society officials, thus reinforcing suspicions of guilt by this kind of tampering with potential evidence.

In an article written after Blavatsky's death entitled *The Defence of the Theosophists*, he confronts theosophical objections issued by Besant, Judge, Olcott and others directly, refuting their objections issue by issue, and pointing out the vested-interest perspective that they wished to impose upon his investigation. This article has largely been neglected by critics, who maintain that his methodology and mindset were

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<sup>21</sup> Cranston, op. cit., p. 277.



prejudicial and selective from the outset, and thus that his conclusions only reveal those presumptions. However, in the article Hodgson vehemently states that he attempted to be as objective as possible, and only came to his conclusions reluctantly through overwhelming accumulation of incriminating evidence. He summarises his conclusions in four points.<sup>22</sup> The first was that the primary testimony about the existence of a Brotherhood of Adepts with occult powers came from Blavatsky and her associates Damodar K. Mavalankar, Bhavani Shankar, and Babajee D. Nath. Hodgson concludes that they deliberately made false statements in their testimony. The second point was his conclusion that the handwriting allegedly of the Masters appeared to be that of Blavatsky and of Damodar in imitation of her. His third point was that no evidence of genuine occult phenomena could be adduced in his investigation in India because many of the witnesses revealed inaccurate memories and weren't stringent enough in accounting for the potential of fraud. And in the case of some witnesses, there were conscious misstatements and efforts to mislead and deceive. His final point was that not only was there insufficient evidence supplied by witnesses, but that his own investigation led him to the conclusion that the phenomena in question were perpetuated through fraudulent means.

The Hodgson report has been passionately scrutinised for over a hundred years, and today is still the object of intensely polarised opinion. Amongst theosophical supporters, Hodgson was rebuked for both his alleged personal deficiencies as the chosen investigator, for his presumed unsympathetic approach to the investigation, and for virtually every conclusion he reached. A number of critics of Hodgson's investigation have appeared over the years, but the most diligent and closely argued refutation came from Vernon Harrison in 1985, timed to correspond with the hundred year anniversary of the initial public release of the report. Harrison evaluates Hodgson's efforts this way.

... whereas Hodgson was prepared to use any evidence, however trivial or questionable, to implicate HPB, he ignored all evidence that could be used in her favor. His report is riddled with slanted statements, conjectures advanced as fact or probable fact, uncorroborated testimony of unnamed witnesses, selection of evidence and downright falsity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Hodgson, *The Defence of the Theosophists*, in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, Volume 9, 1893 – 1894*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company Ltd. 1894, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Vernon Harrison, *H. P. Blavatsky and the SPR: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1997,

Harrison basically says that Hodgson started the investigation with his mind already made up, intent to prove fraud, unwilling to allow for a sympathetic or neutral approach to the outstanding issues, and therefore conducted the investigation as a prosecutor. The bulk of Harrison's critique centres on the questionable way Hodgson treated the handwriting materials. Harrison concludes that the handwriting analysis of the letters in question does not lead to a justified charge of forgery or imposture.

I find no evidence of common origin of the KH and M scripts and HPB's ordinary, consciously-made handwriting. That is to say, I find no evidence that the Mahatma Letters were written by Madame Blavatsky in a disguised form of her ordinary writing made for fraudulent purposes. What may have come through her hand in trance, dislocation, or other forms of altered consciousness is another matter.<sup>24</sup>

By identifying the definitive criterion as "HPB's ordinary, consciously-made handwriting" Harrison isolates one significant factor, but allows for possible mitigating circumstances. He rules out calculated intentional efforts at handwriting manipulation and forgery, but admits that during an altered state of consciousness such a conclusion cannot be ascertained. Therefore, it would seem that handwriting analysis by itself is not necessarily a definitive way of revealing the subjective nexus of energies that may possibly have been active in the psyche during the actual process of writing. Blavatsky was experienced with automatic writing, and admitted that she served as amanuensis, as well as volitionally inserting her own thoughts on occasion when giving shape to Mahatma communications. So absolute blanket conclusions seem somewhat inconclusive. Johnson quotes Blavatsky about her admitted active role in the shaping of content.

HPB herself admitted in reference to other K.H. letters, "It is very rarely that Mahatma K.H. *dictated verbatim*," and confessed further that "when I thought my authority would go for naught, when I sincerely believed acting agreeably to Master's intentions and for the good of the cause" she had "insisted that such a note was from the Master" although it was "often something reflected from *my own mind*."<sup>25</sup>

Johnson distinguishes between the physical writing of the letters and their conceptual

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<<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/hpb-spr/hpbspr-h.htm>>. (Accessed May 2, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, op. cit., p. 175.

composition, noting that she could have composed them and had them copied by a confederate, or else have written them but not necessarily been the composer.

In so far as other accusations of the Hodgson report are concerned, Harrison is sceptical and suspicious, distrusting conclusions founded upon a questionable methodology. And because of this belief in Hodgson's erroneous approach, perceived mistakes of handwriting analysis, and the lack of primary evidence for other charges, he refrains from further analysis, deeming it impossible to proceed.

These downright falsities coupled with the procedural errors, make it impossible for me to accept as a fair, impartial statement of fact those parts of the Hodgson Report that I can verify from primary evidence. This being so, I may perhaps be pardoned for regarding with suspicion the remainder of the Hodgson Report for which supporting firsthand evidence is no longer extant.<sup>26</sup>

This a priori dismissal of Hodgson's conclusions largely because of questions surrounding the handwriting analysis is ironic, because Hodgson explicitly states that this issue was a minor factor, and that the major suspicions arose through the cumulative evidence of his overall investigation and through testimony furnished by theosophists of the time.<sup>27</sup> And refusal to even consider testimony given a century earlier because it is "no longer extant" seems a dubious way of ignoring all of Hodgson's investigative work with the assumption it was all based on a bad-faith vindictive campaign. Which Blavatsky and others theosophists did not themselves feel at the time. Presumption that Hodgson misrepresented or misconstrued evidence, or that he ought to have taken an entirely different tact in his approach ignores the fact that such criticism appeared only after the publication of the investigation. In the duration between the investigation and the publication, there was no overt indication that Hodgson was perceived to have been pursuing a vindictive agenda. As well, considering this wasn't a criminal case involving the legal system, Hodgson's first-hand in-field examination did in fact take place relatively quickly once accusations against Blavatsky were made public. It was not a later reconstruction, though a certain amount of deduction was unavoidable because of tampering with evidence by Blavatsky's associates and reluctance of individuals to self-incriminate. Regardless of Hodgson's personal speculation about possible motives, and

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<sup>26</sup> Harrison, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> See, Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

possible errors with facets of the case, the methodical amassing of accusatory details remains difficult to simply “explain away” as entirely built upon premeditated malice, conspiracy, or incompetent procedure. Even if only a portion of his report is accepted as the most probable explanation, the implications yet point to intentionally deceptive and manipulative behaviour on the part of Blavatsky and/or those involved in the machinations.

The theosophical efforts to deligitimise the conclusions of the report by attempting to discredit the investigator provided a counter strategy. If Hodgson’s report was believed to be flawed even somewhat, then all of it could be considered refuted and worthy of dismissal. So belief that Blavatsky was exonerated and purely a passive victim of circumstances or conspiracy became a common theosophical position and justification for sympathetic revisions. The consensus belief amongst loyal theosophists was that Blavatsky herself was personally vindicated and proven innocent of intentional fraud. That process of attempted rehabilitation by supporters has been ongoing ever since the initial report was issued. And though conceivable arguments have been made to show that Hodgson did not conduct a perfect investigation and could have taken other approaches for particular issues, it is yet a leap of faith to assume that Blavatsky was entirely above board and the innocent victim of a prosecutorial agenda. In addition to his enunciation of problematic detail, Hodgson suggests that his final conclusions were influenced by his person-to-person interviews and discussions with Blavatsky. Regardless of the assessments of his motives by others, or the accuracy of his speculative hypothesis about ultimate intentions, he in fact did actively engage the main figures conversationally and inquisitively, and take into account their counter-claims and explanations. So his intuitions and instincts about Blavatsky’s character and trustworthiness (and of her associates) factored into his conclusions. Regardless of their ultimate accuracy, they at least were closer to the source and based on personal observation unlike those of later critics who only have documentary and anecdotal data to use in attempted deconstruction of his arguments. In the end, contemporary supporters of Blavatsky made their counter-arguments and the public was given a choice of which side to take.

Hodgson’s critical estimation had the most widespread and enduring influence on public consciousness. During the time frame the report was first circulated, the

repercussions for Blavatsky and the movement were severe. Particularly in terms of mainstream reputability and legitimacy. The controversy engendered by the Hodgson investigation most dramatically affected the credibility of the Theosophical Society itself as a purported objective, truth-seeking organisation. And it especially engendered even more severe deflation of Madame Blavatsky's public reputation amongst those of the academic, scientific, and intellectual community and the press who had been at least somewhat neutral beforehand. Although the ensuing notoriety added to an already disreputable mainstream image, theosophy itself yet retained its footing for those willing to look past such controversies and empathise with the belief system. For some, the sense of sympathy and willingness to accept Blavatsky's explanations added to her image as a victim of an unjust conspiracy, and enhanced her charismatic appeal. As a perceived victim of unmerited persecution, chronically misunderstood and under-appreciated by an unsympathetic and unenlightened mainstream consensus of cynics and scoffers, Blavatsky was able to elicit renewed sympathy from those yet loyal, who placed implicit trust in her character and integrity, and faith in her charismatic persona.

Despite the controversy however, one significant point was not in dispute. That was the admission that in many instances, the actual substantive contents of the Mahatma communications appeared in writing directly or indirectly through the issuance of Madame Blavatsky. The point of contention is whether she was, as claimed in the letters and by her, a virtually passive medium of psychic transmission, or as claim critics, the wilful originator and composer. That some unascertainable percentage of the letters did indeed manifest and filter through her mental/psychological apparatus is not in doubt. And assuming an independent originating source, many of the other communications purportedly were given linguistic form and transmitted through the psychic work of secondary parties (the chelas of the Masters), and therefore also would be subject to the intrusion of influences of personality, possibly diluting or altering the full intentions of the assumed primary Mahatma source. Therefore, whether the Hodgson claims of fraud apply and thus negate the entire supernatural explanation, or Blavatsky and/or others had at least an indirect role in the actual construction of those letters, it seems that the belief in a clear, direct, incontestable, personal line of communication from the Masters must be at least treated with caution.

Accusations of conspiracy from both sides seem to be a lasting legacy. Hodgson concluded that Blavatsky and her cohorts conspired to perpetuate the fraud of the Masters. Theosophical sympathisers claim the Coulombs' had personal motives and conspired with missionaries to frame Blavatsky. Later day attempts to rehabilitate Blavatsky's reputation and discredit Hodgson unavoidably depend entirely on secondary materials and can only be considered as possible hypotheses, reflecting the vested interests presumed in the very attempt to rehabilitate. And even making a plausible argument for questioning any of Hodgson's methods or conclusions does not automatically legitimise the orthodox theosophical narrative. Even if he drew particular unverifiable conclusions on some points, or conducted somewhat of a flawed examination, enough serious doubts were raised to treat the orthodox theosophical response with caution. Hodgson dealt with real issues of contention, which defy simplistic sophistic rationalisation. As well, simply reiterating Hodgson's conclusions without acknowledging the problematical circumstances under which they were formed likewise simplifies a complex issue.

#### **6.2.4 Theory 3B – Unintentionally Projected Psychological Figures – Consideration of Archetypal, Neo-Jungian, and Evans' Perspectives**

Another line of thought that shares belief that the Masters were non-existent as autonomous, self-sufficient, independent entities can be found implicit in the speculation of those who profess a primarily psychological basis for the concept. From this perspective, Blavatsky may have not intentionally invented fraudulent beings, however, she still would have to be considered as a purveyor of a complex imaginative notion, most likely deriving from unconscious energies and objectified through the creative faculties. The Jungian theory of archetypes is perhaps the most obvious generic psychological model for this form of explanation, which becomes even more hypothetical and speculative when treated from more radical offshoots of the Jungian school of thought. Jung's own thoughts about the nature of archetypal manifestations and the appeal of theosophy would appear to lead to the inference that Madame Blavatsky may very well have been subject to such intrusions.

When ... psychic energy regresses, going even beyond the period of early

infancy, and breaks into the legacy of ancestral life, the mythological images are awakened: these are the archetypes. An interior spiritual world whose existence we never suspected opens out and displays content which seem to stand in sharpest contrast to all our former ideas. These images are so intense that it is quite understandable why millions of cultivated persons should be taken in by theosophy and anthroposophy. This happens simply because such modern gnostic systems meet the need for expressing and formulating the wordless occurrences going on within ourselves *better* than any of the existing forms of Christianity, not excluding Catholicism . . . The syncretism of theosophy goes a long way towards meeting this need, and this explains its numerous successes.<sup>28</sup>

From Jung's perspective, belief in objective, independent, extraordinarily endowed beings as perceived in vision, dream, and trance, derive from numinous experience, and are manifestations of an archetype of the collective unconscious, objectified and perceived to subsist apart from the percipient. And while the theosophical Masters were not singled out specifically, their inclusion in this category would appear quite consistent with the general themes of that theory. Jung though sees theosophy as a hybrid (though compromised) syncretistic system that has been useful for some in providing an efficacious response in meeting spiritual needs since its modern inception.

The actual cultural representation of numinous experience emerges through the creative imaginative process of those committed to its articulation. However, in the speculative inquiries of some more willing to radicalise Jung's theory, the archetypal image may be perceived as belonging to a different category than either pure subjectivity or objectivity. The hypothesis of an intermediary state called "imaginal" has been propounded in various ways to account for the persistence of objectified numinous encounters without reducing the phenomenon to the status of a rationally contrived fiction or a pathological mental disturbance. This saves the experience from reduction to a "mere" act of fancy, and permits belief in a quasi-independent subsistence of the archetypal representations. Henry Corbin is usually credited with first using the term, and subsequent speculation by others has enriched the discussion.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Harpur begins with a premise that "Imagination" not only is the source of all images of sacred beings, but also effectively accounts for how and where those representations may

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<sup>28</sup> C.G. Jung, *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, pp. 77-78.

<sup>29</sup> For discussion of the influence of Jung on Corbin, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, chapter 12.

appear.

In this understanding of Imagination, we see another formulation of Jung's collective unconscious ... The sacred beings are the spontaneously appearing archetypal images. They are our gods and daimons. The advantage of Imagination as a model for daimonic reality is that it avoids the implication, however residual, of the term 'collective unconscious' that it is somehow purely interior, within us—when ... it is also external to us. Similarly, the model 'Soul of the World' implies the opposite, emphasizing externality over internality. The idea of Imagination draws these first two models together. Like the collective unconscious it is the source of autonomous sacred beings; like the Soul of the World, it locates these sacred beings just as often in the world as in our psyches (as in dreams, visions, etc.).<sup>30</sup>

By this line of reasoning, Blavatsky's characterisations of the Masters would not necessarily be reduced to intentionally embellished creations, but be seen perhaps as based upon "spontaneously appearing archetypes." Her own numinous experiences at times would thus appear to reveal "in the world" empirical entities and milieus, but in fact would be based upon unintentional and subconscious reification of subjectively derived archetypal material.

Blavatsky's penchant for objectifying and personalising the content of her imagination may have been motivated by the real-world influences that may have factored into her image of the Masters. However, insisting on the literal objective autonomy of the Masters as individual entities contributed to the confusion in discerning what portions of her ideas were spontaneous and what part were contrived. Hillman's observations on the nature of the image are instructive.

We tend to literalize, to idolize, the image into a visibility ... We perceive images with the imagination, or, better said, we imagine them rather than perceive them, and we cannot perceive with sense perception the depths that are not extended in the sense world.<sup>31</sup>

It is not inconceivable that Blavatsky inadvertently produced a mixed message in her creative efforts. This may have eventuated through ongoing personalisation of the image of the Masters. Especially in reference to their alleged attentiveness to internal Theosophical Society concerns. While at the same time, "perceiving with the

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick Harpur, *Daimonic Reality*, London/New York/Ringwood/Toronto/Auckland: Penguin Books, 1995, pp. 122–123.

<sup>31</sup> James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, New York/Hagerstown/San Francisco/London: Harper & Row, 1979, p. 55.



imagination,” and drawing upon more numinous and archetypal impressions to portray superior resplendent figures. So by mixing prosaic human qualities and detail with “depths that are not extended in the sense world,” the archetypal image or symbol was given the specific and unique form of the theosophical Masters. And yet, the blending of unconscious and conscious elements may be unavoidable, an intrinsic fact of the creative process that ultimately produces the final representation.

The creative act, the concentration upon the production of something of value that can be communicated to other people, requires entrée to the unconscious; it also requires ego participation. The fear of being taken over by the unconscious may be countered by the act of objectification ... The visions then become manageable creations of his own mind. It is only by setting the inner world against the world of substance that visions can come to a fruitful relationship with values.<sup>32</sup>

It would seem that the particular theosophical doctrine of the Masters originally may have been the result of Blavatsky’s attempt to incorporate the substance of what may have been subjective numinous experience with a broad assortment of residual occult information gleaned from a lifetime of travel, study, instruction, and speculation along similar lines. As well, in perusing the profiles of the Masters, it appears likely that certain of their traits and characteristics would be drawn from knowledge of real people, such as the list of sponsors and influences enunciated by Johnson. When combined with more purely imaginative contents, the final image appears less easy to define. Thus, the inclusion of all such factors would tend to suggest that during the creative period, Blavatsky was continually crafting a mythology of the Masters that included data based upon real-world knowledge and relationships as well as upon what she was able to objectify from her own store of archetypal experiences. So this kind of creativity is basically an imaginative process drawing together and assembling disparate sources of imagery, information, and emotionally laden psychic materials to create a novel and personalised cultural product.

Creativity is imagination pure and simple, ever and anon producing its own shapes and configurations.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of the theosophical Masters that emerged from Blavatsky’s articulation

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<sup>32</sup> June Singer, *Blake, Jung, and the Collective Unconscious*, York Beach, Maine: Nicolas Hays Inc., 2000, pp. 244–245.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Avens, *Imaginal Body*, Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1982, p. 128.

presented “its own shapes and configurations,” possibly based on both conscious and unconscious energies.

A more adventurous and tenuous line of speculation deriving from the same sort of evaluation can be found in the hypothesis put forth by Hilary Evans in *Visions. Apparitions. Alien Visitors*. Evans believes that the experience of confrontation with seemingly veridical extraordinary entities occurs as a result of deep psychological processing, mostly occurring at the subconscious level though exhibiting characteristics of purposefulness and meaningfulness for the individual subject. She calls this source “the producer,” a personification of these purposeful subconscious forces. The seemingly authentic and self-subsistent vision or apparition appears to the perceiver as a distinct autonomous entity, even though hypothesised to be originating purely in the psyche of the percipient. The creative and imaginative faculties help shape and define the form the image takes, but this occurs spontaneously rather than through intentional conscious manipulation. It is after such numinous visions are experienced that some more captivating and powerful images later become assimilated culturally and available for imaginative and creative representation and embellishment. The manifestation of veridical imagery is believed to be an intrinsic possibility of the human psychological condition, given the necessary triggering stimuli, though it is more likely to occur for those individuals who are more emotionally and imaginatively sensitised and susceptible (whether voluntarily induced or spontaneously occurring) to the abnormal states of consciousness enunciated by Gowan. Evans’ theory presumes a number of causal factors all seamlessly integrated in the process of visionary manifestation.

Within our minds there exists a creative, intelligent, sympathetic and understanding capability, whose function is to fabricate non-real scenes and scenarios, for purposes only some of which can be guessed at. This capability, which for the sake of convenience we may call the producer, may plausibly be conceived as a parallel personality to our conscious personality.

The producer has access not only to all our sensory input, both conscious and unconscious, but also to our mental and emotional attitudes and concerns; he also has access, whether constant or when the need arises, to information not available to our conscious minds...

Using this material, the producer creates fantasies consisting largely of representations of people; these may be persons, living or dead, known to the percipient; or stereotypes whose identity is evident though they are not personally known to the percipient ...or persons who, so far as the conscious mind can tell,

are total strangers. They may appear as isolated figures or in realistic settings: in either case the manifestation is managed so skilfully that the entity is frequently assumed to be real at the time.

There is no evidence so show that the creation of these imaginary scenes and entities is a continuous process, but unquestionably some are created at specific times for specific purposes.

The non-real scenes are substituted for the reality reported by the senses; the substitution takes place somewhere between the sense organs and the part of the brain concerned with visual imagery. Or is effected so neatly that there is generally no discontinuity between reality and fiction. There is no reason to suppose it uses anything but the normal channels of communication, employing encoded signals.

While the most memorable instances of this process are the made-to-order experiences that relate to a crisis or other event with a strong emotional overloading, 'accidental' tuning in to the material can be obtained in a number of mental states, which are not those of everyday consciousness – when intoxicated or drugged, in trance, delirium or mystical ecstasy...

There is no evident limit to the range of material of the experience, but its nature will be determined by the percipient's personal preoccupations, his cultural background, and by the immediate situation. It will also be adapted to the context of time and place in which it occurs.<sup>34</sup>

This theory makes a number of hypothetical assumptions, particularly the belief that veridical encounters with the numinous arise from a value-oriented, causal interaction between conscious and subconscious levels of the psyche. This theory somewhat restates what would be seen in Jungian terms as a synchronistic underlying order of reality. The inherent drive towards realisation of the potential of the Self through individuation would provoke, when appropriate, compensatory archetypal manifestations via visionary forms of experience. What is distinctive though is the premise that strong emotional overloading or equivalent accidental trigger functions are the stimulus for the creation of fantasies that predominantly feature "representations of people." If these numinous fantasies feature the fabrication of "non-real scenes" highlighting these veridical entity representations, then any number of seemingly profound or solemn scenarios could appear subjectively authentic. Such visions would locate the numinous figure(s) in a congruent setting befitting their perceived status. The wide variety of people potentially represented through such internal operations of the psyche obviously derives from personal and cultural sources, whether historical, legendary, fictional, or imagined.

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<sup>34</sup> Hilary Evans, *Visions. Apparitions. Alien Visitors*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian

The cultural and historical milieu will shape the form the vision takes, but more critical, is “the percipient’s personal preoccupations.” Thus, the framework of familiar and personal ideational and emotional concerns and interests of each individual, and the worldview of his specific environment will shape the contents of his vision. Therefore, using this line of reasoning for hypothetical conjecture, it would stand that Blavatsky’s visionary excursions would produce representations of persons that embodied her personal ideas, values, and beliefs. And these were mostly drawn from her absorption in occult and mystical matters and familiarity with the extensive resources and subject matter of those fields. Combined with residual imagery and associations from her past and her ongoing pursuits, it appears that her description of the Mahatmas, their eclectic esotericism, secretive Himalayan base, astral and transcendent operations, etc. etc. would be logical extrapolations utilised by her own subconscious “producer,” or (Jungian) Self-function.

### **6.2.5 Origins of the Idea of the Masters – An Integrated Theory**

When her statements about experiencing visions of a guardian (later interpreted as her Master) during crises situations earlier in her life are factored in, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that early in her life that such numinous visions served as the defining prototype by which later more mature visionary episodes were interpreted and classified. As well, the inclusion of detail drawn from actual historical personages, incorporated for immediate ulterior ends, and embellished by an active creative imagination could plausibly be seen to integrate with the primary numinous, visionary datum. With this hypothesis, Blavatsky’s thoughts and actions concerning the Masters would justify both her proclamations of sincerity regarding belief in contact with spiritual entities as well as charges of manipulation and deceit. The issue becomes a question of degree, and of quantifying the admixture. What percentage of her portrayal and doctrinal representation of the Masters was based on the sincere assumption that she was engaged in authentic communication with self-subsistent spiritual entities? And what quotient was intentionally fabricated and utilised fraudulently? And, further, what portion of her theosophical career was motivated by belief that her communications with the Masters

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Press, 1986, pp. 308–309.

was active and efficacious, and when did she feel the need to maintain the mythical apparatus through contrivance and manipulation, without visionary reinforcement? Even granting the prominence of visionary experience on an ongoing basis, can the numinous portion be separated from the self-delusional?<sup>35</sup> These rhetorical questions are proposed to illustrate the difficulty in treating the complexities of subjectively based claims of extraordinary experiences. Especially deriving from someone who engaged in continued intentional mystification and revision. Any hypothesis can only be tentative, based on evidence and logic that seems to provide a reasonable interpretation of the materials at hand. In any event, it must be noted that to Madame Blavatsky and orthodox theosophical exponents, the Masters have consistently been envisioned as autonomous existent humans, supremely evolved and oriented to a dimensionality inaccessible to the uninitiated and unqualified, but profoundly real nonetheless. Any hypothesis suggesting less than this advanced state of self-sufficiency would be regarded as heretical. Although allowance was made by Blavatsky and others to think of the Masters as ideals and symbols, the great thrust of the theosophical initiative was to emphasise their historicity and influence in world affairs and organisational concerns.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, any speculation about whether Madame Blavatsky's purported encounters with the Masters can be definitively accounted for through such a hypothetical framework of interpretation can only be tentative, although highly suggestive. Blavatsky's familiarity with esoteric traditions would provide a background of information about the theory of a secretive brotherhood of Masters. With Johnson's study, it seems that real historical figures played at least some role in the descriptions of the Masters, providing idiosyncratic personalised detail and imagery. As well, with a known propensity for engaging in a variety of altered states of consciousness, and a vivid and fecund imagination, it would seem plausible that numinous visionary episodes may have occurred in which the belief in the objectivity of the Masters was felt to be verified. And through application of the general Jungian methodology, the possibility of those numinous experiences being archetypal in quality may be postulated. So through the

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<sup>35</sup> For a cogent analysis of the issue of self-deception, see Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, New York: Vintage Books, 1984, pp. 59–66.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, H. S. Olcott, *The Himalayan Brothers*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 1999, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/olcott11.html>>. (Accessed May 19, 2002).

stimulus of crises situations or other triggers, the continuity of such visions would appear to confirm their veridical status. As well, from anecdotal accounts and the implications of the Hodgson investigation, it would be naïve to believe that no degree of fabrication or embellishment took place when it suited Blavatsky's purposes. Thus, factoring in all these contributing elements, it would seem that the formal theosophical doctrine of the Masters as enunciated by Blavatsky was a product of a number of discrete sources of input, giving the doctrine of the Masters wider socially legitimating authority and serve Blavatsky's personal agenda when required.

### **6.3 The Functional Utility of the Idea of the Masters**

#### **6.3.1 The Idea of the Masters Providing the Authority for Internal Organisational Structuring – Themes Discerned in *The Mahatma Letters***

For our purposes, what is important to note is the functional utility of the doctrine of the Masters. How it served in helping legitimate the larger theosophical worldview. The role that the idea of the Masters played within the theosophical ideational system attained an importance independent of factual origins. Blavatsky applied the claim of a secret occult brotherhood of Masters in two main ways. One was a quasi-private organisational function, mostly applied to the more senior and important society members and associates. Having to continually reiterate and reaffirm her personal role and special status as primary intermediary between Masters and members, it was necessary to show stability and that the link with the Masters was still operative. In her capacity as authoritative theosophical theoretician, it was necessary on an ongoing basis to confirm for the key Theosophical Society members and associates that the Masters were still proactive and supportive of the organisation itself as a special institution.

Whatever role Blavatsky played in the creation and transmission of the Mahatma communications is of secondary importance in this instance. Regardless of their origins, the Mahatma messages served an important supportive purpose for Blavatsky by regularly confirming the special role she played as liaison, as well as the generally correct way her activities conformed to Masterly intentions. The Mahatma letters in particular were a mix of theoretical and philosophical ideas and specific concrete organisational concerns. With the stamp of approval by the Masters for particular objectives and

potential lines of action, the Theosophical Society could more efficiently be directed along lines intended to conform to those aspirations. Conversely, where signs of disapproval or warnings about possible choices came from the communications of a Master, a heavier weight was placed on the process of decision-making. So the seemingly inordinate amount of attention in the Mahatma letters directed to apparently mundane internal societal minutiae could only be reasonably justified by rationalising more esoteric, impersonal, and universal purposes beneath the surface of the everyday concerns. Also, at this “insider” level, demands or expectations of tangible proof and personal contact with the Masters was anticipated, and therefore had to be taken into account. We shall look at some of the ways the communications from the Masters provided institutional directives and reaffirmed Blavatsky’s special status.

As well, the doctrine of the Masters also served another practical purpose. This was a more public function, directed at the average theosophical membership, sympathisers, and curious public. These would be people more likely to be reading the articles, pamphlets, newspaper references, and books, attending lectures, holding discussions, and so on, but not necessarily part of the “inner circle” of the Theosophical Society. The utility of the theory of the Masters was mostly normative and inspirational, providing paradigmatic ideal types to serve as role models as well as further legitimating the theosophical claims to special status as an institution sanctioned by supernaturally connected sources.

### **6.3.2 The Idea of the Masters Providing an Idealised and Alluring Public Image**

We begin with the way belief in the possibilities of communication with the Masters served to shape institutional affairs. A perusal of the Mahatma letters reveals two major themes, often discussed in the same letter. One major focus of interest was the provision of occult knowledge and information, often phrased in personal advisory terms for the intended recipient. This content was both about theoretical and philosophical matters as well as practical issues pertaining to personal conduct and training for chelaship. The other was almost an obsessive interest in the minutiae of organisational affairs, filled with advice, recommendations, gossip, opinion, judgment of character, speculation about procedural options, elaborate and convoluted explanations for allegedly

fraudulent activities and so on. Despite the questions of the source and means of authorship, the writings themselves served as important indicators to recipients that the Masters were actively concerned about them personally and the Theosophical Society as an entity. This provided legitimating authority for their contents, and inspirational encouragement for the recipient, who (if believing in their supernatural authenticity) was able to proceed, feeling that he or she was privy to a special and unique source of truth.

Another consistent secondary undercurrent to many letters is the approval given to the activities of Madame Blavatsky. Although often spoken of irreverently and pityingly, those kinds of characterisations appear almost purely rhetorical when viewed over the span of the letters. Beneath the caustic comments about her physical limitations, temper, and questionable personal habits, she is almost always portrayed as loyally and effectively trying to follow the advisement of the Masters as best she can. Her mistakes are never a matter of bad faith, betrayal, egotism, or selfishness. They are a result of tempestuousness, over-eagerness, physical or mental incapacity, circumstantial and unexpected variables. And, underlying even these fallibilities and character flaws, is the built-in excuse of “her karma,” justifying the unusual and problematic ramifications of her activities. So by linking the desires and objectives of the Masters to Blavatsky’s endeavours, she is portrayed as a struggling though determined messenger who yet reveals a message more significant and worthy than could be attributed to her own devices.<sup>37</sup>

Let us illustrate some of those functions of the Mahatma letters. We begin with by looking at how the purported Masters differentiated between roles as supernaturally sanctioned authoritative teachers of esoteric wisdom, and their subsidiary status as Theosophical Society functionaries and advisors. The continuity of these kinds of presumed relationships provided the foundation of trust and faith upon which the credibility of the transmitted knowledge as well as advisement for the movement, rested.

The so-called “Mahatma Letters” were physical letters, seemingly hand-written, that appeared mysteriously and unexpectedly in the environs of A.P. Sinnett, a notable member of the London lodge of the Theosophical Society. The explanation for the

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<sup>37</sup> See L. Gordon Plummer, *H. P. Blavatsky, The Mystery*, in *H.P. Blavatsky and the Secret Doctrine*, ed. Virginia Hanson, op. cit., pp. 166–177 for the standard theosophical occult rationale for Blavatsky’s unusual personality traits and unconventional behaviour. Also see Cranston, op. cit, pp. 149–150.



unorthodox method of delivery was that occult means were used throughout the process, from composition to delivery. Ostensibly expressing the thoughts of the Mahatmas on arcane knowledge and Theosophical Society plans, they provided an early outline of basic theosophical doctrine and intentions. The Masters (primarily Koot Hoomi or Morya) stress that they are elite representatives of an esoteric/occult/spiritual tradition, utilising the Theosophical Society to advance a different worldview and change the habitual perceptions common to Western society at this moment of cyclical evolution.

If, for generations we have “shut out the world from the Knowledge of our Knowledge,” it is account of its absolute unfitness; and if, notwithstanding proofs given, it still refuses yielding to evidence, then we will at the End of this cycle retire into solitude and our kingdom of silence once more... We have offered to exhume the primeval strata of man’s being, his basic nature, and lay bare the wonderful complications of his inner Self ... It is our mission to plunge and bring the pearls of Truth to the surface... For countless generations hath the adept builded a fane of imperishable rocks, a giant’s Tower of INFINITE THOUGHT, wherein the titan dwelt, and will yet, if need be, dwell alone; emerging from it but at the end of every cycle, to invite the elect of mankind to co-operate with him and help in his turn enlighten superstitious man. And we will go on in that periodic work of ours; we will not allow ourselves to be baffled in our philanthropic attempts until that day when the foundations of a new continent of thought are so firmly built that no amount of opposition and ignorant malice guided by the Brethren of the Shadow will be found to prevail.<sup>38</sup>

Cautious of the ramifications of radical change, and because they do not trust in the capacity of the masses to properly comprehend the true significance of this new worldview, the Masters must work cautiously and carefully. However, by utilising only trusted allies and loyalists, The Masters will be able to disseminate their message via the theosophical apparatus. Becoming an accepted chela though is difficult. Not every aspirant has the capacity for self-sacrifice and dramatic change in lifestyle. The rare exception may aspire to the highest ranks, but the less accomplished or dedicated must settle for playing lesser roles. And the onus is on the prospective student to seek out, properly impress, and surrender autonomy to the Master.<sup>39</sup>

However, once accepted as even a peripheral or minor associate of the Masters, one’s entire future cosmic and existential destiny changes. The conscious volitional decision to partake in the work of the Masters, places one in an entirely different sphere

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<sup>38</sup> Barker, op. cit., p. 51.

of relationships, responsibilities, and priorities. The Masters will exert their influence as they deem necessary, and the commitment to their work transcends any other former primary interest or concerns. However, because the conditions are different for each person, responsibilities and relationships cannot be simply abandoned. The obligations of this new bond will manifest in ways chosen by the Masters according to their plans and their needs. The long-term effects on the karma of the new associate will now be significantly altered by this relationship, as the commitment to their work places the aspirant on a new footing in the quest for spiritual development. The influences will be felt through subconscious impressions during sleep, unexpectedly during the activities of the day, and indefinitely extended through future lives. The following comment is instructive in its emphasis on the way commitment is portrayed as form of psychological possession, or surrender of autonomy. “Crossing the mystic line” is a threshold that forever changes both the immediate conduct of life and the future destiny of the reincarnating Self.

Your strivings, perplexities and forebodings are equally noticed, good and faithful friend. In the imperishable RECORD of the Masters *you have written them all*. There are registered your every deed and thought; for though not a chela, as you say to my brother Morya, not even a “protégé”—as you understand the term—still, you have stepped within the circle of our work, you have crossed the mystic line which separates your world from ours, and now whether you persevere or not; whether we become later on, in your sight, still more living *real* entities or vanish out of your mind like so many dream fictions—perchance an ugly nightmare—you are virtually OURS. Your hidden *Self* has mirrored itself in *our Akasa*; your nature is—yours, your essence is—ours. The flame is distinct from the log of wood which serves it temporarily as fuel; at the end of your apparitional birth—and whether we two, meet face to face in our grosser *rupas*—you cannot avoid meeting us in *Real Existence*. Yea, verily good friend your *Karma* is ours, for you imprinted it daily and hourly upon the pages of that book where the minutest particulars of the individuals stepping inside our circle—are preserved; and your *Karma* is your only personality to be when you step beyond. In thought and deed, by day, in soul-struggles by nights, you have been writing the story of your desires and your spiritual development. This, everyone who approaches us with any earnestness of desire to become our co-worker, he himself “precipitates” the written entries by the identical process used by us when we write inside your closed letters and uncut pages of books and pamphlets in transit. . . . During the past few months, especially, when your weary brain was plunged in the torpor of sleep, your eager soul has often been searching after me , and the current of your thought been beating against my protecting barriers of Akas as the lapping

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

wavelets against a rocky shore. What that “Inner Self,” impatient, anxious—has longed to bind itself to, the carnal man, the worldlings’ master has not yet rectified: the ties of life are as strong as chains of steel. Sacred, indeed, some of them are, and no one would ask you to rupture them. There below lies your long-cherished field of enterprise and usefulness. Ours can never be more than a bright phantom-world to the man of thorough “practical sense”...<sup>40</sup>

This graphic description is personalised in such a way to suggest that there is a dramatic gulf between merely human cognisance and will, and the superhuman capacities of the Masters, who are capable of penetrating the private subjective spheres of under-evolved supplicants to discern their true eternal essence. The “Inner Self” is presumed exposed as a self-sufficient supervening presence distinct from the social self and psychological persona to those skilful and experienced in manipulation of supersensory faculties. And the phrases “you are virtually OURS,” “your essence is—ours,” explicitly indicate that discipleship to the Masters is a process wherein egocentric self-interest is relinquished and replaced by the priorities inculcated under Masterly guidance. The specific tone noted for Theosophical Society operatives is that embarking on this path and crossing the threshold is in fact a logical and progressive step furthering an already predetermined destiny encompassing multiple incarnations.

For those who desire to commit completely to the work of the Masters and undertake the process of applying as a chela, the obligations are strict, rigorous, uncompromising. And absolute faith in the supernaturally legitimated authoritativeness of the Masters and their teachings is necessary to ever hope to attain the desired objectives. The Masters in fact insist that it is only through unconditional faith in their intentions, knowledge, and transcendental status that “Truth land” can be reached.

Believe me faithful friend, that *nothing* short of full confidence in us, in our good motives, if not in our wisdom, in our foresight, if not omniscience—which is not to be found on this earth—can help one to cross over from one’s land of dream and fiction to our Truth land, the region of stern reality and fact.<sup>41</sup>

By asserting that their credibility as teachers/gurus/mentors/super-evolved beings was validated by their roles in the occult hierarchy, the contents of the worldview espoused in their communications acquired special authoritative status. Sinnett utilised

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

much early theoretical material emanating from such letters of the Masters in his books, *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*. The contents of their teachings presented the same general ideational skeletal structure expounded by Blavatsky in her writings, with virtually no contradictions or disputes on essential principles. Essentially, theoretical speculation in *The Mahatma Letters* encompasses a wide variety of topics concerning the occult vision of the universe and of man. Most of the doctrinal discussion dealt with the details pertaining to the cyclical basis of cosmic, natural, and human evolution.<sup>42</sup>

The Masters explication of evolutionary and involutory macrocosmic and microcosmic processes, dynamically integrated, causally related, and evolving through cosmic, species, racial, and personal cycles and stages became accepted as a fundamental ideational pillar of theosophical thought. Along with Blavatsky's writings, *The Mahatma Letters* have maintained their authoritative status for most traditional factions of the theosophical movement. The Masters sketched out many of the particulars about specific issues in their letters. Included were comments about the nature and destiny of the individual; the procedures and stages of emanation from God/the Absolute to the lowest material planes; the characteristics or conditions by which the gods/cosmic energies/entities etc. may be identified or distinguished; the operations of subtle and material cosmic and natural forces and powers; the metamorphoses through different kingdoms; the dynamics of karma, etc. etc. The letters of the Masters served the purpose of providing first Sinnett and his Theosophical Society associates, and later, indirectly through his books, a wider public, specific doctrinal content upon which the broader worldview was built.

However, despite the possible attractiveness or plausibility of the worldview itself as a self-contained system of thought and framework of belief, it yet retained its defining allure because it was alleged to have the special legitimating status of the Masters. Acceptance of the premise that the Masters were authentic representatives of a transcendently grounded spiritual hierarchy of real and proven efficacy sanctified and glamorised the contents of their teachings. Even if the worldview itself was found to be internally consistent, logical, emotionally satisfying, and a credible option, it was not presented as merely a product of human thought or insight. From its very first

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<sup>42</sup> For an encapsulated example of this broad sweeping vision, see *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

enunciation, it was inexorably linked with the necessary belief in a wisdom tradition maintained by an extraordinarily evolved and spiritually advanced elite brotherhood. Their directive purpose was said to have continuously endured through the history of the species and even, the preceding evolutionary rounds and cycles. Thus, although efforts to legitimise the theosophical worldview purely on grounds of plausibility, logic, and emotional persuasiveness have at times minimised the transcendent and occult characteristics of the Masters and their hierarchy, the original impetus was dramatically dependent on just those elements to establish a position of special status for the emergent Theosophical Society. If the Society was especially founded on their behest, then that would give it a distinguished and noble legitimacy, inviting to those inspired by its ideals and objectives and desirous of joining the ranks of a spiritually pioneering vanguard.

The special elite status of the Masters and the occult system of knowledge they sanctioned helped inculcate a feeling of unique purpose for front-line Theosophical Society organisers, theoreticians, and activists. As well, the Masters apparently took more than a detached and impersonal overview of Society operations and strategies. Despite their lofty spiritual roles within the hierarchy of the Brotherhood of Adepts, they seemed to spend an inordinate amount of attention and thought concerned with all aspects of the movement. Through their letters and communications they seem extraordinarily alert, concerned, and sensitive to every subtle or explicit nuance relating to individuals or situations involving the organisation. They were apparently aware of diverse conversations, written correspondences, secretive motives of various individuals, and did not hesitate in bold and blunt judgment and recommendations. From their secret retreat in the Himalayas, they try to micromanage the movement through suggestions, warnings, and entreaties to follow, reject, or modify particular lines of action. The tendency to manipulate operations of the Theosophical Society or related enterprises through advisement and judgment about others is found constantly in their presumed correspondence. For example, here advice is given in which the motives of one party are virtually demonised by the suggestion that they in fact reflect hidden malignant influences.

A cloud does lower over your path ... He whom you made your confidant—I advised you to become but his co-worker, not to divulge things to him that you should have kept locked within your bosom—is under a baleful influence, and

may become your enemy. You do right to try and rescue him from it, for it bodes ill to him, to you, and to the Society. His greater mind fumed by vanity and charmed by the pipings of a weaker but more cunning one, is for the time under a spell of fascination. You will easily detect the *malign power* that stands behind *both* and *uses them as tools* for the execution of its own nefarious plans. The intended catastrophe can be averted by redoubled vigilance and increased fervour of pure will ...<sup>43</sup>

Warnings of caution, planting the seeds of distrust and suspicion, petty and cynical character observations for those opposed to a Blavatsky endorsed line of conduct appear as common threads of Masterly advice.

One word of advice—an earnest warning from both of us: *trust not little Fern—beware of him*. His placid serenity and smiles when talking to you ... are all *assumed*. His letter of penitence and remorse to M—which he sends you to keep—is not sincere. If you do not watch him closely, he will mix the cards for you in a way that may lead the Society to ruin, for he swore a great oath to himself that the Society will either *fall* or *rise* with himself. If he fails next year again—and with all his great gifts, how can such an incurable little Jesuit and liar help failing?—he will do his best to pull down the Society with him...<sup>44</sup>

Disgust and disappointment in those who have either rejected their overtures or have turned from actual or potential supporters to critics is also evident throughout the Mahatma correspondences. Often expressed as a steady undercurrent of gossip and innuendo.

Mr. Hume—who once promised to become a champion fighter in that Battle of Light against Darkness—now preserves a kind of armed neutrality wondrous to behold ... C.C. Massey? But then he is the hapless parent of about half a dozen of illegitimate brats ... Dr. Wyld?—a Christian to the backbone. Hood?—a sweet nature ... yet, no worker. S. Moses? Ah! Here we are. S.M. has nearly upset the theosoph. Ark set afloat three years back: and he will do his level best to do it over again...<sup>45</sup>

And here we see a proposed Machiavellian plan to appease those restless with the Society as it stood, and desirous of instituting a competing organisation. The threat of a cessation of communication is issued if a solution is not found.

Shall I tell you the future of that new body? It grow and develop and expand and finally the Theos. Soc. Of London will be swamped in it, and lose first its

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 303.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

influence then—its name, until Theosophy in its very name becomes a thing of the Past... The evil may yet be averted—let the Society exist in name till the day it can get members with whom we can work *de facto*—and by the creation of another counteracting cause we may save the situation. The hand of the Chohan alone can bridge it, but it must be *yours* that places the first stone for the work. How can you do it? Think of it well if you care for further intercourse. They want something new. A *Ritual* to amuse them.<sup>46</sup>

And most interestingly, Mahatma Koot Hoomi took a very proactive position in advising Sinnett to continue with his plan in founding a new esoterically oriented Anglo-Indian journal, *The Phoenix*. The Master involved himself extensively with financial and logistical advice. However, despite original encouragement, when the venture showed signs of being unsuccessful, he denied any blame or responsibility, professing discomfort and distaste for involvement with the enterprise. And when facing questions of accountability, he charged Sinnett with racist motives.

I stepped outside our usual limits to aid your particular project from a conviction of its necessity and its potential usefulness: having begun I shall continue until the result is known. But in this uncongenial experience of meddling in a business affair, I have ventured within the very breath of the world's furnace. I have suffered so much from the enforced insight at short distance into the moral and spiritual condition of my people; and been so shocked by this nearer view of the selfish baseness of human nature ... I have seen so distinctly the certainty that it cannot be helped—that I shall henceforth abstain from any repetition of the unbearable experiment. Whether your paper should succeed or not—and if the latter, it will be due to *yourself* exclusively ... I shall have no more to do with the financial side of these worldly affairs; but confine myself to our prime duty of gaining knowledge and disseminating through all available channels such fragments as mankind in the mass may be ready to assimilate. ... The great pain that you have afflicted upon me, shows clearly that either I understand nothing in the fitness of political duties and therefore, could hardly hope to be a wise business and *political* “control” or that the man whom I regard as a true friend, however honest and willing, will never rise above English prejudices and the sinful antipathy towards *our race* and colour.<sup>47</sup>

Another theme found in the purported communications of the Masters was the admixture of minor criticisms and thankful gratitude directed towards the figure of Madame Blavatsky. On the one hand, her fallibilities, temperamental personality, and physical debilitations are noted as constraining factors for the cause. On the other hand, admiration for her loyalty, dedication, gumption, effort, and willpower is expressed.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-266.

Essentially, the criticisms appear superficial in light of the spirited admiration reflected for her as an agent of the Masters. To the recipients of the contents of these messages, Madame Blavatsky is portrayed as absolutely trustworthy and fully authenticated as a representative of the Masters. Although her flaws may be irritating, and her behaviour embarrassing or detrimental at times, in the long run her importance is unequivocally confirmed. Blavatsky's mission is given special status and sanctification through the Masters supernatural authority, while her own seemingly discomfiting approach is revealed to be the result of a mysterious occult process. A theosophical tenet was that the effects of personal karmic debt became compacted and intensified as one advanced further along the spiritual path. So her personal idiosyncrasies, while not condoned, are excused as inevitable and unavoidable side effects or by-products of the accelerated training she was undergoing under the auspices of her Master.

Here we see her being portrayed in both her exasperating and endearing modes, shown as a complex individual who is not fully understood or appreciated. However, for all the external flaws of personality, the qualities of her inner self are revealed to be much more substantial and estimable. The contrast between the "eccentric" and the "most delicate and refined" aspects of "HPB's mind" indicate a tendency towards inner struggle, and thus provides a likely explanation for the discrepancies of her behaviour.

Of course she is utterly unfit for a *true adept*: her nature is too passionately affectionate and we have no right to indulge in *personal* attachments and feelings. You can never know her as we do, therefore—none of you will ever be able to judge her impartially or correctly... In your opinion, HPB is, at best, for those that like her despite herself—a quaint, strange, woman, a psychological riddle: impulsive and kindhearted, yet not free from the vice of untruth. We, on the other hand, under the garb of eccentricity and folly—we find a profounder wisdom in her *inner* Self than you will ever find yourselves able to perceive. In the superficial details of her homely, hard-working, common-place daily life and affairs, you discern but unpracticality, womanly impulses, often absurdity and folly; we, on the contrary, light daily upon traits of her inner nature the most delicate and refined, and which would cost an uninitiated psychologist years of constant and keen observation, and many an hour of close analysis and effort to draw out of the depth of that most subtle of mysteries—human mind—and one of her most complicated machines—HPB's mind—and thus learn to know her true *inner* Self.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 384-385.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 314.



#### 6.4 - Analysis of Blavatsky's Article *Mahatmas and Chelas*

The functional utility of the Masters for Theosophical Society loyalists and organisers lay in providing supernatural legitimation for the content of their communications and credibility to their suggested plans and advisements. As well, the personal relationships of teacher/mentor to pupil/advocate often was phrased in terms and with references mostly applicable to only a small selective group of people. Advice about possible lines of private conduct, steps to be taken towards fuller spiritual development, potential actions involving the Society, all presumed a degree of confidentiality. The wider circle of theosophical supporters and sympathisers as well as the mildly curious public-at-large could not presume to be privy to such direct communications. What they knew of the Masters and their message came from indirect secondary proliferation of such information and the explicit written or verbal commentary of those claiming first hand contact, such as Sinnett, Olcott, Blavatsky.

The value of the idea of the Masters was somewhat more diffused and general when presented to the wider public than it was when confined to the self-interested Theosophical movement insiders. Here, primarily as expressed in the writings of Madame Blavatsky, the Masters were represented more as paradigmatic ideal types. Though they were depicted as living, spiritually superior and advanced humans, they generally were portrayed enigmatically and shown to be dealing with world and cosmic concerns far beyond the purview of the uninitiated. The somewhat self-interested, pedantic, and manipulative sides shown in direct communication with useful associates is now more muted and generally depersonalised. The usefulness of the idea of the Masters then for a wider less committed audience is more along the lines of inspiration and reassurance, and for the authoritative legitimation of the ideational contents of the theosophical worldview.

To examine this more formal theosophical presentation of the Masters, intended for a broader public, we shall look at a representative article written by Madame Blavatsky. Entitled *Mahatmas and Chelas*, it was published in the July 1884 issue of the *Theosophist*. She begins with a definition.

A MAHATMA is a personage, who, by special training and education, has evolved those higher faculties and has attained that spiritual knowledge, which ordinary humanity will acquire after passing through numberless series of reincarnations during the process of cosmic evolution, provided, of course, that they do not go, in the meanwhile, against the purposes of Nature and thus bring on their own annihilation. This process of the self-evolution of the MAHATMA extends over a number of "incarnations," although, comparatively speaking, they are very few.<sup>49</sup>

Essentially, the status of Mahatma is attained as the result of the successful completion of the self-willed thrust towards personal spiritual evolution. This process apparently is not initiated or stimulated by intrinsic or instinctive biological factors, but by individual volition and intentional choice. By voluntarily deciding to undertake "special training and education," the individual may ultimately reach the desired objective of spiritual insight, thus differentiating himself from the mass of humanity. The "higher faculties" must be cultivated over a vast time period extending through multiple incarnations. This process thus is more intensive and demanding, requiring non-compromised dedication and diligence. However, it is a quicker route than that facing the majority of the race. Rather than passing through indefinite numbers of lives of slow incremental progress, only a smaller and more compacted series will be needed when the accelerated approach is taken. However, there is a real element of risk, because achieving the status of full spiritually evolved Mahatma is not automatic or guaranteed. Defying the natural course brings severe consequences. Continued rebellion against those purposes by individuals will eventuate in their own self-destruction.

Once the process of reincarnation is introduced, the speculation becomes more metaphysical. Madame Blavatsky explains what she says she is permitted to of the occult doctrine concerning post-mortem existence and reincarnation. This basically is a restatement of the theosophical views about the sevenfold constitution of man. She says that the first three principles are primarily associated with the body, and dissipate with its death. The fourth, and lower part of the fifth, endure longer, subsisting for a relatively temporary but indeterminate period in/at "Kama Koka," popularised as the "astral plane" in later theosophical and occult literature. Eventually, when the karmic scales are balanced, these intermediary personal principles also will disintegrate. However, the

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<sup>49</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *Mahatmas and Chelas*, retrieved from Blavatsky Net Foundation, 1884, < <http://www.blavatsky.net/blavatsky/arts/MahatmasAndChelas.htm>>. (Accessed May 3, 2002).

“higher Manas, the pure man” is properly associated with the spiritual nucleus of the sixth and seventh principles. That purified essence of transcendent selfhood reverts to a more spiritualised locale, “Devachan,” where it partakes of an even more refined and ethereal existence, assimilating the lessons of the most recent incarnation. Eventually though, the necessity of reincarnation reasserts dominance and the cyclical operations of nature resume for the particular monad/self/entity. Each incarnation in theory is assumed to most likely add lasting wisdom, maturity, insight, and character development that cumulatively will eventuate in individuals who will explicitly and intentionally commit themselves to the path of accelerated spiritual evolution. The continued reiteration of this process is portrayed with an almost mathematical inevitability, as evolution from the unawakened state to the condition of enlightenment occurs. Blavatsky sees it this way.

Now, an entity, that is passing through the occult training in its successive births, gradually has less and less (in each incarnation) of that lower Manas until there arrives a time when its whole Manas, being of an entirely elevated character, is centered in the higher individuality, when such a person may be said to have become a MAHATMA.<sup>50</sup>

When such a state is achieved, the Mahatma is no longer conditioned by the influences of the body and personality, but lives attuned to his higher being. When he dies, he is cognisant via his perpetually elevated state of spiritual consciousness of the processes involved and is able to partake of alternative evolutionary options. If he reincarnates again, it is a voluntary choice, motivated by compassion and desire to stimulate the evolution of others. While thus incarnate, he has extraordinary control over his body and the capacity to consciously utilise supersensory skills. The accelerated and intensified training of those extraordinary powers is guided by the tenets of the esoteric tradition. And because the theosophical system is considered an entirely credible and authentic extension of this philosophy, it should enable those devoted and loyal adherents to progress substantially on the path to becoming a Mahatma.

Blavatsky addresses the frustration expressed by others in not being able to directly see the Mahatmas in the flesh. According to her, the very desire is based on misinformation. People do not understand how to frame the question properly. The true distinguishing criteria of the Mahatmas are spiritual qualities, not physical appearances.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

By simply looking for the physical entity they are simply going to see a similitude of the reality. And even if they would happen to meet them physically, they have no idea about what really defines such exalted beings. All they may see is external appearance, which is ultimately illusory. The uninformed observer just doesn't know enough to judge accurately. To acquire that understanding, the individuals simply must place themselves on an equal footing by becoming more spiritualised and intuitive.

Fundamentally, Blavatsky urges personal spiritual growth, because only by raising consciousness to the requisite state can one truly comprehend. Clarity of perception, the dispelling of illusion, and pure intellectual vision are the only ways to legitimately place oneself in position to cognise the Mahatmas as they truly are. And when so prepared, the Mahatmas will be more readily accessible to the specially qualified individual.

Consciousness is permeated by a sense of new cognitive abilities, allowing intuitive recognition by the Mahatmas regardless of physical location. Because they function primarily as spiritual agents, unhindered by three-dimensional constraints, they are effectively omniscient in terms of their powers. And from their lofty vantage point the Mahatmas are potentially capable of keeping themselves sensitised and attuned to all of humanity via the operations of their special psychic powers. However, although capable of maintaining this subtle form of collective rapport, they apparently function with certain internal constraints, and limitations. Thus the Masters are unable to indefinitely maintain psychic contact simultaneously with all attuned entities. The exception would be the outstanding or notable individual who is distinguished and worthy enough to stand out from the others. And because their objectives are directed towards all of humanity, they are particularly sensitive to the flow of energies directed towards spiritual evolution. So, the most efficacious way that an individual must approach them would be by establishing a co-operative mindset in harmony with such objectives. By attuning themselves to the same spiritual frequency that the Masters operate on, individuals may thus be eventually noticed and drawn into the sphere of a Master's influence.

Blavatsky equates this approach with "faith." Though not "blind faith," which indicates belief without perception or understanding. She feels belief should be accompanied by knowledge, because true knowledge reinforces justified faith. The true essence or transcendent qualities of man (consisting of higher intellectual, intuitive and

spiritual principles) collectively provides opportunity to obtain mystical comprehension of reality. And by awakening those latent faculties, what was inaccessible or improperly cognisable through normal consciousness and personality configurations now becomes lucid and self-evident. . Attaining this ideal state of spiritual development should be the main objective, properly begun by applying for chelaship under the Masters. And only by proper education and understanding of occult beliefs about nature and the cosmos will real spiritual progress be possible.

Thus the desire, which should prompt one to apply for chelaship, is to so far understand the operations of the Law of Cosmic Evolution as will enable him to work in harmonious accord with Nature, instead of going against its purposes through ignorance.<sup>51</sup>

This article recommends long-term and unconditional dedication to the goal of personal spiritual evolution. This is a prerequisite necessary to obtain the attention of the Masters initially, and subsequently needed for proper development of psychic and mystical states of consciousness. Only by achieving that level of awareness and insight can the Masters be recognized for who they really are, not just superficially or partially envisaged. The gulf between the Masters and the average non-committed inquirer is revealed to be qualitative in terms of the contrast in levels of development and maturation, as well as quantitative in terms of the amount of time and number of incarnations needed to reach comparable status. Only by intensified effort and radical re-prioritisation of values can the average theosophical sympathiser or members ever hope to attract personal attention from a Master. However, once commitment is given to chelaship, the opportunities become more of a tangible possibility. By establishing the Mahatmas as both supremely evolved entities as well as ideals of the spiritual evolutionary process, they serve as both paradigmatic role models and case examples of those who followed the prescribed path to evolutionary perfection.

## **6.5 The Legitimizing Significance of the Idea of the Masters.**

The idea of the Masters clearly was a crucial legitimating component of the theosophical ideational system as well as a dominant source of inspiration and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

motivation. Although there are a number of distinctive though plausible explanations for their origins, they are not strictly mutually exclusive. In fact, the practical value of the blending or reconstruction of mythical, historic, symbolic materials relating to the Masters can be found in how those ideas were utilised within the movement. For the organisational leaders and thinkers of the Theosophical Society, promised contact with the Masters provided an incentive for more intense dedication, loyalty to the leaders, and confidence in Madame Blavatsky as the bona fide intermediary and messenger of their intentions. As well as supernaturally sanctified authoritative figures who set the parameters for proper behaviour and belief. For the average theosophist or sympathiser, the enticement was also along the same lines, but more idealised and doctrinally configured. The path of chelaship was presented as the most viable method of establishing bona fide personal contact, though intensely demanding and all consuming.

Together with unique treatments of knowledge and experience, the notion of the Brotherhood of Adepts as ultimate authority figures and paradigmatic role models served an important purpose in the process of legitimating the theosophical worldview. And defined the movement for decades after Blavatsky's death. The subsequent disputed claims to legitimacy of succession were directly linked to conflicting interpretations of presumed Masterly intentions. As well, the early theosophical definitions and narrative enunciated by Blavatsky, Olcott, Sinnett and other confederates was later amended and revised by such figures as Besant, Leadbeater, Judge, Bailey, Arundale, and others to reflect their own insights and interests.

Another significant component of the theosophical ideational construct necessary for sustaining confidence and justifying belief was the presence of a body of authoritative writings produced by Madame Blavatsky. In particular, her major books *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and *The Voice of the Silence*. These served to define the field of inquiry and consolidate theosophical doctrine. In effect, serving as the equivalent of "sacred texts" for the movement, intended to enlighten, provoke interest, and proffer an extensive alternative worldview. We shall now explore the literary consolidation effected in Blavatsky's main works.