

H. P. Blavatsky's First Theosophical Article: Overture, Proem, and the Original Program of Modern Theosophy

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While many have read books by H. P. Blavatsky, few are aware of her first theosophical article, “A Few Questions to Hiraf,” which launched her public work in July 1875, two months before the founding of the Theosophical Society. The Latin word *opera* means “work,” and an operatic overture is meant to prepare the audience for the musical themes to come. On this criterion, the article certainly qualifies as her overture. Besides seeding fundamental theosophical concepts which Blavatsky progressively unfolded in her subsequent writings, it discloses her basic mission and the goals she and her adept sponsors wished to accomplish, later reiterated in the “Original Programme Manuscript” written in October 1886.² Read together with collateral statements in her letters to Colonel Henry S. Olcott and others at the time, the article serves to refute assertions that Blavatsky began her theosophic career without this agenda, including the universal brotherhood objective, and made up her philosophy piecemeal in the ensuing years. They also make clear that she understood the withering opposition her work would provoke. As context is important, this paper is divided into two parts: first, the historical background, and second, selected excerpts from Blavatsky’s article with relevant commentary.

In the “Original Programme Manuscript” Blavatsky writes that she was “sent to . . . America in 1873 to organize a group of workers on a psychic plane” and, two years later, received “orders from her Master and Teacher to form the nucleus of a regular Society whose objects were broadly stated as follows”: 1) Universal brotherhood, 2) no distinctions based on race, creed, or social position, but only on personal merit, 3) to study the philosophies of the East, of India chiefly, to present them *gradually*, and to interpret exoteric religion by the light of esoteric teaching, and 4) to oppose materialism and theological dogmatism in every possible way, by demonstrating occult forces unknown to science, and the presence of psychic and spiritual powers in man — as well trying “to enlarge the views of the Spiritualists.” These must have been daunting objectives for a Russian immigrant with limited command of English in 1870s America, a woman with no

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² H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings (BCW)* 7:145-71 (<http://www.theosociety/pasadena/ts/hpb-torigprgm.htm>)

academic or theological degrees, yet possessed of literary talent, an encyclopedic mind, and more than two decades of world-traveling experience.

Realizing that the churches and scientific academies were unlikely to lend a sympathetic ear, Blavatsky turned to the more receptive but fledgling Spiritualist movement as a first foothold to introduce theosophic ideas. She and Henry Olcott met in October 1874 while investigating Spiritualist séances in Vermont and thereafter became lifelong colleagues. In December, Blavatsky moved to Philadelphia, where she continued her investigations and wrote a few articles on Spiritualism, one of which — exposing the fraud of a Dr. Child — elicited an appreciative letter from and subsequent correspondence with Professor Hiram Corson of Cornell University. In her second letter to him, postmarked February 16, 1875, she wrote:

I am here in this country sent by my Lodge on behalf of Truth in modern spiritualism, and it is my most sacred duty to unveil what is, and expose what is not. Perhaps did I arrive here one hundred years too soon. May be, and I am afraid it is so, . . . for people seem to care every day less for truth and every hour more for gold, — [and] my feeble protest and endeavors will be of no avail; nevertheless, I am ever ready for the grand battle, and perfectly prepared to bear any consequences that may fall to my lot.

— E. R. Corson, *Some Unpublished Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*, pp. 127-8

In April, Blavatsky returned briefly to New York as plaintiff in a successful lawsuit concerning farm property on Long Island, where she was represented by William M. Ivins. For two weeks as “guests in a dull country hotel,” waiting for the judicial process to creak along, Ivins and his associate, a brilliant law student named William E. S. Fales, who had been appointed to translate Blavatsky’s testimony given in French, spent long hours with her discussing occultism, gnosticism, kabbalah, magic, Rosicrucianism, and the like.

In late April or early May Olcott received his first letter from one of Blavatsky’s Egyptian teachers known as Tuitit Bey, and shortly afterwards organized a small investigating committee called the Miracle Club. On May 21 Blavatsky wrote to Olcott that she had been “intrusted with an arduous and dangerous task, Harry, to ‘try’ and teach you, having to rely solely on my poor, lame English.” In this same letter she also mentioned that

The Lodge will send an article this week, No. 1 of the series of articles to come from *Luxor*. It is a sort of rudimental insight given by them to the world. It treats of what is

man on Earth and of the object of his life here or what it should be. It goes to prove that the first seven of our past, present and subsequent existences in different spheres are but a sort of embryonical essays, modellings of Nature . . . herself, who tries her hand for the final formation of the *real, complete man*, who can become only on the seventh sphere a perfect *microcosmos* or a miniature store house of samples of everything from the Alpha down to the Omega of the great *Macrocosmos*, whom he must represent to perfection before he steps *beyond* the seventh sphere. . . . All the seven spheres one after other present the man in a state of more or less developed *embryo* according to his own exertions. . . . I'm at liberty to tell you that the articles in question have been ordered to be written by *mere* children of the Science, by the *neophytes* (of course they will be carefully revised), and such as they are, *Tuitit* thinks them *too good* for the green Americans, he says *few* will understand and many of the omniscient Spirit^{sts} will pitch into them and feel *shocked*.

— *Blavatsky Speaks* 1:37-43

A notice about the Miracle Club appeared a week later in the *Spiritual Scientist*, a Boston Spiritualist journal that she and Olcott had been supporting. Blavatsky saved a cutting, and on it wrote: “Ordered to begin telling the public the *truth* about the phenomena & their mediums. And *now* my martyrdom will begin! I will have all the Spiritualists against me in addition to the Christians & the Skeptics! Thy Will, oh M.: be done!” (*BCW* 1:88-90).

Before she could do much, however, Blavatsky became seriously ill, owing to complications of a leg injury suffered the previous January. On and off through late May and early June those at her bedside noted that three or four times daily she lay as one dead for two or three hours at the time. Her doctor was pressing for amputation. “Mortification or sugar plums, I *won't have it!*” she retorted. “Fancy my leg going in the spirit land before me!” But “two days of cold water *poultices*, and a white *pup*, a dog by night laid across the leg, cured all in no time.”³ Her recovery must have been swift because by July 8 she was strong enough to travel to Boston where she completed a lengthy reply to an article on Rosicrucianism sent to her for publication in the *Spiritual Scientist*.

The article was written under the pen name “Hiraf” and, judging by its Editorial Note (which was no doubt largely written by Blavatsky), she likely knew it had come from William Fales,

³*Blavatsky Speaks* 1:81-2, 93.

who had translated her testimony at Long Island.⁴ What she may not have known was that “Hiraf” was the name of a five-member club composed mainly of lawyers — HIRAF being an acrostic of the first letter of their last names — formed to discuss literature, especially philosophy, theology, and related matters. Years later William Ivins revealed that the Rosicrucian article had been jointly composed by fellow Hiraf members Frederick W. Hinrichs, William Fales, and himself. Hinrichs wrote that “we young men had little reverence, some learning, and some power of expression.” Although impressed with Blavatsky, they apparently were not so impressed with Spiritualism and esoteric science and, at the time, regarded their effort as “a test of human credulity” (*BCW* 1:97-100).

Whatever their motives, Blavatsky evidently found in the article what was needed to fire her “first occult shot,” published in two parts, on July 15th and 22nd.⁵ We may assume that most of her readers were steeped in church dogma and a limited, materialist science. Social, racial, and gender prejudice ran deep, and few knew little if anything about Oriental philosophy, which was widely considered to be mysterious, heathen, and inferior. And yet, by virtue of reading a Spiritualist journal, each had interest in at least one question of ultimate concern: Can we know what happens to us when we die? Blavatsky’s article begins as follows:⁶

A Few Questions to Hiraf *****

Author of the article “Rosicrucianism.”

By Madame H. P. Blavatsky

Among the numerous sciences pursued by the well-disciplined army of earnest students of the present century, none has had less honors or more scoffing than the oldest of them — the science of sciences, the venerable mother-parent of all our modern pigmies. . . .

As a rule, Occultism is a dangerous, double-edged weapon for one to handle, who is unprepared to devote his whole life to it. The theory of it, unaided by serious practice, will ever remain in the eyes of those prejudiced against such an unpopular cause, an idle, crazy speculation, fit only to charm the ears of ignorant old women. . . . [H]ow can we hope that Occultism, . . . which stands in relation to Spiritualism as the Infinite to the Finite, as the cause to the effect, or as unity to multifariousness, how can we hope, I say, that it will easily gain ground where Spiritualism is

⁴ Olcott confirms it was Fales in *Old Diary Leaves* 1:102.

⁵ Reprinted in *BCW* 1:101-118 (online at <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/bcw/b75-6-15.htm>)

⁶ Comments in square brackets are mine. — WT

scoffed at? . . . Ridicule is the deadliest weapon of the age, and . . . we would scarcely be likely to find one individual in the present times, who would be brave enough even to defy ridicule by seriously undertaking to prove the great truths embraced in the traditions of the Past.

[Blavatsky gives Hiras credit for such courage, but indicates that her wish is to share with her readers]

a little of the little I picked up in my long travels throughout the length and breadth of the East — that cradle of Occultism — in the hope of correcting certain erroneous notions he seems to be labouring under, and which are calculated to confuse uninitiated sincere enquirers, . . .

In the first place, Hiras doubts whether there are in existence . . . what we term regular colleges for the neophytes of the Secret Science. I will say from personal knowledge that such places there are in the East — in India, Asia Minor, and other countries. As in the primitive days of Socrates and other sages of antiquity, so now, those who are willing to learn the Great Truth will find *the chance* if they only “try” to meet someone to lead them to the door of one “who knows *when* and *how*.” If Hiras is right about the seventh rule of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross which says that “the Rose-cruz *becomes* and is not made,” he may err as to the exceptions which have ever existed among other Brotherhoods devoted to the pursuit of the same secret knowledge. Then again, when he asserts . . . that Rosicrucianism is almost forgotten, we may answer him that we do not wonder at it, and add . . . that, strictly speaking, the Rosicrucians do not now even exist, the last of that Fraternity having departed in the person of Cagliostro.

Hiras ought to add to the word Rosicrucianism “that particular sect,” at least, for it was but a sect after all, one of many branches of the same tree.

[According to Blavatsky, these branches were all sourced in “the great Oriental mother-root” and its “primitive Oriental Cabala.” Then she briefly traces some of its branchings, alluding to the Egyptian, Pythagorean, and Greek mysteries, primitive Christianity, its early Gnostic divisions, and their relation to the origin of the Rosicrucian brotherhood in the 13th century. She continues:]

As alchemists and conjurers they became proverbial. Later . . . they gave birth to the more modern Theosophists, at whose head was Paracelsus, and to the Alchemists. . . .

The Rosicrucian Cabala is but an epitome of the Jewish and the Oriental ones combined, the latter being the most secret of all. The Oriental Cabala, the practical, full, and *only* existing copy,

is carefully preserved at the headquarters of this Brotherhood in the East, and, I may safely vouch, will never come out of its possession. . . . One who wants “to become” has to hunt for his knowledge through thousands of scattered volumes, and pick up facts and lessons, bit by bit. Unless he takes the nearest way and consents “to be made,” he will never become a practical Cabalist, and with all his learning will remain at the threshold of the “mysterious gate.” The Cabala may be used and its truths imparted on a smaller scale now than it was in antiquity, and the existence of the mysterious Lodge, on account of its secrecy, doubted; but it does exist and has lost none of the primitive secret powers of the ancient Chaldaeans. . . . [Yet] the Oriental Rosicrucians (for such we will call them, being denied the right to pronounce their true name), in the serene beatitude of their divine knowledge, are ever ready to help the earnest student struggling “to become” with practical knowledge, which dissipates, like a heavenly breeze, the blackest clouds of sceptical doubt.

. . . “[K]nowing that their mysteries, if divulged,” in the present chaotic state of society, “would produce mere confusion and death,” they shut up that knowledge within themselves. Heirs to the early heavenly wisdom of their first forefathers, they keep the keys which unlock the most guarded of Nature’s secrets, and impart them only gradually and with the greatest caution. But still they *do* impart sometimes!

[After a brief digression about the lofty doctrines of Christ, Buddha, Lao-tse, and others, Blavatsky states the object of her article, which is “firstly, to show the slight differences between the two Cabalas — that of the Rosicrucians and Oriental one; and, secondly, to say that the hope . . . to see the subject better appreciated at some future day than it has been till now, may perhaps become more than a hope.”

She then traces the origin of the “Rosicrucian Cabala” to the Jewish Cabala which, according to its own tradition, was written down by Simeon ben Yohai at the time of the 2nd Temple’s destruction in 70 CE.]

Before that, all the mysterious doctrines had come down in an unbroken line of merely oral traditions as far back as man could trace himself on earth. They were scrupulously and jealously guarded by the Wise Men of Chaldaeia, India, Persia and Egypt, and passed from one initiate to another, in the same purity of form as when handed down to the first man by the angels, students of God’s great Theosophic Seminary.

[This appears to be the first time Blavatsky used the words *Theosophist* and *Theosophic* in public print. Earlier, in her February 16th letter to Hiram Corson, she used the word *theosophy*: that her belief “springs from the same source of information that was used by . . . [all who] have ever been searching for a system that should disclose to them the deepest depths of the Divine nature, and show them *the real tie which binds all things together*. I found at last, and many years ago, the cravings of my mind satisfied by this *theosophy taught by the Angels* and communicated by them . . . for the aid of human destiny” (Corson, p. 128, italics added — note the allusion to the divine unity of life and, implicitly, brotherhood).⁷

After explaining the source of the Oriental Cabala or “compound mystic textbook of all the great secrets of Nature,” she turns to its philosophic content, contrasting its views on the origin of evil with that given in the Western Cabala. Here are the first hints of basic theosophic teaching elaborated in Blavatsky’s later works, in particular the Three Fundamental Propositions in the Proem of *The Secret Doctrine* (1:14-17) which describe 1) the boundless Principle or divine source in which all things are rooted and which is the essence of all things; 2) the law of cycles or periodicity; and 3) the fundamental identity of all souls with the universal Oversoul, and the rebirth and reincarnations of all souls on the arcs of descent and ascent through the seven globes of the planetary chain.]

Oriental philosophy . . . denies that the great Ain-soph (the Endless or Boundless) who made his existence known through the medium of the spiritual substance sent forth from his Infinite Light . . . could ever create an endless, macrocosmal evil. It (Oriental philosophy) teaches us that,

⁷ Regarding the origin and naming of the Theosophical Society in September 1875, Olcott believed the idea of the Society *originated* with him, and its name is usually attributed to a dictionary search by founding member and high-ranking Mason, Charles Sotheran. Yet the Corson letter and the Hiraf article suggest more was at play behind the scenes. In addition to these documents, there is Blavatsky’s Scrapbook note stating that in July 1875 she received “*Orders . . . from India direct to establish a philosophico-religious Society and choose a name for it — also to choose Olcott.*” Contradicting Olcott’s account, Blavatsky stated (later attested by William Q. Judge) that it was she who *initiated* the proposal to form the Society.

See Annie Besant’s statement in *Lucifer*, April 1893, p. 105: “She [HPB] told me herself how her Master bade her found it, and how at His bidding she wrote the suggestion of starting it on a slip of paper and gave to W. Q. Judge to pass to Colonel Olcott; and then the Society had its first beginning.”

WQJ to Sarah E. Cape, October 189[3], reprinted in *HPB: The Extraordinary Life of Helena Blavatsky*, p. 140n: “Very soon after at a gathering of people there H. P. Blavatsky asked me to ask Col Olcott then at the other side of the room to found a Society. I asked him & then I called the gathering to order assumed the chairmanship and nominated Olcot as permanent chairman, as which he was elected.”

See also HPB to WQJ, November 19, 1890, reprinted in *Theosophical History* (VI:4) pp, 130-1: “[Olcott’s] position is that the T.S. *was not* founded as a result of *Master’s* ‘order,’ that in fact he never received any ‘order’ but the whole thing came to him spontaneously. Well, *you* know that he *almost lies*. Six months before we were talking & preparing for such a thing, . . .” (online at <http://blavatskyarchives.com/hpbwqj111990.htm>)

though the first three spheres out of seven — taking it for granted that our planet comes in fourth — are inhabited by elementary or future *men* (this might account for the modern doctrine of Re-incarnation, perhaps) and, though until they become such men, they are beings without immortal souls in them and [are] but the “grossest purgations of the celestial fire” [i.e., the most elementary forms], still they do not belong to Eternal Evil. Every one of them has the chance in store of having its matter *reborn* on this “fourth sphere,” which is our planet, and so have “the gross purgation” purified by the Immortal Breath of the Aged of the Aged, who endows every human being with a portion of his boundless self. Here, on our planet, commences the first spiritual transition, from the Infinite to the Finite, of the elementary matter which first proceeded from the pure Intelligence, or God, and also the operation of that pure Principle upon this material purgation. Thus begins the immortal man to prepare for Eternity.

. . . With our passage into each subsequent sphere, we throw off something of our primitive grossness. Hence, there is eternal progress — physical and spiritual — for every living being.

[Blavatsky spent the next sixteen years unpacking this paragraph in her later writings. Here she only adds that upon this “primitive” original tradition were modeled the Jewish Cabala and the Hermetic and Rosicrucian systems, each elucidating in its own way:]

1. The nature of the Supreme Being;
2. The origin, creation, and generation of the Universe, the *Macrocosmos*;
3. The creation, or generation, of *outflowing* of angels and man;
4. The ultimate destiny of angels, man, and the Universe; or the *inflowing*;
5. To point out to humanity the real meaning of the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures.

[Making allowances for its Western idiom, this list reads virtually as a table of contents of Blavatsky’s later works, particularly *The Secret Doctrine*, which interprets each point in light of the Stanzas of Dzyan.]

As it is, the real, the complete Cabala of the first ages of humanity is in possession, as I said before, of but a few Oriental philosophers; . . . the location of their Brotherhoods will never be revealed to other countries, until the day when Humanity shall awake in a mass from its spiritual lethargy, and open its blind eyes to the dazzling light of Truth. A too premature discovery might blind them, perhaps forever.

[Nevertheless, Blavatsky makes clear that the intent of this fraternity is *gradually* to reintroduce such portions of the sacred science as would]

dissipate these clouds and unhealthy mists of a thousand religious sects which disgrace the present century . . . and recall into new life the millions of wretched souls who shiver and are half frozen under the icy hand of killing skepticism. Truth will prevail at last, and Spiritualism, the new world's conqueror, reviving, like the fabulous Phoenix out of the ashes of its first parent, Occultism, will unite for ever in one Immortal Brotherhood all antagonistic races; . . .

[Aside from its hopeful appeal to Spiritualists, never realized except as a metaphor for renewed spiritual awakening, this paragraph articulates the article's mission statement, its chief objective being clearly defined as *universal* brotherhood. We cannot, perhaps, fully appreciate how carefully Blavatsky and her teachers had to introduce this thought into the deeply prejudiced mind of the late 19th century. Even so, it was not until May 1878 that the Theosophical Society adopted as its chief aim: "to aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity, wherein all good and pure men, of every race, shall recognize each other as the equal effects (upon this planet) of one Uncreate, Universal, Infinite, and Everlasting Cause." Conversely, the Society was never to become an "academy of magic"⁸ or a "school of promiscuous Theurgic rites."⁹ In view of this, it cannot be argued that the brotherhood objective was an afterthought. Whatever interests other early members may have had, it was from the beginning the central motif and motive for Blavatsky, without whom there would be no Theosophical Society.

She closes the article — coming full cycle to her opening theme — by asking, "What hope can there be for a modern Occultist, learned only in theoretical knowledge, to ever attain his object?"]

Occultism without practice will ever be like the statue of Pygmalion, and no one can animate it without infusing into it a spark of the sacred Divine Fire. . . . A Rosicrucian had to struggle ALONE, and toil long years to find some of the preliminary secrets — the ABC of the great Cabala — only on account of his ordeal, during which were to be tried all his mental and physical energies. After that, if found worthy, the word "Try" was repeated to him for the last time before the final ceremony of the ordeal. When the High Priests of the Temple of Osiris, of Serapis, and others,

⁸ *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom* 1:8

⁹ *H. P. Blavatsky to the American Conventions: 1888-1891*, Letter II, p. 18.

brought the neophyte before the dreaded Goddess Isis, the word “Try” was pronounced for the last time; and then, if the neophyte would withstand that final mystery, the most dreaded as well as the most trying of all horrors for him who knew not what was in store for him; if he bravely “lifted the veil of Isis,” he became an initiate, and had naught to fear more. He had passed the last ordeal, and no longer dreaded to meet face to face the inhabitants from “over the dark river.”

. . . If people ask me for the proof, I will answer that it does not enter my province to teach others what they can learn themselves with very little difficulty, provided they give themselves the trouble to read and think over what they read. Besides, the time is near when all the old superstitions and the errors of centuries must be swept away by the hurricane of Truth. . . .

[In her Scrapbook, Blavatsky pasted a clipping of this article, at the end of which she wrote in pen: “Shot No. 1. — Written by H.P.B. by express orders from S*****” (presumably Serapis). Thus marks what may be called the formal beginning of the modern theosophical era.]