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Digital Occult Library

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DIGITAL OCCULT LIBRARY

by

ALEXIS BRANDKAMP

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date   Anna Akasoy

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ABSTRACT

Digital Occult Library

by

Alexis Brandkamp

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       This capstone project is a website, titled *Digital Occult Library*, hosted by the CUNY Commons and built with WordPress. The site address is:

digitaloccultlibrary.commons.gc.cuny.edu

It features (in this iteration) twenty-five unique pages with information on and discussion of occult and esoteric topics. It also hosts a forum that can be accessed and utilized by anyone, not just those registered on the Commons. The purpose of the site is to inform three types of interested parties on the highlighted topics: a general audience with no current knowledge of the occult, practitioners of esoteric traditions, and academics. Not only is the site meant to inform, it is a means by which the three groups may interact and discuss the topic to everyone's mutual benefit. This is done by direct invitation in the text as well as with the open forum.

       Additionally, the site uses unique icons to direct attention of each group to specific information tailored to them. Various images and decorations are used, along with the general visual design of the site, to aid in expression and visualization of ideas. Particular attention has been paid to the underlying philosophy and historical context of the selected topics. The website will hopefully continue to be active with additional pages added by myself and also grow in depth with future outside interaction.

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   created using Conifer (https://conifer.rhizome.org/abrandkamp/dol-mals-thesis-version)

If anyone asks what I study, my rote answer is typically "occult philosophy and esoteric theology". In most cases this ends the discussion after a polite yet vacant nod from the person unfortunate enough to have queried me. I don't do this out of any sense of malice (entertainment perhaps but never malice). I've privately workshopped the best way to describe my somewhat scattered research interests. Parring it down to this five word description is what I feel best expresses the core of what branches out into so many disciplines, topics, historical periods, and other arbitrary limens. "Occult" is perhaps the most evocative and least accurate term of the bunch. "Philosophy" and "theology" are the secular and religious sides of the same coin. "Esoteric" is the vaguest and thereby the best catchall term for my entire ethos. Eschewing reason I fail to mention the term "literature", though it should take precedent. If I'm feeling gregarious, which typically I am, I will amend my description with "as they appear in literature". "Literature" at this point in my mind extends to more or less anything that appears in any form of printed language. In defense of my overambitious and grossly interdisciplinary academic self-identification, I can point to one single unifying factor that I believe has led me to approach things in this way: Dante.

My first literary interest, beyond reading for simple entertainment, was Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. I don't know how or why I managed to get hold of a copy of *Inferno* in middle school. I remember my teachers expressing concern at the time because despite it being a seven-hundred-year-old epic poem it is much too intense for the typical 6th grader. I imagine I found it among my parents' book collection. I genuinely can't remember, but I have a feeling, that in those early years despite not really understanding most of it, the vivid imagery of Dante's hell is what held my interest until I could appreciate the full text and context. From there, the

Commedia became a sort of puzzle, each line a clue to a larger piece that eventually unfolded into a complex tapestry. Like magic, I would discover something new every time I read it. Not only is the *Commedia* intensely visual, which has inspired so much provocative artwork through the centuries, it references so much outside information: Dante's personal history, Italian politics, ancient literature, the Bible, myth, medieval science and medicine, philosophy, and practically every other known topic of human knowledge for the time. It genuinely feels like it encompasses everything from heaven to hell and all there is in between in three relatively short volumes. This was the keystone on which I built my literary expectations moving forward. A work is never simply what was contained on the page but all the other ideas and connections it evoked in the knowledgeable reader.

From there, it was a short jump to books and manuscripts that explicitly required deciphering and knowledge to understand. Books of magic, purporting to be ancient knowledge passed down from learned teachers to worthy students, was fantasy come to life. The delicate Dead Sea Scrolls, the revelatory Nag Hammadi library, countless lost and forgotten manuscripts hidden away in libraries and monasteries; these were sacred treasures that revealed their secrets to lucky and dedicated scholars. I was never interested in any sort of supernatural aspects of the subject. I didn't expect to find coded prophesies or doorways to the astral plane. Instead, it was the quiet solitude that they evoked; the reverent sense of awe and wonder. Monks in the desert carefully copied letters that they held sacred then stashed them away in high, cliff-side caves to preserve and conceal them from outsiders at Qumran. In similar fashion, some gnostic minded group buried codices in jars along the Nile to protect them from detection and subsequent destruction. These were things that people were willing to risk their lives for or even dedicate what little time they had in life to copying and preserving what information the scrolls and

codices contained. What do these texts tell us about these people throughout the centuries who lived and died by their words? What is sacred and why? What are the consequences of the associated worldview and cosmogony? Why were people who held these views persecuted or revered for their knowledge? What makes these texts so dangerous and so precious? Why has interest in them persisted for so many centuries and how do we discuss and interpret them today in academics and popular media? I still consider these and many more questions in my studies. My interest had led me to a difficult topic, one that spans human history and culture. As is typical in the human thought process, I wanted to synthesize and make sense of so much disparate information. I wanted to understand, I wanted to *know*. As you can imagine, I only found that the more I learn, the more I learn what I don't know. In my infinite hubris, this has led me to my capstone project (mind you, I say this with the genuine joy of the academically masochistic variety).

INSPIRATION

The two most challenging aspects of my project were the amount of material I wanted to cover and that there wasn't a model for what I wanted to do. I had initially pitched the idea to be similar to the "Princeton Dante Project" (https://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/projinfo.html). This website started as a digital project on CD in 1996 and eventually migrated onto the internet. The creators wanted an easily accessible tool to teach and study Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I was struck by the multimedia presentation of the project, which included audio recordings, the ability to search the text, and artwork based on the poem. It was an interactive way to explore the work that wasn't limited to what was contained on the page. Princeton is not the only university to host a digital Dante project. Another early inspiration for me was "Dante Worlds" from the University of

Texas (http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/index.html). Created a few years after Princeton's Dante Project, in 2002, Dante Worlds stood out for the original artwork that accompanied its analysis of *Inferno*. This artwork was bold in style and content, illustrating scenes of hell with hectic strokes reminiscent of Ralph Steadman. The colors were predominantly red and brown tones, as if the contorted and agonized subjects were painted with blood, dirt, and fire. The evocative imagery was just another teaching tool, however, accompanied by succinct explanations of the material along with suggested study questions. This site, like Princeton's, is meant to educate, inform, and engage an audience. As I mentioned before, these are not the only admirable digital resources on Dante and his works. I'm sure that prominent scholarly interest as well as the highly visual nature of the *Commedia* play no small part in researchers gravitating towards digital projects. The explicit academic nature and quality assured me that online scholarly resources were viable beyond simply hosting textbooks or journal articles. For me, however, even before my graduate career began, I had decided that Dante had been thoroughly picked clean by scholars who came before me. While I still enjoyed the *Commedia*, and continue to refer back to it in many ways, I don't feel that I personally have anything new or interesting to say about it in a scholarly context. The subjects of occult and esoteric literature that my interest in Dante had guided me to offered a much larger playground. In fact, it is more than any one person could map in a single lifetime. I have satisfied myself with knowing that I will never, ever, run out of topics to explore in this subject. How I designed my project, and the outside skills I've brought to it, help insure that I can focus on different types of work (writing, reading, drawing, designing, searching, coding) so that I never tire of what I am doing or how I am doing it. If I get fatigued, I switch focus. A simple yet elegant solution to shepherd a scattered mind.

The initial idea for this project came about when I realized that there was no quality resource that did justice to the topics I was researching in an easily accessible, digital space. There are of course numerous books, journal articles, and digitized resources but many are restricted to academics. Aside from paywalls, such as on JSTOR or other popular journal aggregates, and the similar high cost of published academic works, the most accurate and substantive sources of information aren't tailored to a non-academic audience. Wikipedia serves as a reasonable, objective source of information for the laymen but lacks focus, depth, and perspective. Quite a few libraries have digitized books and manuscripts, some available to the public and others exclusive to their associated institutions, but they are often difficult to navigate. Even if you know what you're looking for, these digital archives require a particular skillset to utilize them efficiently. Additionally, there are countless manuscripts and materials that have yet to be digitized and not everyone who would be interested in such documents and artifacts have the required access granted to academics. In these, and many other examples, I saw a stark divide between the critical academic, the uninformed layman, and the devout practitioner. Each had access to their own resources but there was no respectful meeting place where an exchange of ideas could occur and no incentive to share their individual perspectives. Ostensibly the needs and goals of each group would seem to conflict and contradict one another. The academic, though they can be passionately interested in a topic, is generally expected to remain objective in their research. In an academic context, one defers to fact and logic with rarely a nod to emotion. The practitioner takes their work as a sign of faith. Spiritual education rarely intersects with the methods and ideology of the academic kind. It is appropriate then that theology is the one topic where the two seem to meet on, if not an even, at least mutually respectful playing field. The

average person, in contrast, perhaps doesn't even know that their assumptions are incorrect much less actively wanting to expand their knowledge of a topic. Either the devout practitioner or the storied academic would happily supply their knowledge to these uninitiated if given a chance.

There are small instances where these groups may cross paths. The academic is not unfamiliar with interviewing subjects of their study. However, the results are often published behind the aforementioned academic paywalls. Practitioners may believe that the logical approach of the academic is disrespectful or ignorant to their greater purpose. The general populace, of course, is never kind to those that stray outside the norm. To them, academics stay in their ivory tower, the esoteric sage is an oddity to be gawked at or ridiculed, and the occult consists of Satanists and devil worshippers who eat babies and produce heavy metal music. There needs to be a better forum for communication. This isn't exclusive to occultism but with my research I am specifically equipped to approach the problem.

Tragically, the worst possible thing has happened to occult studies in recent years: it has gotten popular. The likes of tarot cards and witchcraft are part of a growing "aesthetic" that populates mood boards and trendy retail stores. I suppose we should all be grateful that the "Satanic panic" of the 80s hasn't returned with it. Regardless, the resurgence of interest makes the need for accessible and accurate information even more poignant. The popularity isn't just a matter of fashion trends recycling; it is a response to mainstream religions being unable to fulfill our culture's spiritual needs. Much like the Spiritualist movement in the mid 1800s was responding to the Rationalism of the Enlightenment and the New Age movement of the 1970s (with its abundance of alternate religions that integrated occultism, Eastern philosophy, and esoteric practices) being birthed out of disenfranchisement with the "American Dream", today's occult revival is a reaction to a growing void within Western culture. Alongside this general

trend of spiritual destitution, spurred no doubt by Western society's growing obsession with materialism, historically marginalized groups such as women, LGBTQ+, and people of color are gaining more and more ground in acceptance and equality. Traditional religious outlets are slower in their acceptance than general society. As such, these groups naturally find empowerment in alternate practices. Witchcraft and Wicca have naturally appealed to women since their emergence in the 1950s. LGBTQ+ individuals can express themselves and their spirituality freely in systems that are designed to be individualistic, like Wicca, neo-paganism, and even some forms of Satanism. Respect for and interest in native beliefs and practices that have been historically outlawed or suppressed in favor or the Christian majority have likewise found renewed academic and cultural life. All of this is happening in an age with unprecedented access to worldwide communication and information. The time to bridge these gaps is now. Aside from the fostering of acceptance that grows in collaborative spaces, the amount that different people and groups can learn from one another and encourage each other is truly exciting. I don't intend to be an instructor who lectures in the general direction of people via a website; I want to be a coordinator and moderator of a space for collaboration and learning. I don't just present information, I ask questions. I don't claim full authority, I claim some modicum of experience. The best thing I can imagine for this project is for it to outgrow and outpace me as its progenitor in order to belong to a community and not just an individual.

As such, I had initially planned for my project to include much more collaboration and communication between myself and these targeted groups, especially with practitioners. Due to a number of factors, that aspect has been largely reserved for later growth and iterations of the site as I continue to work on it in the future. What is currently implemented is a forum where anyone can make posts, respond, and comment. I now consider this stage of the project, in its current

iteration, as merely the foundation or seed of a larger project which will hopefully attract a community of interested scholars, practitioners, and laymen who participate in its growth and continuation.

THE PROJECT - WHAT IT IS

The website, at the time of this submission, consists of twenty-five pages on various topics as well as a forum. The primary pages include a home page that acts as a welcome and introduction to the site and three distinct guides, one each for academics, practitioners, and a general audience. These four pages, including the bibliography, are accessible via the top banner. A site map located on the right-hand side lists the following pages: Academics' Guide, Alchemy, Alchemy and Psychoanalysis, Bibliography, Contact, Cults and the Occult, Folk Tradition or Occultism?, Foucault's Pendulum, General Audience's Guide, Glossary of Terms, Influential Occultists and Other Figures, Manuscripts, Maps, Occult Languages and Alphabets, Occult Literature, Occult Philosophy, Occult Studies for the Skeptic, Practitioner's Guide, Primary Sources, The Midnight Gospel, and Witchcraft and Wicca. Both the top banner and site map are accessible on every page of the site. Each page has information on the title topic and links to other pages as needed in context. Features also include hover text over some words with quick definitions, relevant visual decoration, and use of the site icons to direct attention. Relevant outside sources are linked, especially when digital versions of discussed material are accessible. The "Maps" page links to a "StoryMap", one of which is completed and replicated in text on the website. StoryMaps are visual tools that allow a user to view content that is placed alongside a map selected by the creator. I put relevant information together along with appropriate visuals and used a public domain map I edited to match the aesthetic of the site. Other than links to

outside resources, this is the only content that is not hosted on the CUNY Commons and contains a different web address than the core site. StoryMaps were created and are hosted by "Knight Lab", a project from Northwestern University, and is available to anyone, not just academics.

As for how I chose the topics for each page, I wanted to address the aspects of occultism that seemed to be most misunderstood in modern culture. The "Witchcraft and Wicca" page is a prime example. I tend to organize information chronologically so that my reader can see how a tradition or concept that is over 2,000 years old has changed and grown since its earliest recorded history. For witchcraft, this naturally begins with the etymology of the word. Most people assume that witchcraft is ancient, but breaking down the word itself as well as the word in context reveals a more nuanced history. Even the overarching category I've chosen to define my studies, "occult", is applied retroactively to describe a very diverse and often disconnected set of traditions, themes, religions, and philosophies throughout history. There is a balance between being pedantic and "technically" correct and being authentic, that is expressing a complex topic in a way that best represents it without having to produce a novel's worth of explanation. This has been one the main challenges I've faced throughout the project. I had to comb through so many resources and process so much information in order to assess and present what I considered the most authentic, concise information I could. This was one of the main goals I had from the start, especially when it came to tracking down relevant manuscripts. Where I expected to find lists of extant examples of primary sources, I instead found the information scattered across numerous books, sites, and obscure, incomplete references. Most people have access to basic resources on these topics but don't have the time or the desire to read thousands of pages or sort through complex archives to resolve simple curiosity. General audiences are informed more by popular media than historic fact. I hope that by creating a more accessible and time friendly
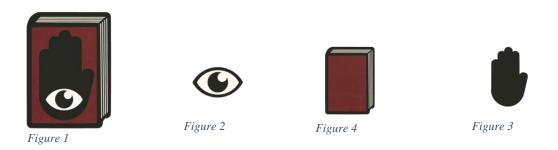
resource, I can attract both laymen and practitioners to review more substantive material than what they may otherwise have referred to. Websites are an ideal medium to do this because of their accessibility and interactivity. Instead of having to invest in picking up a book, a person interested in the topic can click around various pages until they find what really excites them. From there, I've provided information on the sources I used so they can dig deeper if they so desire. It's not uncommon to hear complaints that because of modern media and the way that it caters to the "lowest common denominator", the general populace has a radically decreased attention span. While I have no doubt that commercialization and pop culture play no small part in this phenomenon, it may be that the amount of information presented to the average internet user overwhelms as much as it informs. By presenting the most important information and breaking it up with visuals as well as encouraging interaction with separate, linked pages, I hope to capture the attention of my intended audience.

THE LOGO

Aside from nurturing my academic interests, one of the joys of working on this project has been my ability to use other skills and hobbies to enrich the final product. While my graphic design skills are admittedly amateur, I am proud of the icons and logo that serve both symbolic and functional purposes throughout the various pages on the site. Very early on I had decided that I wanted to have clear, visual indications that would direct the reader's attention based on their specific need or interest. Websites have an advantage over textbooks with their interactivity but I wanted to mirror the latter's use of images and icons to help categorize information as well as make it more dynamic. The impetus to do this likely draws from how I myself process information. I wouldn't describe my mental process as "visual" exactly, rather I have an abstract

collection of facts and relationships between them in which expression and understanding is greatly aided by the use of visuals. Recognizing that different people have different ways of thinking and learning characterized by a focus on audio, visuals, spatial reasoning, etc., I wanted to take advantage of the unique functions a website offers. Since my own learning process works much like an interconnected "web" of concepts, realizing my project in this way was ideal.

Returning to the use of icons, the logo I designed (fig. 1) breaks down into three distinct images: an eye (fig. 2), a book (fig. 3), and a hand (fig. 4):

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 4

Figure 3

Each symbol correlates to one of the targeted audiences (general, academic, and practitioner respectively) as well as each word in the title of the project itself. "Digital" refers to digits in the hand as well as the hands-on nature of practicing the occult (and obviously describes the online format). "Occult" has the same root as ocular, referring to the eye, and evokes the fresh look at the topic I hope to give my laymen audience. "Library" is clearly linked with the book as well as the academic nature of the site. It is immensely satisfying to realize the entire nature and intended function of my project in such simple, graphic terms. Not only does the use of multi-level symbols reflect the topic but it utilizes my skills in art and design in a modest way. This has resulted in me feeling more connected to and intimately involved with the project as a whole. It has my unique stamp on it, one that I drew myself (by hand) with digital tools (a tablet and

stylus). It beings everything together in a multidimensional way that most people won't ever even realize.

DIFFICULTIES

I encountered a few technical hurdles during development of the site. I had initially hosted it on the CUNY Graduate Center's "Web Services". At the time, it seemed the logical choice as it was hosted by the university as a free, ongoing resource. Unfortunately, the version of WordPress (the software used to build websites) that Web Services used lacked quite a few of the features that I had initially planned on utilizing. It was also prone to freezing and crashing. About halfway through my work, I found that I could host the site on the CUNY Commons. I migrated everything over quickly and easily. The transfer not only solved a number of my technical issues but it proved to be much more functional with many more resources. With the change of hosting I was able to work efficiently without constantly attending to technical problems. I was also able to implement features that I had previously abandoned on the old site, such as embedded content and a forum, since it lacked the necessary plugins (plugins are essentially various features you can apply to WordPress that add a wide range of functions to your website). Downloading new plugins is restricted to admins on the WordPress account. Both Web Services and CUNY Commons don't allow students admin privileges and therefore they are restricted to the pre-loaded content. The Commons iteration of WordPress has dozens more plugins available, most of which I didn't even touch during my time building the site. Those extra ones that I did use, however, proved invaluable.

I genuinely do not know how much my anxiety about the specific tone of my writing is a legitimate concern and how much is that nagging sense of imposter syndrome that seems to currently plague academics in general. It has been a deliberate choice on my part to directly address my readers and to express myself in the first person. My hesitation to do this is directly related to how I see material presented in my research. I will not argue that a professional and depersonalized style should not be standard for academics; it indeed ensures a level of quality and accessibility that can and should define scholarship. I don't expect to read a history of the western world in the style of the grandfather from *The Princess Bride* telling me a story, complete with interruptions and glossing over boring details. The problem is, there is a place for that kind of presentation of history but we've relegated it solidly in the category of "popular media" and not education, certainly not *higher* education. The pitfall of the sanitized, disquisition style of communication is that it breeds an expectation of perfectionism, unquestioned authority, and the false sense of discouraging conversation. It took me far too long to realize that academia is in fact an ongoing, active discussion. I was able to experience it in a classroom setting but it wasn't clear to me that there was a larger trend of such discussions taking place in print. I thought that when you published or wrote something it was under the assumption that it was "correct" or "factual". The confidence that the style implied meant I was afraid to be wrong. Through my experience in the MALS program, however, I've been able to better understand the balance between authority, knowledge, conjecture, and discussion in an academic context. Regardless of academics' dry reputation, real or assumed, I will make the argument that what I have been trying to accomplish with my capstone necessitates an explicitly conversational tone as opposed to an authoritative one. I am not interested in being the unquestionable expert on this, or any, topic. I

want to actively solicit feedback from peers, experts, and anyone else interested in talking about these ideas. It's detrimental to everyone to pretend that dividing up discussion based on level of education or academic prowess should be the standard. Here too is a core principle in the design of my website; I explicitly engage with and invite conversation between three groups that would otherwise have sought out different kinds of resources. I want practitioners to learn the factual histories of their craft. I want academics to understand and respect the people who believe in occult rituals. I want the average person to realize that the occult isn't just black candles and tarot cards. There is too much to be gained in these conversations to relegate each to opposing corners of the discussion.

For this reason, I have deliberately chosen the tone and manner in which I communicate, both here in my explanation and in the project itself. I want to communicate clearly and effectively but with a familiarity that I don't often find in my academic sources. This was especially important to me on the website because I was actively speaking to non-academic readers as two thirds of my audience. My views on this may change in the future or they may be specifically relevant to this project. Either way I wanted to address and defend what I feel may come across as an unusual tone in my writing. Establishing a unique voice amongst a sea of excellent scholars is both daunting and necessary. I've decided to err on the side of sincerity instead of crafting something more disingenuous. I suspect that practice and experience will ultimately temper my skills to an appropriate level of distinction.

Another aspect of the tone of the website in particular is that I directly address issues of racism and cultural appropriation. I desperately want to include practices from racial and ethnic groups that I'm not part of, both for the purpose of inclusion as well as highlighting groups that haven't gotten the recognition in past academic discussion that they deserve. To do this, I had to

directly address my audience and tell them about myself and that my perspective is as a white, queer individual. A lot of the material that included more diverse practices had to be cut from the site because I didn't have the time to adequately learn the cultural nuances and I lacked the collaboration of someone who is part of that particular group. I look forward to having that kind of material be eventually integrated into the site, especially having voices from individuals with personal experience and unique backgrounds. As it is, I feel the only responsible thing I can do is to be upfront and straightforward about it. The conversation about racism has been at the forefront of our culture recently. I can neither speak for nor can I ignore people who experience discrimination and racism. What I can do is invite them to speak for themselves. Until others can offer up their voices, I've largely relegated that content to later additions on the site. Where issues of race and culture intersect with the topics that I do feature, such as on Neopagan revivals and folk practices, I've explicitly stated that I lack authority on certain topics and others should be consulted for a more accurate understanding, especially for practitioners.

SOURCES - SO MANY SOURCES

I could have chosen a single topic for the subject of my capstone project. I probably should have. In this, the year of hindsight that is 2020, I'm confident in my selection of too large of a topic as opposed to too narrow. This project has continually kept my interest in ways that no singular paper or essay ever has. It has life beyond this submission and of that I am proud. The website is as much a result of what I wanted to do as of what I was required. I'm certain that a fraction of the hours I spent on it would have been more than sufficient for its completion. I don't say this to speak highly of myself; in fact, it can be as much a curse as often as a strength. I absolutely love finding sources: books, articles, manuscripts, everything and anything related to what I'm

researching. Oftentimes I found myself following a reference in the material I was using down a rabbit hole of information to the detriment of my time management.

The fact that I have chosen such a large and varied field of study has not been helpful in this propensity of mine. One of the pages that I had planned to include from the beginning was on Kabbalah. The density and complexity of the topic made it impossible for me to review all the sources I had and distill it all in a way that I would have been satisfied with the result. In the effort to include everything I had to exclude it entirely. I simply don't have an infinite amount of time to add to this iteration of the project. I do not, however, consider all that extra time and effort I put into researching the topics which haven't been included to have been a waste. Not only is that material there for when I need it in the future, but working with it has grown my research skills and knowledge base. I've been practicing acceptance of the fact that not all the work that one does behind the scenes is necessarily evident to an outside viewer. The plumber that charges a hundred dollars to fix a leak in your house isn't charging you for the five minutes it took them to fix it; they're charging you for the twenty years of experience it took to know where the leak was to begin with. While I knew this on an intellectual level, this project has really made me experience it in a way I haven't before. Instead of focusing on the final product I've been able to enjoy more of the journey, which I genuinely do. I've always had, and I'm sure many of my readers can relate, this need to have everything all at once. I want all the knowledge, all the skill, all the ability so that I can realize what I have pictured in my mind. My closing comments on the "Guide for Practitioners", one of the final pages to be written thus far, was my own revelation on this desire and how it is reflected in the work I've done and the work that my audience seeks to do. I wrote, "There is a reason wise sages and teachers are generally depicted as old and gray; this kind of skill takes a long, long time to develop and there are no shortcuts. So enjoy it. Revel

in new discoveries. Look forward to learning something new. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Continue to seek out that which is hidden with joy and anticipation." I still feel that sense of impatience, of wanting to absorb all the books I have stacked on my desk instantly. Of course, as I do read and study them it inevitably leads to adding more to the pile. To me, it has become a pleasurable Sisyphean task, if there ever was such a thing.

One of my favorite sources, one that partially inspired my efforts, is Herbert Silberer's *Alchemy and Psychoanalysis* (alternately titled *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism*). It is featured in my capstone but not in as much depth as I had initially planned. Silberer takes a more spiritual approach than I am inclined to, but much of what he chose to write about and discuss resonated with me in ways that few other authors had. He was writing from the perspective of early psychoanalysis, influenced by the budding new science of Freud and Jung. Eastern philosophies stemming from Hinduism and Buddhism are mixed with Western esotericism in Silberer's analysis. One of the many intersections from this constellation of sources refers to Freud's conception of the libido, reflected in Hermetic alchemy and the Bhagavad-Gita: "The love of the transitory finds itself deceived because the object vanishes, while the desire itself, the conation (or in psychoanalytic language the libido), continues forever. For this everlasting desire only an everlasting object is suitable. An object of that kind is not to be found in the external world." (348-9) Both the Eastern and Western sources attempt to provide such an "everlasting object" and Silberer considers if they aren't one in the same. Metaphysical musings aside, this equating of human's infinite desire to their spiritual pursuits is foundational to my understanding of esotericism. My solution is somewhat like the serpent eating its own tail; I continue to indulge in this endless consumption of knowledge in recognition of the endless desire. My stacks of books and open-ended projects are the answer to the very questions that I probe within them. I

don't think too many spiritually minded practitioners would agree with my solution but I think they can at least appreciate and benefit from my ironically recursive efforts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the life lessons I've learned from working on this site is, if you see a lack of something in the world, whether it be a resource, a narrative, a product, service, or really any kind of actualized idea, and you say to yourself that "that seems simple enough, I can do that", you are probably wrong. The incorrect assumption isn't that you can create whatever it is you envision; with enough work and dedication most projects can be realized even if not in the way that they were first conceived. No, the danger lies in assuming that something that is so obviously missing from the world will be easy to produce. It turns out that if something doesn't exist, there is probably a reason for it. I don't think that my idea for this resource is unique. Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, in their article "Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions", describe the need for something very similar. Published in 1995, I feel like they anticipated the impact that the internet would have on the dissemination of information. It is such a monumental tool for both positive, creative ambition as well as devastatingly effective when used to misinform or manipulate. I'm certain that someone has pointed this out already, but Borges' *The Library of Babel* encapsulates the problems of the internet as an information resource rather beautifully. At the time it was published in 1941, modern computers didn't even exist, much the less the internet. Still, the infinite library feels like a fair facsimile of what the internet would feel like if made into a physical space. The amount of knowledge, and the *potential knowledge*, that is contained in such a space is maddening. Generations of archivists scour the library searching for meaning.

The thought of any single human mind being able to process that amount of information is laughable.

A good portion of my project focused on digitized manuscripts. Again, I am not the first nor the only one to recognize the immense value in such a resource. Scholarship is no longer limited by distance or even the physical existence of the material any longer. Once digitized, it exists, in a sense, out of time and out of space, suspended awaiting access. Yet, the more that gets added to the internet's collective data, the more it resembles Borges' *Library*. How can one view this vast landscape that encompasses so much of humans' output throughout history, being added to every single microsecond, from the most banal blog update to the reproduction of the Dead Sea Scrolls (those sacred texts so carefully preserved by their copyists) and seduce meaning from it? I suppose the most that anyone can do is extract what meaning they can for themselves. For those of you, if there are any, reading this years in the future, I have been finishing up my project amidst the 2020 global pandemic. There has been more than one point during this that I questioned the purpose of what I am doing, the value. The Arts and Humanities often fall by the wayside during times of crisis for practical reasons if nothing else. How do I justify spending time and energy on something like this website, or my degree in general, when it feels like the world is falling apart around me? Why do I bother? Why don't I do something *useful* instead? I could probably offer up some rationale along the lines of "this is what truly *living* is about, the higher functions of human thought" or something else that may or may not be equally transparent in its forced justification. I could but I won't. I think it comes down to something simpler, the same basic human drive that begs for a modicum of spirituality despite the reign of rationality. It's related to the impulse among humans to create and preserve art. There is a scene from the film *Children of Men* (which takes place in a near post-apocalyptic future

where only England has a modicum of civilization left and even that is quickly eroding) where the main character visits his rich and influential cousin. His cousin is in charge of acquiring and protecting art as the world falls apart and humans slowly go extinct. The scene at his home shows he has Michelangelo's damaged *David* in his foyer, Picasso's *Guernica* hanging in his dining room, and Pink Floyd's giant inflatable pink pig floating outside the window. This tableau is man's last desperate attempt to hold on to what made living most worthwhile in the twilight of his existence. I'm not claiming my own efforts to be equitable to so much as the pig in this scenario, only that I think when the world is burning down around you sometimes the best you can do is hold on to what fulfills you. Despite having made my work exponentially more difficult, if only in creating a background level of stress that anyone who lived through this time in history will certainly look back on with less than fond memories, at least the state of the world in 2020 has made me reflect on and appreciate my work in a way that I wouldn't have otherwise. With any luck, others may be able to appreciate it for more relevant reasons in a future that doesn't feel like the newsreel montage at the beginning of a movie set in a post-apocalyptic hellscape. Regardless, I'm happy with the digital space I've created to weather the turmoil. I hope others may join me so we may ride it out together to a more peaceful, enlightened future.

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