INTRODUCTION

WHO WAS MADAME BLAVATSKY?

Of all the names associated with modern spirituality, that of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky—or HPB, as she preferred to be called—is surely one of the most controversial. Although she died more than a century ago, Blavatsky's name still turns up in serious discussions about "ancient wisdom," "secret teachings," and "inner knowledge," and it is generally agreed that her Theosophical Society (or TS, as it is often called), which she founded in New York in 1875, with her colleagues Henry Steel Olcott and William Quan Judge, was more or less the official starting point of the modern spiritual revival. By "modern spiritual revival," I mean our contemporary widespread interest in a direct, immediate knowledge and experience of spiritual reality, and in a more profound relationship to the cosmos than traditional religions and mainstream science can provide. Represented by a heterogeneous collection of different occult, esoteric, or spiritual pursuits, today this revival is popularly, if often mistakenly, associated with the "New Age." This grassroots hunger for a sense of meaning and purpose that the official organs can no longer supply

can be traced to the nineteenth century—indeed, in this book I will look at some of the sources of it—and can be said, I believe, to have been inspired by Blavatsky. In fact, as early as 1970, in an article for *McCall's* magazine, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut dubbed Blavatsky "the Founding Mother of the Occult in America."[1]

But one doesn't need to be a Theosophist to have felt Blavatsky's considerable presence. Her contribution to modern spiritual thought, and to modern culture in general, is so great that it can easily be overlooked, in the way that some prominent feature of the landscape can be overlooked—that is to say, taken for granted. Yet if Blavatsky's offering to our modern spiritual consciousness was to be suddenly removed, it would drag along with it practically everything we associate with the very notion of modern spirituality. And those of us who had taken Blavatsky's contribution for granted would certainly notice the loss.

To press my point: Anyone who meditates, or considers himself a Buddhist, or is interested in reincarnation, or has thought about karma, or pursues "higher consciousness," or has wondered about Atlantis, or thinks the ancients might have known a few things that we don't, or reads about esotericism, or who frequents an "alternative" health center or food shop, would be aware of it if modern spirituality somehow became "HPB free." And this, of course, would include quite a few people who never heard of Blavatsky, or who have only the vaguest idea of what Theosophy is or of its place in the history of Western consciousness. Which is to say most people. If nothing else, our endless fascination with the "wisdom of the East" would not have arrived, or would have taken much longer to get here, if it were not for her efforts and those of her early followers. It's been said that all of modern

Russian literature emerged from Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat." It can equally be said that practically all modern occultism and esotericism emerged from the ample bosom of his younger countrywoman and contemporary, HPB.

Yet, although she was one of the most remarkable women of the nineteenth century, to the general public, Blavatsky is virtually unknown. When I've mentioned her in recent times—when asked what I was working on at the moment—more often than not the response was a shaking head and a baffled look, although a few acquaintances mustered some questions like "Wasn't she a psychic?" or a "fraud?" or a "charlatan?" Yet, those who are aware of her, and of her contribution to Western thought, have a different view. Like the historian of esotericism Christopher Bamford, they wonder why she is not, as Bamford believes she should be, counted with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as one of the "creators of the twentieth century"?[2]

We may think Bamford pitches Blavatsky's claims too high, but he does so for good reason. By the time of Blavatsky's death in London in 1891, the Theosophical movement had spread from New York to India, Europe, and beyond, and included among its devotees some important names, such as Thomas Edison and Mohandas Gandhi.[3] And by the early years of the twentieth century, it was a force, as the saying goes, to be reckoned with, informing major developments, not only in spirituality and esotericism, but in politics, art, religion, and much more. Some of the individuals who were influenced, positively or negatively, by the Madame include the poet T. S. Eliot, who lampooned her in *The Waste Land*, a seminal work in modern poetry[4]; the artist Wassily Kandinsky, whose abstract paintings are informed by Theosophical ideas[5]; L. Frank

Baum, the creator of *The Wizard of Oz*, who became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1892[6]; Abner Doubleday, Civil War hero and purported inventor of baseball, who became president of the American branch of the Theosophical Society in 1878; the composer Alexander Scriabin, whose lush, ecstatic work is rife with Theosophical motifs; and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, who was initiated into the Theosophical Society by Annie Besant, the socialist and freethinker who converted to Theosophy after meeting Blavatsky, and who, as president of the society, helped India win its independence.[7] Even Einstein is said to have kept a well-thumbed copy of Blavatsky's *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine*, on his desk, and some Theosophists have gone as far as to infer that the inspiration for Einstein's famous formula, $E = mc^2$, came from that dense and weighty tome, a claim many perhaps will find too hard to swallow.[8]

We may not want to follow Blavatsky's supporters this far, yet one has to ask why, having had such a huge effect on modern culture, outside of the "esoteric community" Blavatsky's name is not more well known? Feminists alone, one would think, would have caught on to her long ago. Yet even to use the phrase "well known" at all in the context of HPB is something of a misnomer, even within the esoteric community, if by "well known" we mean "accurately known," and not merely famous—or infamous.

As anyone who has tried to write seriously about HPB discovers, the question "Who was Madame Blavatsky?" isn't easy to answer, not the least because of the considerable difficulties Blavatsky herself puts in its way. To say that HPB is a bundle of contradictions is not only an understatement, it is to repeat what practically everyone who has written about Blavatsky has said.

Blavatsky spoke about herself and her life frequently, with great panache and at great length. But as her biographer Peter Washington points out, she "rarely said exactly the same thing twice."[9] Rudolf Steiner, who borrowed more from Blavatsky than his followers would care to admit, tactfully remarked that she exhibited a "lack of consistency in her external behaviour," a trait which Steiner accounted for by her Russian soul.[10] It would be relatively easy for a resolute researcher to tally up the many discrepancies in her accounts of herself and declare that HPB had, at best, a flexible grasp of the idea of truth—notwithstanding the Theosophical motto that there was "no religion higher than truth." Yet, after a time, one begins to wonder—at least I did—whether there was some conscious purpose behind the Marx Brothers mayhem and double talk, and one understands how one HPB scholar, K. Paul Johnson, came to feel that she made "a deliberate effort . . . to appear untrustworthy and suspicious and to render the biographer's task impossible."[11]

Some, confronting this problem, have collapsed in exasperation. The historian of religion Maria Carlson, whose study of Theosophy in Russia repeats many of the myths and misconceptions about HPB, concludes that "an accurate and completely factual biography of this remarkable woman will never be written."[12] For James Santucci, a historian more amenable to HPB and Theosophy, Blavatsky "remains an enigma to any fair-minded investigator of her life and writings."[13] Johnson, perhaps the most controversial HPB scholar of recent times, remarks that in Blavatsky's case, "the scholar's efforts to unravel the truth are frustrated by the deliberate

occultation of history."[14] Sylvia Cranston, whose enormous but not quite exhaustive account presents the most complete "pro-HPB" view, cautions: "After her departure from Russia, HPB's life is not easy to document."[15] The historian of esotericism, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, confirms that it is only after her appearance in New York in 1873, at the age of forty-two, that "her career admits of continuous documentation," and that Blavatsky's references to her "Masters" during what K. Paul Johnson calls her "veiled years" are "almost all retrospective from the later, Indian phase of her life."[16]

Even Blavatsky's first biographer, the Theosophist and journalist A. P. Sinnett, ran into quite a few walls when attempting to rehabilitate HPB's reputation following the initial accusations of fraud that followed her for the rest of her life, and continue to haunt her legacy to this day. "From seventeen to forty," she told him, "I took care during my travels to sweep away all traces of myself wherever I went . . . I never allowed people to know where I was or what I was doing."[17] She restated this approach to her past life some years later in a letter to some followers: "To even my best friends," she told her correspondents, "I have never given but fragmentary and superficial accounts of [my] travels, nor do I propose to gratify anyone's curiosity, least of all that of my enemies."[18]

Blavatsky's deconstructive attitude to her past may have been informed by a sentiment she expressed in one of her last pieces of writing. In *The Voice of the Silence*, a translation of selections from *The Book of the Golden Precepts*—a work of "esoteric

Tibetan Buddhism" that, like the "Stanzas of Dzyan" of her most famous book, *The Secret Doctrine*, more than one Tibetan scholar has argued never existed—she writes: "One single thought about the past that thou hast left behind will drag thee down and thou wilt have to start the climb anew. Kill in thyself all memory of past experiences. Look not behind or thou art lost."[19]

A critic might remark that this was a convenient philosophy for someone who had a past worth forgetting, and HPB's detractors all agree she certainly had. But it is also an approach to one's past life that other questionable gurus adopted. The Greek-Armenian-Russian G. I. Gurdjieff—aptly, his real nationality remains debatable—had much in common with HPB, and he also went out of his way to obscure his past and to create a legend. More recently, Carlos Castaneda took pains to eliminate all traces of his life prior to his emergence as a best-selling guru in the 1970s, and did his best to stay incognito until his death in 1998. He also instructed his followers to do the same, with debatable results.[20] Staying out of the limelight and rejecting one's past are not uncommon practices on the mystic path. The Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, with whom Blavatsky felt much accord, famously refused to be painted or to disclose any information about his life, arguing that this "public" side of himself was unimportant, as his "true self" was his immaterial spirit, striving after the absolute. We can admire Plotinus's dedication, and too many centuries have passed between his time and ours for us to wonder if there was something he didn't want his contemporaries to know. But we generally don't give the same benefit of the doubt to more recent adherents of this belief, and when they go out of their way to let us know

they've made things purposefully difficult for anyone wanting to trace their careers, eyebrows and alarms are raised.

But the problem isn't with Blavatsky alone. If Blavatsky's life becomes subject to independent corroboration only after her arrival in New York in 1873, accounts of her life prior to this time by others are also equally suspect. Her sister, Vera Zhelihovsky, whose relationship with HPB was rocky at best, provided accounts of Blavatsky's early years but changed her tune almost as often as Blavatsky did herself. It may be germane that Vera was a successful author of children's stories. At one point, having turned against her sister, she supplied damaging ammunition to the Russian Vsevolod Solovyov, a writer of historical fiction and the author of a sensational, slandering, and highly doubtful tabloid "memoir" of his brief time with HPB in Paris in 1884.[21] Vera then wrote a scathing criticism of Solovyov and his book. Other early accounts—by Blavatsky's Aunt Nadya Fadeyev, for example—are equally suspect, and along with several other equally doubtful reports, her "reminiscences" contribute to what the esoteric historian Joscelyn Godwin calls "the host of unreliable witnesses without whom there could be no Theosophical history at all."[22]

Yet family and friends are not the only sources for the difficulty in pinning the Blavatsky story down. Practically from the beginning of her public career, HPB was the recipient of some pretty bad press, both from hostile journalists and from those eager to spice up an already recherché story. And with Blavatsky's eccentric character, practically anything they said about her seemed plausible. So a journalist for the *Commercial Gazette* of Cincinnati, visiting HPB in

London in 1889, informed his readers that "One is told she is five hundred years old and renews her age in the far east as often as it is necessary," and repeats a story that "crisp new bills are improvised by a moment's thought," while comparing an afternoon at Blavatsky's home in Holland Park to an audience with the pope, the ascent of Mount Blanc, and a pilgrimage to Mecca.[23] By this time, Blavatsky was no doubt tired of correcting these exaggerations and falsehoods, and in any case, on many occasions she did not bother, seeming to agree with the showbiz adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity, as long as they spell your name correctly. Yet such reports, and ones only slightly less fanciful, became the source material for more lasting accounts of her life and career, and form the basis of the Blavatsky legend. Colin Wilson once remarked about Rasputin, Blavatsky's countryman, that he seemed "to possess the peculiar quality of inducing shameless inaccuracy in everyone who writes about him."[24] The same could be said for Madame Blavatsky.

IT MAY BE assumed that tabloid journalists do not spend much time checking their facts, but surely serious scholars are another matter? Yet, even with decades of Theosophical history to draw on, this seems not to be the case. So, in his recent book *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, the London School of Economics Emeritus Professor of European Thought, John Gray—considered one of the most important social and philosophical thinkers of our time—manages in a brief paragraph to repeat several inaccuracies about HPB and to present the sort of "facts" about her that simply thicken the layers of misinformation making up the standard anti-Blavatsky account.[25]

One wonders why, if respected academics, who are supposed to be the guardians of scholarly accuracy, can spread rumors and take thirdhand hearsay as fact, Blavatsky is lambasted by them for telling stories about herself? Especially as many of these "facts" have been exposed as inaccurate, and more reliable accounts are available for the reading? But the answer is clear: the stories are too good, and the picture of Blavatsky as a "fraudulent guru" is too ingrained in the collective consciousness for anyone to bother about it.[26] Except, of course, for Blavatsky supporters, whose efforts will naturally seem suspect to those experts, and "fair-minded investigators" who even trouble themselves to try to arrive at a balanced view.

THE CULTURAL HISTORIAN Jacques Barzun once remarked that part of his job was to trace the history of reputations. This meant showing how, say, the "crude, barbaric, ignorant" Shakespeare of the early seventeenth century, who, according to the diarist Samuel Pepys, wrote "the most insipid, ridiculous play I ever saw" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), became the "immortal genius" we know today, and what was involved in the transformation of the one into the other.[27] Entailed in this is showing how some reputations become one-sided and misrepresentative. It's not a question of obscurity, of taking a writer, thinker, or artist no one knows about and making them better known. On the contrary, it means peeling away the myths and misconceptions that have accreted around a figure everyone thinks they know very well, but are actually quite wrong about. The legends, hearsay, and lazy repetitions collect around the writer or artist like a shell until they are rarely, if ever,

seen "in the flesh." As Barzun writes, "It is the fate of geniuses to engender a conventional view, a plausible simulacrum of the true figure, which the attentive biographer must destroy before he can attempt a faithful portrait. This preliminary labor entails many things, the reorientation of the common mind upon the evidence, and the straightening out of faulty logic." Yet, even with all this, there is still no guarantee that the old, mistaken picture will dissolve and a more accurate one arise. "Under the strain of taking all this in," Barzun writes, "the common mind tends to be suspicious and it soon snaps back into its old groove of belief. That is why conventional opinion persists in spite of scholarship and critical biography."[28] "To educate the educated," Barzun tells us, "is notoriously difficult," and once the public and especially the "experts" have made up their minds, it is often a Sisyphean task to change it.

To my mind, Barzun has done remarkably well with the reputations he has repaired, and I believe Blavatsky shares in the "fate of geniuses" mentioned above. But I don't believe Barzun ever had a subject who laid as many traps for her would-be rescuers as she did.

But my concern here is not to recount the many inaccuracies that crop up in "the Blavatsky story," like potholes on a poorly maintained road, nor to excuse myself for not providing the reader with the "truth" about HPB. There are Blavatsky and Theosophical websites dedicated to those pursuits, and along the way the interested reader can find out how to reach them. My job here is to try to tell "the Blavatsky story" as best I can, and these preliminary remarks are offered as a general acknowledgment at the start that the following account, taken from a variety of sources, may or may not be true. If this seems like a lame excuse for poor research and an inability to "nail Blavatsky down," so be it. My only defense is

that I am not the only one to make it. As many have recognized, "the facts in the case of Madame Blavatsky" may indeed be doubtful, but without them, there would be practically no case at all.

The writer Henry Miller, a reader of Blavatsky, once said that we should "live life to the hilt." Blavatsky certainly did that, and more. To take her own word for it, throughout her career she was a woman on a mission. Sent into the West by mysterious Eastern adepts, she was charged with the task of bringing a new spirituality to a civilization perilously sliding into a blind and deadening materialism. Whether she succeeded or not is debatable, but I for one think we could do worse than to try to understand her message, and to see if it holds out any prospects for us today.