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Our Secret Teachers: An Interview with Gary Lachman

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PSYCHE

Jeffrey J. Kripal

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I had the pleasure of reading through Gary Lachman's astonishing new book this spring, *The Secret*. Gary was kind enough to answer some of my questions, which went like this.

Jeffrey Kripal: Gary, you treat SO much material. You are also reminding your readers that everything a particular speculative writer wrote to appreciate the basic ideas of the author. How do we do this? I mean, how do we develop this kind of connoisseurship without decades of reading esoteric and the internet, "discrimination is key." So how do we acquire this kind of discrimination? How do we separate wheat from the chaff?

Gary Lachman: Well, the art of discrimination does take some time to acquire, but then anything you read about the sorts of things I write about for forty years now, and so I have had the time to do it. It really isn't an easy way to do it, although if, like myself, one is a voracious reader, it is actually a great deal and to apply the same kind of critical sense you would apply to anything else to the

A. R. Orage, the brilliant editor of the *New Age* journal of the early 20th century and one of the most important requirements for esoteric study is common sense. Unfortunately this is often forgotten when the mystical, magical, or esoteric begins to be mentioned. To some extent this is understandable. I

was accompanied by a frustration with 'mainstream' intellectual approaches, and so the idea that intuition takes precedence. This has its advantages, but it also has significant disadvantages. My own trajectory began with naive enthusiasm which gradually became a more serious academic. I simply began to *think* about these matters, not merely accept the word from the

to some friction. I have also always been deeply committed to the western intellectual tradition alongside a parallel study of western philosophy, literature, science and so on. In fact one of the similarities between some esoteric thought and some concerns of more 'acceptable' western thought. For example, I examine what I think are clear resonances between some ideas about consciousness: Bergson and Whitehead and those of more radical figures, like the maverick Egyptologist R. A. Schwaller de L'Épée. He said "Prove all things. Hold fast to that which is true." That's discrimination in a nutshell. Separation.

It also helps to have a specific question in mind, rather than a vague general wish for 'enlightenment'. In the occult and esoteric, my interest more and more focused on consciousness. That enabled me to dig through the undergrowth of occult and esoteric literature.

I always suspect some kind of background gnosis in writers like yourself, some guiding light, what to keep and what to let go. I know you discuss your encounter with Colin Wilson's *The Occult* (the important New Age bookstore in L.A.) and your travels to various significant sites and places. Did you have some personal revelation or gnosis? Can you say something about that possibility? I mean, should we be reading this book on many levels?

I can't say I've had one, specific experience that has informed my work. I didn't have a conversion over by a mystical event. In my case it has been a less dramatic but perhaps more stable gradual process. *Thought* my way to them, which means that I can understand them intellectually. Arguments for an experience corroborated the arguments.

I can say that what excited me about *The Occult* was that in it, Wilson described experiences that I had but the language with which to speak about them until then. Wilson writes of what he calls "Faculty X" which is a 'reality of other times and places.' Essentially this is an awareness that 'reality' extends beyond what we are trapped in the present, just as if we were stuck in a locked room. I had had moments like that. I was a reader of Nietzsche since my teens and he speaks of feeling 'six thousand feet above the world'. Inspiration for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* came to him. I knew how Nietzsche felt. These weren't the kind of experiences that many people find taking entheogens and such useful, I can't say my experiences with them have been particularly significant. But these other experiences were, and when I began to

was a way to understand them. In some of my books I describe some other similar enlightening

In my book on Ouspensky I write about my experiences with 'self-remembering' and with the C Jung I write about particularly striking synchronicities that left me in no doubt about their re Steiner I write of my experiences with some of his mental exercises and how this led to a powe external world; I speak of looking at a rose and feeling that my consciousness somehow 'cradle the 'is-ness' of things, what Meister Eckhart calls *Istigkeit* and when I became to study this lite exactly what was happening in these moments.

In the late 70s to mid 80s, I experimented with different 'teachings' and was for a time involvec then the Gurdjieff 'work'. So I have tried to combine an intellectual approach to understanding approach as well. But this is really the "existential way," to speak of it like that. For existenti The meaning and purpose of our life, here and now, is its central concern, and it is that sensibili intend at some point to write about the different "mystical" or "paranormal" or, as you have it i experiences I have had and how they have gradually helped me form my present sense of thing

As I read your book, there appear to be two central organizing themes: (1) the developme Gebser on the formation of different forms of consciousness and consequent ways of kno civilization; and (2) the recent work of Ian McGilchrist around the two hemispheres of th functions have more or less taken over Western culture. You associate the suppressed rig "secret teachers" of Western esotericism. You begin and end the book reflecting on these your book with a careful and nuanced hope for a more "integral brain." Can you tell our 1 writers and how they helped you write a very ambitious history of Western esotericism?

I came across Gebser's work in the late 80s through Georg Feuerstein's book on him, *Structure Present Origin* came into the bookshop and I grabbed it and was bowled over by it. Gebser's ce mutated – he doesn't say evolved – through different "structures" from our primitive beginning present, highly differentiated discrete separate selves. He calls these the archaic, the magical, structures of consciousness. These have emerged from a source he calls "origin," which exists i manner that is difficult to understand. Each structure is progressively further "away" from orig experiencing the "breakdown" of the mental-rational consciousness structure. which began arc

a space for the emergence of what Gebser sees as an “integral” structure, integrating the previous direct awareness again of origin.

I draw on Gebser because the ferocious attack on the hermetic, animistic worldview launched in the seventeenth century seems to me to be an example of what Gebser means by a structure of consciousness whose benefits are exhausted and they become liabilities; this is when it breaks down and hypertranscends its determination to eliminate the hermetic view – aimed especially at the Rosicrucian Robert Fludd. Gebser’s ideas to McGilchrist’s notion that our two cerebral hemispheres are engaged in a kind of struggle have been the case throughout western history, but in recent times – say the past few centuries – our left hand until now, as McGilchrist argues, it has become dominant and is crowding out the input of the right.

Our two brains see the world in very different ways. McGilchrist points out that it is not so much that they do different things – as was first thought – but that they do the same things *very differently*. To put it simply, the right brain sees the world as an immediate, living, whole, a tangible presence that it participates with. It sees and feels the content of this its experience is vague, broad, general, implicit. The left brain’s job is to process and analyze these “presences,” so that we can know it and understand it and move around in it. It breaks the whole into parts, creates a very efficient map of the world made of abstract symbols rather than living presences. The right brain sees the tree. The left sees the tree. The right absorbs meaning; the left seeks clarity. Both of course are necessary for the left brain approach, because it is geared to practical success, has managed a kind of control over the world in its likeness, and marginalizing any opposition. I refer to Leonard Shlain’s book *The Alphabet* as an example of the idea that there is an antagonism between the two brains. Shlain sees it in terms of the left brain, linear process, as opposed to what he sees as an earlier, right brain, image-based, a matriarchal society.

I wondered: if the left brain is engaged in a campaign against the right, would it open up other ways of seeing the world in other contexts? Marin Mersenne’s vicious attack on the hermetic, in support of the rising Cartesian mechanical view, seemed to me to be a clear example of a left brain view of knowledge, because that is what the western esoteric tradition seems to be, a knowledge system

analysis. It was eliminating the competition. It was a complete smear campaign, and the downfall earlier at the hand of humanist scholarship – another left brain discipline – again suggested self-assassination.

Now the esoteric, inner tradition itself is well aware of the tension between the two ways of being. Gebser and McGilchrist, it is interested in the creative polarity between the two. Gebser speaks and McGilchrist points out that the times when the warring hemispheres reach an accord are the Renaissance and the Romantic Movement as examples. We know alchemy is about bringing together yin and yang, and the harmony of the two opposing pillars in the kabbalah's tree of life through the "Opposition is true friendship" and "Without contraries there is no progression." Goethe and Coleridge saw polarity as the essential foundation of consciousness and being. So it seemed to me that one could see the esoteric tradition, and that of the western mind itself, in terms of this idea of a struggle between the two worlds.

Personally speaking now, I was particularly intrigued by Stan Gooch, whose work I have engaged. Can you say more about him, and perhaps why he is not better known and read?

Stan Gooch is a very important and exciting thinker and it is a shame that his work is not better known. I discovered his work in the late 70s and went on to read everything he wrote. He was a Jungian who linked his studies of the paranormal and his ideas about Neanderthal man.

Gooch had many insights into Neanderthal that were laughed at when he first presented them. For example, he argued that we are the product of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon mating. When he first presented this, he became an intellectual pariah. Now it is accepted. He believed that Neanderthal was psychic and much more sophisticated than what had been thought. This too has been vindicated.

In books like *Total Man* and *The Neanderthal Question* Gooch looked at what he saw was our inner self. He argued that in each of us is a kind of "double," an "other self" that was more psychic, intuitive, and more connected to the unconscious. It was a kind of constant tussle with our more solar, rational, logical everyday selves. He wrote brilliant books like *Paranormal* and *The Double Helix of the Mind*, where he writes about the importance of the cerebral and the emotional.

our cerebral cortex has grown. Gooch was a brilliant and very readable writer, but sadly, none of the early 90s he had more or less given up, frustrated with knowing he was right, but having that as I can tell, he had financial troubles – as anyone who tries to write for a living does – and in that hermit. I wrote about his ideas in *A Secret History of Consciousness* and sent him a copy. We could be saddened to see that he seemed to have become sunk in depression and a kind of apathy. He did want his ideas to be known, and when it seemed that he was being ignored, he more or less said his work is due and if I can get a publisher interested, I would be happy to help that along.

I was also struck by your distinction between the “superhumanism” of some of the key Renaissance humanists (and the early Pico della Mirandola) and the “only humanism” of some of the later critics you expand on this a bit for our readers?

There seems to have been a split in Humanism in its early years. The first wave of Renaissance humanism and hermeticist Marsilio Ficino and the Christian kabbalist Pico della Mirandola, were enthusiastic. They saw man as a potential god and rejected completely the Medieval image of man as a lowly creature in need of salvation. (Both were nevertheless good Christians.) The re-discovery of the Platonic and Hermetic Renaissance gave man a new self-image as a co-creator with the divine. These early humanists' imagination and their vision had a cosmic scope, as Giordano Bruno's universe of infinite worlds.

The humanists who followed were somewhat more circumspect. Where the early crew looked toward the East, the later favored Rome. Eloquence and style were more important to them than flights of cosmic vision, and they were often overdone. Good style, urbanity, mature restraint, and critical discrimination were highly valued. The right tended to be informed by the characteristics of our opposing brains, with the right tending toward what I call "superhumanism," which include William Blake, and the left tending toward an "only humanism," a determined down-to-earth pretensions, the kind of down-to-earth attitude exhibited by Isaac Casaubon, the scholar who wrote the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

When you discuss the American countercultural scene and the human potential movement, Maslow's concerns that aspects of these communities and cultures, which he witnessed to be anti-intellectual, that they did not take the life of the mind and critical reason seriously,

anti-intellectual, that they did not take the use of the mind and critical reason seriously & concern about some of the dangers here in your first book, *Turn Off Your Mind*. As we try ways of knowing and being, how can we keep critical reason and the left brain on board? balance just right, like Goldilocks, as you playfully put it? Not too hot, and not too cold. No

Well that I guess is what used to be called the \$64,000 question. We can see pendulum swings back and forth and certainly since the rise of the scientific approach as our one sure path to truth and knowledge and certainly since the rise of the scientific approach as our one sure path to truth and knowledge outbursts of what we can call right brain consciousness in reaction to this. A recent example of this is to write about in *Turn Off Your Mind*. Clearly the idea is bring about a creative relationship between the right and left brain is to understand what the problem is, and that is left brain work. We need to see exactly what is going on conceptually, so that it becomes something more than a vague dissatisfaction with our state of consciousness. Right brain consciousness can be very pleasant and it is a undeniable relief from the desiccated consciousness of the left brain than a right brain holiday. And if Gebser and McGilchrist are right, we outgrew a more right brain mind purposefully, in order to develop our more precise, more effective left brain mind. So returning to the need to understand how our consciousness got to be how it is and why it had to develop in this way within its limitations and see how it needs to evolve.

This is why I am less interested in “higher” or “altered” states of consciousness these days than I was in the time. This is phenomenology. As I discuss in my book on Colin Wilson, *Beyond the Robot*, we have purposefully limited our consciousness, as an evolutionary necessity – more developed because we needed it to. We have of course done this unconsciously but the idea is to uncover the unconscious acts of “editing” that result in the world that we see. Drugs can remove the present edit out 99% of reality, allowing it all to rush into consciousness. But such “cosmic consciousness” is to be able to open the doors of perception just a bit, to allow in more of the living immediacy of the world and knock the doors off their hinges. We can learn how to do this through certain mental acts, which are described and techniques in the western esoteric tradition. There are certain phenomenological ways of

working with the world that are not far removed from some visionary practices in western esotericism. Henry Corbin connects these to the idea of the Imaginal World, the intermediary realm between the world of pure intellect and the world of sense. This was a major part of his career as a phenomenologist and follower of Heidegger.

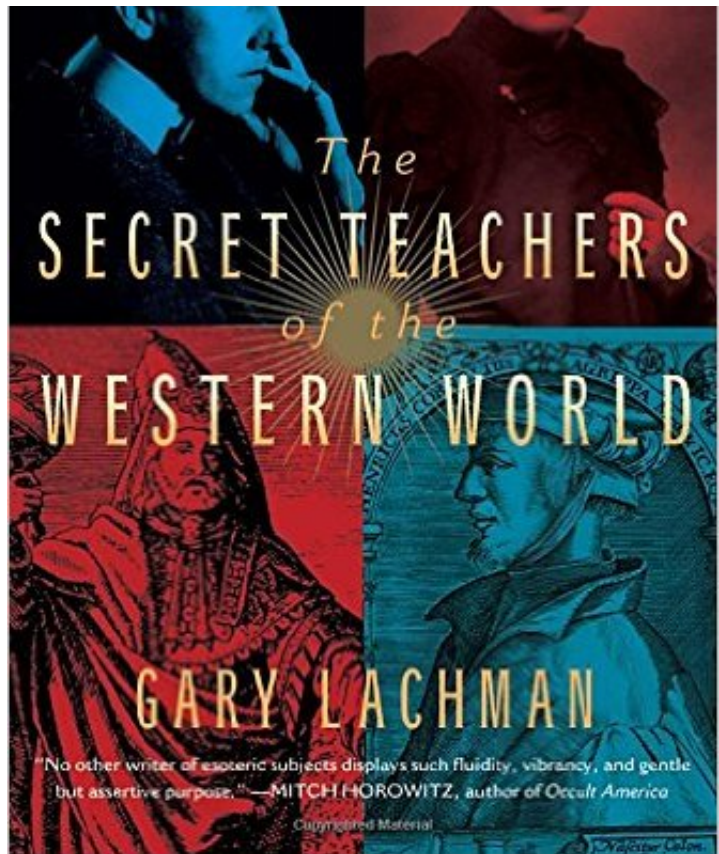
Again, this is something that runs throughout the western esoteric tradition. We can see it as a tradition geared toward the integration of both ways of knowing.

Finally, a bit of humor. What is it with British rockers and the occult? I mean, there's you of you are astonishingly prolific. Is there something in the water over there? Or in the m

Well, I'm a yank who found a second – or third – life here, deposited by the waves of a mid-life c Anglophile, even as a kid. I grew up in the 60s, with the Beatles, James Bond, *The Prisoner* and Sherlock Holmes, so a lot of my childhood had a kind of British backdrop. Then I became a gre developed a romantic appreciation of 1950s London, the “duffle coated” days of the Angry Youn there was Yeats, Crowley and the Golden Dawn. So I've always inhabited a London of the Mind what success I've had in music came from the UK; my song “(I'm Always Touched by Your) Pre (<https://realitysandwich.com/317591/three-types-of-telepathy/>), was a UK Top Ten hit. S good to me. There's also a very lively audience here for this sort of thing, with many groups hol lectures and conferences. And the English do like their ghosts and haunted houses and there is here – Madame Blavatsky lived not far from my flat. So I've found a good second home.

Thank you, Gary!





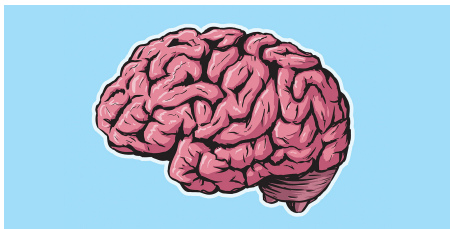
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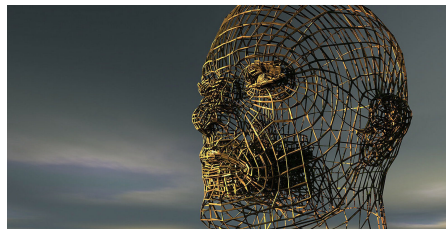
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