

talented artist Anna-Marie Ferguson's *A Keeper of Words* can be given the academic attention they deserve. A companion text to her superbly illustrated "Legend Tarot" (presented as a set of watercolour images), this book examines both popular as well as little-known Arthurian legends (for example, those concerning the Cauldron of Annwn, the Eachtra, La Cote Male Tail and Maledisant, and Evalach's Shield, among others). Not only is Ferguson undisputedly one of the finest present-day Tarot artists, her command over, and knowledge of, obscure Arthurian legends is nothing short of impressive. Psychosocial aspects of the Tarot can be viewed through the lens of Anthony Louis's *Tarot: Plain and Simple*—a book that gains no small measure of importance from the fact that Louis is a trained clinical psychiatrist. While there is, somewhat surprisingly, nothing ostensibly Jungian about Louis's work (unlike Sallie Nichols's *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey*), it definitely displays a thorough sensitivity to links between the human psyche and present-day Tarot analysis. I personally find Mary K. Greer's *The Complete Book of Tarot Reversals* to be the type of text that satisfies one's demands for original approaches to Tarot interpretation and examination, especially since, as far as divination is concerned, there are far too few works that deal with the topic of reversed (ill-dignified) cards. Irwin himself is careful about cautioning his readers that one can easily miss out on a variety of interpretive meditations if one ignores this aspect of the Tarot. Greer's book is part of Llewellyn's "Special Topics in Tarot" series, and gives considerable focus to facets of the field that have hitherto been left relatively unexplored. Were cultural studies to emphasize, actively and persistently, the growing need for academic analyses of Tarot decks and motifs, Irwin's text could acquire the well-established niche it deserves and not be placed in the humorous, but uncomfortable, position of an academic Gulliver among Lilliputians.

Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), xxix + 340 pp., \$49.75 (cloth)

Gunn's book opens with four paragraphs of the most impenetrable, jargon-laden and infuriating prose any reader is likely to meet irrespective of their particular disciplinary affiliation. This mish-mash of postmodern neologism, rampant citation, bravura interdisciplinary erudition, and esoteric intertextual rhizome-farming is, the reader thankfully learns, "intentionally tortuous" (p. xix) and designed to display the link between contemporary academic writing in the humanities and the use of language in texts often referred to as dealing with the *occult*. Yet, as we quickly learn, Gunn's purpose is not to ridicule the use of "strange, mysterious or difficult language" in either of these areas of discourse, but rather to account for their formal similarity by examining the "generative contradiction" or "rhetorical antinomy" (p. 50) that drives them both. Indeed, Gunn's central thesis is that the occult "tradition" died with the birth of the twentieth century (and its mass media) and that the discourses of the "posts" (as Gunn refers to them) represent the best example of what the occult has transformed into, namely, the *occultic*.

The strength of Gunn's work lies in its confident and often elegant use of a hermeneutic paradigm mostly unfamiliar to researchers in religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. Rhetorical analysis currently tends to be the preserve of communication, composition, or (rather less frequently) literature scholars, and little is known of its

methodologies or key contemporary texts outside of these areas. There arises, therefore, the danger that such a discipline might suffer from an overly narrow, parochial perspective that would unfavorably limit the utility and originality of its analyses. Yet this is generally far from the case—in having to constantly reconcile a powerful Classical heritage with the need to meaningfully engage with a constantly evolving contemporary public life, the academic study and teaching of rhetoric today demonstrates a very successful interdisciplinary spirit that is willing to attempt to integrate literary studies, contemporary philosophy, postmodern theory, critical communication and pedagogy, non-western rhetorical and communication traditions as well as constantly reinterpreting the Western rhetorical streams that serve as its bedrock. Gunn's study is a perfect example of the opportunities that such an approach offers as well as demonstrating a few of the problems that can attend it.

The first four chapters of the book set out the details of Gunn's theory of "occult poetics" through discussions of the "traditional origin narrative of the occult," the paradoxical approach to the ineffable in occult thinking, the corresponding nature of esoteric language, and then finally the relationship between the hermeneutics of close textual reading and the traditions of occult "interpretive practice" (p. 82). The fourth chapter, "On Textual Occultism," finishes with a captivating close reading of Aleister Crowley's *The Book of the Law* (which is usefully presented in its entirety as an appendix).

The core of the generative contradiction that informs Gunn's occult poetics is neatly summed up in the line "the truth is ineffable but let me tell you about it anyway" (p. 49). Gunn argues that all occult discourse assumes the Platonic dictate that language is not capable of reaching truth. Nevertheless, this tenet is paradoxically ignored by the generators of occult discourse, who are capable of producing some of the most voluminous texts imaginable. So far, of course, this is an observation that can be made of a large amount of religious discourse and as such brings nothing new to an understanding of how the occult might differ from the non-occult religious mainstream. Gunn readily admits this and proceeds to isolate two additional elements that make occult discourse distinct. The first is the role of secrecy and the second is the "continuous impulse to create new vocabularies for some translinguistic reality" (p. 48). Gunn's close readings of Crowley and Blavatsky are intended to exemplify these respective elements of occult discourse and, indeed, for this reviewer, they do convincingly work to illustrate the details of the author's argument. The second part of the book begins to extend the occult poetics into a wider definition of the *occultic* which is able to encompass any discourse which has recourse to both secrecy and the invention of a new vocabulary in order to "establish the authority of one or more individuals" (p. 51). It is here that Gunn is able to compare the apparently exclusive languages of traditional occultism and the postmodern humanities, and it is here also that he is able to examine the powerful role that the mass media have played in transforming the occult into the occultic.

In discussing both Crowley's and Anton LaVey's reception and subsequent commodification by the mass media, Gunn is at his most persuasive and certainly makes a strong case for the death of the magus (which, in his telling, appears to evince all the signs of a suicide, or at least death by reckless misadventure) within the terms and evidence that he has allowed himself. And here we come to the central problem with the book. For, although it is full of exciting new ideas which cry out to be further adopted and adapted, there is a strong sense in which Gunn is building his edifice on a few rather questionable foundations. Firstly, to state that all occultism is essentially Platonic in its assumptions about language is a severe oversimplification. Christopher

Lehrich, for example, has amply demonstrated the highly subtle and complex nature of Agrippa's understanding of language in his 2003 study *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy*. Similarly, Gunn's position ignores the influence of Cabala and Christian Cabala on the linguistic philosophy of authors like Agrippa and Dee (which Deborah Harkness carefully uncovers in her consideration of issues of language surrounding Dee's work in her *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy and the End of Nature*). Consequently, the generative contradiction of Gunn's occult poetics is based upon an initial premise (that the occult tradition sees spiritual truth as ineffable) that is neither well argued for nor convincing. Secondly, the word "tradition" itself comes in for its fair share of analysis in *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, particularly in Gunn's brief presentation of the "occult origin narrative," yet there is little attention paid to the construction of this narrative or the forces acting upon that construction, and in the end Gunn tends to resort to distinguishing between the occult tradition and the artifacts of a modern, mass-mediated occultic (and no amount of surrounding ironic quote marks can prevent us from understanding that he is using the word "tradition" in a quite traditional way). Thirdly, for a book that is ostensibly focused on the twentieth century, Gunn severely limits his sampling of the modern occult—no examination of Wicca, paganism, chaos magic, etc., all of which might well provide evidence that works against his thesis. Each of these problem areas stem from the fact that there is almost no engagement with modern scholarship on the occult. In a move that seems to openly acknowledge this weakness, Gunn includes an eleven-page appendix entitled "Scholarship on Occultism" which neglects to mention the work of Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Michael York, Joscelyn Godwin, Arthur Versluis, Graham Harvey, or any of the studies, journals, presses, or university programs they are associated with. What we do get are summaries of the work of Marcello Truzzi, Edward Tiryakian, and Tanya Luhrmann—definitely canonical but hardly representative of the very wide range of current thinking on the occult and the esoteric.

As an example of the many enlightening and productive perspectives that the discipline of rhetoric can bring to the study of occult discourse, Joshua Gunn's *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is an extremely well-written, inspiring model. As a thoroughly convincing presentation of an occult poetics that is as applicable to Agrippa or Dee as it is to Crowley and that is fully engaged with the current state of the academic study of the esoteric, Gunn's book must be considered only a partial success.

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Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley und die Versuchung der Politik*, trans. Ferdinand Leopold (Graz: Ares Verlag, 2006). 335 pp., EUR 24.90 (cloth).

Since the 1990s, Aleister Crowley—the occultist, magician, artist, and founder of the religion of *Thelema*—has received much scholarly attention. Several biographies have been written, and numerous articles explore the complexities of his life and work, as well as his impact within the cultural context of the early twentieth century. Many scholars agree that this influence goes far beyond the limited circles of the Order of the Golden Dawn and the orders that have resulted from its activities; Crowley's