By the mid-nineteenth century, magic (and the occult generally) in the West were in parlous straits, paralleling those described in the surprising recent bestseller by Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. The novel is set in a fair approximation of early nineteenth-century England and depicts a world in which magic was venerated, indeed diligently studied, but in an antiquarian fashion only, with no thought of—and indeed a horror of—practical application of the trove of abstruse knowledge. Magic before the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Norrell is a bit of flotsam only, the debris of a once-great synthesis that survives solely to intrigue the curious. This is the description of the York society of magicians with which the book opens:

They were gentlemen magicians, which is to say they had never harmed any one by magic, nor ever done any one the slightest good. In fact, to own the truth, not one of the magicians had ever cast the smallest spell nor by magic caused one leaf to tremble upon a tree, made one mote of dust to alter its course or changed a single hair upon any one's head. But, with this minor reservation, they enjoyed a reputation as some of the wisest and most magical gentlemen in Yorkshire.

The *real* magical world of the mid-nineteenth-century West was in a similar predicament. A generation of modern scholars has labored to descry the reality (and the practice) behind the hefty tomes and the intimations of the initiatic novels of the period, but to little avail. The secondhand formulas of Barrett’s *The Magus* (1801), the Romantic pseudo-realism of Bulwer-Lytton’s novels *Zanoni: A Rosicrucian Tale* and *The Coming Race*, and the Gothic labyrinths of Eliphas Levi’s disquisitions bring us little information on any underlying substrate of real magical practice and experience. Barrett was a dabbler, cribbing what

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1 Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.
2 Ibid., 3.
4 On Bulwer Lytton, see Gilbert, “‘The Supposed Rosy Crucian Society,’”
he thought would sell; Bulwer Lytton (with the one famous exception of the supposed conjuration of Apollonius of Tyana, with Eliphas Levi) confined his practice to smoking vast amounts of opium and hiring young girls to scry for him; and Levi himself was as timid about the results of his labors as are the antiquaries of the York society of magicians:

[Levi] suffered so much from the effects of this Evocation that he never dare attempt it again, & I suppose, he did nothing but make books, teach Occultism for money, & buy & sell old China.7

That last sentence could serve as an epigram for the study of magic in the early nineteenth century. Bookish antiquarianism is the occupational hazard of the student of magic: the delight of unearthimg the deliberately obscure becomes its own reward—a secret, miser-like delight in minutiae known only to the student and, most importantly, not known to competitors. Examples abound, and they could be multiplied ad infinitum. We look in vain for solid evidence of practical magic or lived experience. Even Mesmerism, which by mid-century had incorporated elements of traditional magic and produced rather astonishing experiences, suffered almost universally from the bane of secondhand experience: the entranced seeress (for it was usually a young girl) saw visions, while the mesmerist could only look on and wonder at her descriptions.9 The most detailed description we have of what

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6 “There is another thing not generally known as to the late Lord Lytton. He was an Opium eater. A Baronet, Sir Henry Willoughby, assured me, that in the House of Commons, Sir Bulwer made a circle of air around him redolent of the odour of Opium, such large quantities did he take within wh[ich] circle, no one would enter, unless compelled. His later works must have been written in an ecstasy the result of Opium, & many of the curious things enunciated by him, he must have got at thro’ his Clairvoyantes. I think now I have given you some slight idea of what the late Lord Lytton’s Occultism was.” William Alexander Ayton to unnamed American correspondent, January 22, 1886 (private collection). Ayton constantly bemoaned his own failure to achieve what magic had promised, and ended up in his advanced old age moving his efforts first into the H.B. of L. and then into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

7 William Alexander Ayton to unnamed correspondent, May 18, 1885 (private collection). “You mention Eliphas Levi. He was the first who really enlightened me after years of futile searchings thro’ the old Occult books which only mislead. It may be a matter of doubt how far even E.L. is misleading…. I also know intimately another Frenchman, an Oriental Initiate, a great friend of E.L.’s and from him I have learned the most of him…. He told me that E.L. had not the nerve or courage to carry out practically what his good knowledge told him were the means to use.” Same to same, February 26, 1884.

8 See Deveney, “Why Do We Do What We Do?”

9 See, e.g., Anonymus, The Celestial Telegraph, a partial translation of Cahagnet’s