CHAPTER 6

The Harlem Renaissance as Esotericism

Black Oragean Modernism

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Introduction

And if out of a wholesale allegiance to Communism the Negro could develop just a half dozen men who were really and truly outstanding the result would be worth the effort.

Wallace Thurman 1992, 219

Sometimes the Harlem Gallery is a harvesting machine without binding twine; again, a clock that stops for want of winding.

Tolson 1965, Ins. 4136–4139

According to Tom Hodd, “scholars have grossly ignored any relation the Modernists held to pagan religions, and in some instances, have blatantly denied the existence of a ‘secret tradition’ in Modernist literature” (Hodd 2010). This essay examines the incorporation of that secret tradition of esotericism—Spiritualism, Theosophy, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, and Alchemy—into the literary texts of Harlem Renaissance writers. And it argues that the esoteric teachers G.I. Gurdjieff and his New York agent A.R. Orage were directly responsible for the infusion of occultism into a new form of black writing. Hodd further comments that “occult scholarship is highly specialized and demands considerable foreknowledge from its readers (perhaps this is part of the reason why occult scholarship has remained on the periphery of Modernist criticism)” (Hodd 2010, 115). What this means is that the evaluation of literary texts that are situated in occultism requires that scholars have a deep knowledge of occultism as well as literature and criticism. While I have placed the Harlem Renaissance texts in the context of Modernism, I have supplanted Modernist criticism. In order to explicate the Oragean Modernist texts, I have taken a comparativist approach. I treat the Gurdjieff Work comparatively as an offshoot of Theosophy in order to establish the broad background. I also compare the Oragean version of the teaching to Gurdjieff’s version, as Orage was present in New York and differed in emphasis from what Gurdjieff taught in...
France. On another level, I treat the novels written by the Harlem Renaissance esotericists comparatively by showing their relationship to the development of the realist novel. And I also compare the novels as discrete performances of the Oragean esoteric realist ur-novel.

In addition to the problems entailed in examining the relationship of the Harlem Renaissance to occultism, there are the problems arising out of the parallel blind spot of race. Khem Guragain states that “Mainstream hegemonic discourse always undermines black’s presence in the making of American literature and culture” (Guragain 2009). African American literature is a non-canonical body of writing that has only been moved out of marginality in the 1970s. The intrusions of literary theory into literary scholarship; the literary politics of the black arts movement; limitations in the numbers of scholars, teaching positions, and opportunities for publication; and the inferior quality of the research that examines African American literature have contributed to a skewed narrative in which it is virtually impossible for literary critics to concede that an African American esoteric movement might have existed within the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, Aaron Douglas’s lifelong practice as an esoteric painter is trivialized as a “flirtation with Gurdjieffian teachings” (Ragar 2008, 141), while his enigmatic and inauthentic career as a Marxist is rationalized and ratified. Similarly, faced with evidence of Wallace Thurman’s participation in the Gurdjieff Work, Amritjit Singh, one of the major scholars of the Harlem Renaissance, shifts the emphasis to the temporary nature of this influence, stating that Thurman “took Gurdjieff quite seriously for a while” (Singh 2008, 10) and supports this assertion by quoting Thurman’s admission to Langston Hughes that “Thus I could never make a good Gurdjieff disciple” (Singh 2008, 24). Thurman and his associates had wished to recruit Hughes, and once Hughes had turned his back on them, they countered by behaving as though they had also lost interest in Gurdjieff. Throughout the writings of the Harlem Gurdjieffians there are indications that they successfully misled Hughes and that they carried on their esoteric activities without his awareness of them.

It is the Harlem writers themselves who give testimony to the falsity of Hughes’s assertions about the collapse of Jean Toomer’s esoteric school. In Seraph on the Suwanee, Zora Neale Hurston refers to a crewman who was lost when he was “swept overboard by a big sea” (Hurston 1948, 324; emphasis added). This is an allusion to Hughes, whose autobiography was The Big Sea (1940). Hughes’s mistaken account of Toomer’s failure to introduce the Gurdjieff Work in Harlem in The Big Sea is the most-often quoted narrative of esotericism in Harlem in the 1920s, and it served as the authoritative account of Toomer’s activities in many scholarly studies of the Harlem Renaissance.