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The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum

WILLIAM R. LEACH

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The Clown from Syracuse: The Life and Times of L. Frank Baum

There was a Goose in Syracuse
And full of fun was he;
He met a Clown and bought
his gown
And thought a Clown he'd be.
But for his jokes
the little folks
Had very little use;
And when the Clown
danced up and down
They thought he was
a Goose!

—L. Frank Baum, *Father Goose: His Book*, 1899

L. FRANK BAUM'S *THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ* IS ONE OF THE MOST important cultural documents and fairy tales in American history. It has been immensely popular as a story children continue to read, as a musical people still see, and as a film enjoyed nearly everywhere throughout the world. Few stories have captured the modern imagination to the degree that Baum's has. Its characters and themes are part of the way we think and behave.

To understand *The Wizard of Oz* and the reasons for its popularity, therefore, is to understand a great deal about twentieth-century American culture. It is to understand what dreams and myths have animated that culture. Surely, *The Wizard of Oz* was read for the most obvious of reasons—it was a fine fairy tale full of interesting

I would like to thank Elizabeth Blackmar and Alan R. Titcher for helping me with this manuscript. They persuaded me to eliminate some shaky thinking and to build a better argument.

characters and facts taken from American life and instantly recognizable to most Americans. But there was more to the book's popularity than its excellence as a tale. The book was also acclaimed because it met—almost perfectly—the particular ethical and emotional needs of people living in a new urban, industrial society. *The Wizard of Oz* was an optimistic secular therapeutic text: It helped make people feel at home in America's new industrial economy, and it helped them appreciate and enjoy, without guilt, the new consumer abundance and way of living produced by that economy.

On first glance *The Wizard of Oz* appears to be backward-looking, in no way connected with industrial capitalism or consumption. The book has, in fact, been construed as an agrarian tale in touch with older traditions of domestic virtue, rural simplicity, and Christian character. Its most influential analysts have linked it to the old-fashioned farm life of hard work, periodic scarcity, and self-sacrifice, with a gritty individualism, and with a moral universe of unchanging laws and truths. In this same vein, *The Wizard of Oz* has been seen as a Populist parable inspired by the late nineteenth-century farmers' revolt against exploitation by Eastern banks, railroads, and industrial profiteers.¹

But beneath the surface is another perspective altogether, one more supportive and uncritical of a new life in modern secular corporate America. Far from being a book associated with farms and homesteads only, *The Wizard of Oz* is also linked with the new department stores, with big urban fairs, and with the hotels, theaters, and restaurants that were being built everywhere in America after 1890. The book both reflected and helped create a new cultural consciousness—a new way of seeing and being in harmony with the new industrial order—that had very little in common with America's traditional rural and Protestant heritage. At its heart is not repression or guilt but wishing and desiring and a belief in an ever-expanding world of plenitude. There is also the view—radically different from the early nineteenth-century one—that the world is no longer fixed and stable but variable and volatile. It is a world in which people can change their identities as they please, face life without fear or anxiety, and cross existential boundaries to become not one but several selves.

The first essay in this book focuses on the life and times of L. Frank Baum. Baum identified almost completely with the new in-

dustrial order and with the new cultural values emerging out of that order. He opposed old social hierarchies, including the one that raised men above women in status and power. (Baum was a feminist.) He rejected established religion and the theology of evil and damnation, which many Americans at the time still very much believed in (and still believe in). And he saw in late nineteenth-century industrial capitalism—in its technologies and inventions, and in its consumer institutions and entertainments—a new kind of “magic” as exciting as any conjured by any traditional religion.

To be sure, Baum’s professional life had no direct relation to factories and corporations or to what can be loosely called the production side of the American economy. But Baum was deeply involved in the consumption side of that economy, or in what we might describe as the dream-life of capitalism. Throughout most of his youth and adulthood he earned an income not from writing fairy tales but from working in the theater and in merchandising. He was a shopkeeper, a traveling salesman, an actor, a playwright, a window dresser, and an editor of the first magazine on show windows ever published. Insofar as he had a religion at all, it was a new mind-cure therapy called theosophy that reinforced his love of magic, focused on the “here and now,” extolled the benefits of “live and let live,” and freed him from any guilt about consuming goods or making money.

Insight into Baum’s life and into the new historical conditions that shaped his character and thought will help the reader better understand his most important book. The following essay traces some of the crucial influences on Baum, including theosophy and mind cure, the theater, merchandising, and middle-class feminism. The concluding essay will return to these themes and conditions to offer a critical reflection on *The Wizard of Oz* and a brief analysis of these themes as they appear in the other Oz books and tales.

A Trinity of Influences: Theaters, Stores, and Spirits

L. Frank Baum was born on May 15, 1856, in Chittenango, New York, on a handsome estate called Rose Lawn, overflowing with flowers, just fifteen miles east of Syracuse. He was the last of seven children in an Anglo-Saxon, upper-middle-class family and was lovingly cared for by his parents, especially by his mother, Cynthia Baum, an Episcopalian who tried to bring him up (but to no avail)

by strict Christian principles. Baum knew only security and comfort in this idyllic world of "velvety lawns" and "beds of bright flowers."² Probably against his mother's wishes, he read fairy tales, which only a few years earlier had been forbidden to American children as impractical, unrealistic, and un-Christian. Baum was one of a new (but still small) group of children in this country whose reading no longer consisted solely of Christian tracts and utilitarian parables.³

Just to the south of the Baum home were the abundant oil fields of Pennsylvania, where dark green oil—almost as green as the emeralds in Oz—first gushed out in the 1850s and where John D. Rockefeller started building Standard Oil, the first giant business corporation in history.⁴ Baum spent his childhood and youth in the shadow of America's revolution in oil, which in the early years attracted an incredible mix of men hellbent and determined to make a quick fortune. Baum's father, Benjamin, made fast money in the oil fields, although his specialty lacked the glamour of rigging and drilling. What he did was skim crude oil off the river that flowed through the fields, refine it, and sell it at a good profit. Later, Benjamin founded and directed the Second National Bank of Syracuse, another sign of the economic development sweeping through the region. He invested in dairy land, in retail properties, and in the theater business. Oil, land, real estate, and money passed readily through his hands, doubtless giving his son a taste of the economic abundance that would profoundly affect his life and his fiction.⁵

The early decades of Baum's life were marked not only by the fighting of a bloody civil war but also by striking changes in two activities that were to have special meaning for him—merchandising and the theater. Merchandising boomed in the late 1860s and 1870s, reflecting the tremendous growth in manufacturing and in agriculture that had begun to transform the American economy into the most productive capitalist economy in the world. Giant wholesalers such as A. T. Stewart in New York City and Marshall Field's in Chicago appeared, as did the first chain stores such as Woolworth's in upstate New York, to say nothing of the thousands of small dry-goods stores, increasingly bound together into regional markets by the new railroad system. At the same time and side by side with the stores, new theaters and theatrical practices were coming on the scene in cities throughout America, including new vaudeville houses, traveling road shows, national touring companies,

more and more commercial theaters, and a significantly expanded traveling circus. The first great theater personalities—playwrights, actors and actresses, and producers and impresarios—commenced to lay claim to the hearts and minds of Americans. Never had so many Americans seen so much theater or spectacle before.⁶

Baum fell in love with the theater, directing to it much of the emotional and spiritual energy that, in some other time, he might have channeled into religion. The theater—its protean life and magic, the opportunity to use colors and lights to create startling illusions—got under his skin. Baum's father tried to direct his son's interest elsewhere and even enrolled him in a military academy. But Baum hated the school, and returned home, where he was educated by private tutors. Then, barely out of his teens, he plunged into a career as an actor (his preferred profession). By 1880 he was writing and producing his own plays, performing lead roles, and touring the country on the newly emerging theatrical circuits.

At the same time, even as he dreamed of a major theatrical career for himself, Baum took up a career as a traveling salesman. He worked for one of his father's businesses, a dry-goods importing firm, and founded a business of his own, "Baum's Castorine Company," which made axle grease out of crude oil. Selling—so much like acting—appealed to Baum too. He traveled about, especially on the new railroads, peddling Castorine to retailers all over upstate New York.⁷

In 1882 Baum married Maud Gage, the daughter of Matilda Joslyn and Thomas Gage, a rich dry-goods merchant from Fayetteville, New York. Matilda Gage was one of the leaders of America's first feminist movement, a figure equal in intellectual stature to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and coauthor of the first four volumes of *The History of Woman's Suffrage*. She founded the Women's Liberal Union, perhaps the most anticlerical, anti-Church feminist faction ever formed in the United States. Gage hated established religion partly because it opposed, she believed, the emancipation of women. Instead, she embraced theosophy, a late nineteenth-century mind-cure system still practiced today that combined a high regard for women and science with a seemingly contradictory faith in magic and spiritualism.⁸

Theosophy is of considerable importance to us because it was to have a lifetime influence on L. Frank Baum as well. Founded in 1875 in New York City by the flamboyant Russian émigré Madame

Helene Blavatsky, theosophy seems to have satisfied the emotional needs of many “progressive” middle-class people who were alienated from traditional Christianity but who wanted to fuse some kind of religion with scientific knowledge. It was a curious mixture of conflicting ideas. On the one hand, theosophists believed in spiritualism or in the notion that the “spirits” of dead men and women hovered over the earth and could be reached directly at séances and through mediums. Blavatsky herself assembled some very elaborate séances and was not above exploiting her mesmerizing blue eyes (and other devices) with unashamed trickery. She and other theosophists also practiced “occultism,” the study of the “hidden powers” in “natural phenomena.” They argued that all “beings” continued to exist in new forms over time, never dying or disappearing. Living things, they asserted, metamorphosed into new entities—into animals, birds, new human beings, or whatever. Karma, reincarnation, metamorphosis, and transformation were all basic tenets of theosophy. For a while, Egypt—the land of mystery, “magic,” and transmigration of souls—was theosophy’s chosen land.⁹

At the same time, Blavatsky and other theosophists opposed any form of personal deity and were belligerently anti-Christian. According to them, there was no afterlife in the traditional sense, only the eternal “here and now.” The only “God,” Blavatsky said, was “latent in all” individuals.¹⁰ Theosophists studied pagan beliefs and such world religions as Buddhism and Hinduism. They longed to find the “meta-spirit” that lay behind all religions and that, they believed, was first expressed in the secret pagan mysteries of the ancient world. They tried to integrate science and personal salvation into a whole philosophy. Their occultism, which instructed theosophists to look deeply into the pantheistic “forces” underlying nature, led many of them to embrace the new electrical and chemical sciences. Evolutionary science, too, seemed very compatible with their vision. “The Universe itself,” Blavatsky wrote, “is unfolding out of its own essence” and so, we too, are “ever-Becoming” into “pure spirit.”¹¹

The most radical *secular* feature of theosophy, however, was its emphasis on “healthy-mindedness,” as the great American psychologist William James was the first to point out at the turn of the century. Theosophy renounced all negative thinking or anything related to human evil and worthlessness, especially fear and anxiety.

Drawing on Hinduism, it opposed the Christian ideas of sin and guilt, a radical position putting theosophists in conflict with mainstream beliefs. "We are really Gods," they said, "not sinners. We must not beg for salvation but demand it as our spiritual birthright." Think positively, the theosophists said, and all pain and misery will vanish. Theosophy was among the "no worry" and "mind-cure" sects (James's words) of the times that included Christian Science, New Thought, Unity Church, and various meditational specialties. Although hostile to the more religious Christian Scientists, theosophy shared with the other sects a common positive thinking that prefigured the "feel-goodism" and the transcendental meditation of the twentieth century. The point, as James expressed it, was to throw off one's "misery habits." Affirm yourself and learn how to concentrate your powers, the mind-curers urged. No one is better than you are. "You *are* well, sound, and clear already, if you did but know it" is the way James paraphrased the mind-curers' approach.¹²

Blavatsky and her disciples followed another position, however, that James failed to mention—feminism. "I wouldn't be a slave to God himself, let alone man," Blavatsky said.¹³ Her books were filled with references to the great mother-goddesses and mother-cults of the ancient past. Americans in the movement knew of and often disparaged Blavatsky's trickery as a medium, but they were drawn to her exotic pseudoscientific beliefs, to her here-and-now philosophy, and to her feminism. Matilda Gage greatly admired Blavatsky's first book, *Isis Unveiled*, a voluminous tribute to the great queen of Egypt. Isis, Gage said, quoting from Blavatsky in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, "contained germs within herself for the reproduction of all living things."¹⁴

L. Frank Baum's contact with Mrs. Gage, as well as with other theosophists, would greatly shape his attitude toward life and would ultimately go directly into his fiction. At their first meeting, however, it seems that Matilda Gage did not take to Baum in the least. In spite of sharing with him some similar liberal views and a background in merchandising, she apparently drew the line with actors, as did many Americans at the time. This line, however, was beginning to blur. The very changes in American religious life that made it possible for "respectable" people like Matilda Gage to take a Helene Blavatsky seriously were also affecting many American Protestant denominations, altering them deeply from within.

By the 1880s leading Protestant churches, from Congregationalist to Presbyterian, were retreating from earlier beliefs in the depravity of men and women, in original sin, and in the inherent evil in the world. The whole idea of Satan was disintegrating as well; whereas once he had been viewed as a dangerous dissembler, as an "actor" and impersonator determined to mislead and corrupt, now his theological role or function was being played down or ignored altogether. Such changes in thought had important consequences for "real" actors, who had for years been relegated to the lowest rungs in the social ladder. Slowly, many urban Protestant denominations ceased judging them and their theaters so harshly, and popular associations with the devil were dropped.

Liberal Protestant ministers were partly to blame for this change in attitude. Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn, the most influential preacher of his day, ran his church like a theater. He sermonized from a circular stage, not from a pulpit, so that he might get close to his congregation, look directly into their eyes, and even touch them with his hands. A contemporary of Blavatsky, Beecher even used pantomime in his sermons. Such ministerial behavior was radical, and it seemed to seep through liberal Protestantism, weakening deeply held antitheatrical prejudices. In most American cities, all that remained of a fierce opposition to actors was the conviction that they were *literally* (not theologically) connected with deviance. Actors never settled down, they drank too much, they fornicated whenever they could, and they almost never paid their debts—at least these were the reigning myths and also the probable grounds for Matilda Gage's objections to Baum as a son-in-law. As one of Gage's neighbors said of her, she thought at first that Baum was a "good-for-nothing dreamer" who would never be able to make ends meet.¹⁵

Unfazed, Baum won everybody over, married Maud in the Gage family home, and then went straight out to confirm his mother-in-law's fears by taking his wife on a theatrical tour of the Midwest. In town after town, Baum and his own theater company put on his plays, including the successful musical comedy "The Maid of Arran," which, Baum boasted, was a "triumph of mechanical art and elegance," possessing "the most beautiful, expensive, and complicated Stage Settings ever carried by a Traveling Show." Maud was thrilled by the trip, although she loathed the West and Kansas

in particular. "I don't think much of Kansas as a state," she wrote. (Neither did Baum, for that matter. As his wife said in this same letter, "Frank will eventually settle in Chicago or New York.")¹⁶

Back in Syracuse, Baum seems to have had little trouble making amends to Mrs. Gage, although there would always be a distance between them. At twenty-six he was good-looking, tall, and well-built. He had black hair, gray eyes, an impressive handlebar moustache, and a "vitality that constantly ran away from him," as a show-business friend would later say.¹⁷ He fled anxiety and stress of all kinds, partly because of a chronic heart condition but also by disposition. When conflicts erupted, he played the peacemaker. He and Maud reared four sons, and he treated them all like "buddies," rarely scolding or disciplining them. He told the boys fairy tales (which Mrs. Gage liked and would soon urge him to write down and publish). The burden of both disciplining the children and managing the finances fell on Maud, as did making decisions about the family religion. A freethinker who dabbled in theosophy like her mother, Maud sent her sons to Ethical Culture School in the late 1890s, where they were exposed to a very cosmopolitan ethical outlook that welcomed all other perspectives, including theosophy.¹⁸

By the time of his marriage, Baum had joined his mother's church, the Episcopal Church, although his reasons for doing so were almost entirely social—to meet the right people and to make the right connections. He directed his "spiritual" interests elsewhere—toward theosophy. Baum was fascinated by the fairy lore, mother-goddesses, and Egyptian occultism of spiritualism. He probably liked Blavatsky's scientific philosophy, her feminism, and—can it be doubted, for a man who enjoyed acting and selling so much—her theatrical humbuggery. He would soon be a theosophy enthusiast.

Baum and his family spent the mid-1880s living off the income from his plays, from a small chain of theaters he acquired through his father (a sign of the new theatrical explosion in America), and from his work as a traveling salesman. But, as Matilda Gage suspected, Baum *did* have to struggle to make ends meet and was not averse to trying any fly-by-night scheme, so long as it paid off and entertained at the same time. And always, he seems to have been drawn to some kind of merchandising. In Syracuse he bought a

chicken farm for rearing and selling Hamburgs, prettily colored birds recently imported into the United States. As a money-maker, the venture failed, although it did yield one of Baum's first published books. "These birds," he wrote in his treatise on the subject, "are the most beautiful breed of poultry we possess. . . . The plumage of every variety, either Pencilled or Spangled, Silver, Golden, or Black is at once beautiful and striking. . . . Their marvelous beauty is coupled with their wonderful egg producing qualities."¹⁹

The Book of the Hamburgs was a testimony of sorts to the pleasure Baum got from being in close range with colorful objects. He admired the Hamburgs for their color and for their fecundity, both of which he tied together in his imagination throughout his life. Ever since his childhood, he had responded to color of all kinds—in birds and flowers, in butterflies and jewels. These things could be caressed, touched with the lips, and almost eaten with the eyes, Baum thought. Baum's love affair with color was symptomatic of his whole attitude to life—affirmative, optimistic, tolerant, and uncomfortable with human pain and distress. It pointed to a new kind of cultural perspective, one hostile to self-denial and fear, and in harmony with the "healthy-minded" therapeutic beliefs that were increasingly popular in the social circles Baum frequented.

"To Gain All the Meat from the Nut of Life"

In 1888 the Baums heard stirring news from Maud's relatives who were living in the Dakota Territory. "Come West," they clamored, for here at the end of the railroad line is great wealth, abundant farm land, large deposits of tin, copper, and aluminum, and veins of gold and silver coursing through the Black Hills. Maud had strong reservations but still urged her husband to go. He held back, but with more prodding from Maud's homesteading brother-in-law and her two sisters, he decided to make the move to Aberdeen, which just happened to be the most bustling city in the territory and the magnet for all railroad activity there.²⁰

Baum was very impressed by what he thought to be the possibilities of the place. "Aberdeen stands," he would soon write in a local newspaper, in the language of any local booster, "upon the threshold of the grandest era in its history. . . . The sun of Aberdeen is rising; its powerful and all reaching beams shall shed its glory all over the length and breadth of our continent, and draw the won-

dering eyes of all nations to our beautiful city." In the year he arrived, 1888, he set up "Baum's Bazaar," a small-scale retail store modeled after F. W. Woolworth's pioneering chain store in Utica, New York, a city Baum had visited on one of his many selling tours. Already a skilled salesman accustomed to the hype and humbug "needed" to sell goods, he gave away gifts of "Gunther's Candy" to all the women who came on the first day. A constant flood of advertisements poured from his pen into neighborhood periodicals. The Bazaar had something for everyone, including such new commodities as Chinese lanterns, tinware, newly manufactured crockery and candy, cigarettes, bicycles, ice cream, and solid brass cuspidors (spittoons). Children flocked to the place to peer through the big plate-glass window that fronted Baum's store.²¹

In the midst of building this enterprise, however, Baum's faith in the booming character of Aberdeen's economy got a sharp and unexpected jolt. A depression struck North and South Dakota (which were granted statehood in 1889), and businessmen were thrown into debt and bankruptcy. Populism, a powerful protest movement among farmers, erupted in the area. Baum's Bazaar collapsed, and he was forced to find employment elsewhere. He turned to journalism, managing to scrape together enough capital to buy a defunct local newspaper, *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. Baum wrote nearly everything for this paper—the editorials, the feature stories, and the regular reports; for perhaps the first time in his life (he was thirty-four), he was writing full-time.²²

The Pioneer, as Baum called it, is an excellent source of information about the future author of *The Wizard of Oz*. From it one can establish the subjects that did or did not matter to him. What did not matter to him was the plight of the farmer. Nor did he care much about the Indians who in the early 1890s were fighting in the region against the threat of annihilation. For years Baum-specialists and historians have argued that Baum felt much sympathy for the misery of the farmer and for the Populist revolt against exploitation by the railroads and banks. But Baum wrote nothing about Populism in his newspaper, although given the intensity of the Populist dissent around Aberdeen, one might logically have expected him to say something. His thoughts on the Indians were grim: "Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they should die than live the miserable wretches they are. . . . The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of

civilization, are masters of the American continent.”²³ Baum identified with what he called “wide-awake” Americans and society people, not with the poor and defeated. What interested him was the world he knew, not the afflictions of farmers and Indians.

Four related subjects reappear repeatedly in *The Pioneer*: the local theater, theosophy/mind cure, middle-class feminism, and America’s technological and economic abundance. These subjects formed something of a new cultural totality for Baum, a new way of being that departed fundamentally from the traditional agrarian and religious world in which most Americans were born and reared.

Baum wrote about the theater in *The Pioneer* not only because he loved it but also because he was active in the local theater itself. He breathed a new life into the Aberdeen theater, performing lead roles in such productions as Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Sorcerer* and *The Great Tycoon*, perfect vehicles for him.

Baum also took a clear stand on behalf of theosophy in the pages of *The Pioneer*. He espoused theosophy partly because it gave him another opportunity to indulge his almost childlike passion for illusion making and for make-believe. Baum loved writing about the fairy lore of spiritualism and about witches, clairvoyants, and séances.²⁴ At the same time he pursued the more radical, proscience side of theosophy, joining his mother-in-law and wife in turning against doctrinal Christianity.

Like other theosophists, he saw no contradiction between spiritualism and science. Both, he believed, rested on natural, everyday experience and on factual evidence for their laws and truths. But even more important, both offered people like Baum, who were indifferent to traditional religion, a new “magic” and a new sense of mystery that existed not in the heavens but in the here and now. What, after all, were the newly expanding electrical and chemical sciences, which produced the telephone and the photographic camera, but signs of the “magical” powers inherent in life itself? Theosophists were among the first to celebrate these new forces and inventions. Baum himself was an excellent amateur photographer, priding himself in what was then popularly called “the Witchery of Kodakery.” He was also an accomplished electrician and, in later years, wrote a pioneering science-fiction book on electricity, *The Magic Key: An Electrical Fairy Tale, Founded Upon the Mysteries of Electricity and the Optimism of Its Devotees*, filled with a kind of theosophical awe over the “demonic” forces empowering the universe.²⁵