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Cavalier Treatment: A Column

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Cavalier Treatment

A Column by Lee Speth

The Dawn's Failing Light

Some years ago, on a friend-of-a-friend basis, I attended a wedding at the Temple of the Adytum in Los Angeles. Don't look on your tourist guide; the word "temple" conveys a physical image remote from the reality. It proved to be a renovated storefront on a main thoroughfare. I don't recall much; huge, colorful reproductions of tarot cards around the walls, the bride very attractive in blue, a priest and priestess jointly officiating. It was whispered to me with a slight note of disapproval that the male half of the team was an ex-Catholic priest who leaned toward ritualism in the Temple's ministries. I can't remember being moved or touched by the ceremony. There were circlings of the altar, references to the Aristotelian elements, lots of invocations of Knowledge and Wisdom and Spiritual Progress. I don't recall anyone saying anything wise. But it all turned out to be a link with some of my favorite authors, for I find, neatly laid out on a chart, that the Temple derives, through a Chicago lodge, from the English Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The chart is one of many in Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn by Ithell Colquhoun (Putnam, 1975). I bought my copy about four years ago on remainder and cannot advise as to availability. It is not a book to be undertaken lightly, not so much because of profundity as because of minutiae. The lists of members of various lodges are skippable, but the endless details of occult theory must be followed, if one is to capture the flavor of the thing, even when they puddle away into shallow inconsequence.

The book is a remarkable act of devotion to a man the author never knew. It is aimed at vindication. To Colquhoun, Aleister Crowley is the Stalin of occultism, seizing and perverting the Golden Dawn, becoming synonymous with it in the public mind, displacing and discrediting the true master, the Order's founder, MacGregor Mathers. Mathers could not lower himself to retaliate, could not reassert himself against Crowley's showy megalomania and died in obscurity, his gifts, as Ithell Colquhoun sees it, tragically denied to us.

The occult tendency is, seemingly, as old as religion and may be known by two distinctive notes. First, a belief that the meaning of creation, "the visible world," lies buried in it, never apparent but open at last to a unified, all-encompassing interpretation. It is the business of the occultist to break the Baconian cipher in which God has authored the world. The final answer has never been reported but the initiate explores approaches and, if so inclined, reports his progress. The

second note is a belief that this quest is unsuitable for humanity at large, but is the proper business of an elite, the initiates. Occult societies will be rigidly structured, hostile to the merely curious and often deceptive in their language and in instructions to neophytes.

One becomes an occult expositor, well, by becoming one. In the case of Mathers (Samuel Liddell Mathers in full; he seems to have appropriated "MacGregor" to express some felt connection with Rob Roy) he owed his exaltation to contact with three supernatural "masters". They equipped him with a message and a cause. He married Mina Bergson, the sister of Henri Bergson, in an occultist ceremony, Celticized her name to Moïna and, on orders from the Masters, never consummated the marriage. This pleased Moïna, but not Ithell Colquhoun, whose hope that the Matherses violated their vow of celibacy is vicariously fervent and a mite embarrassing. She makes a weak apology for Mathers' adoption of the clearly bogus title "Count of Glenstrae."

The initiations, the peculiar studies, the attempted spells, the infighting of the mages, went on in the prosaic, optimistic world of the late Victorians and Edwardians. One participant, Arthur Machen, recalled the contrast with good humor:

To stand waiting at a closed door in a breathless expectation, to see it open suddenly and disclose two figures clothed in a habit that I never thought to see worn by the living, to catch for a moment the cloud of incense smoke and certain dim lights glimmering in it before the bandage was put over the eyes and the arm felt a firm grasp upon it that led the hesitating footsteps into the unknown darkness: all this was strange and admirable indeed, and strange it was to think that within a foot or two of those closely curtained windows the common life of London moved on the common pavement....

Ithell Colquhoun cannot reflect humorously upon the Golden Dawn's transit, for, alas, nothing about these people seems funny to her. Even the conflict inherent in Mathers claiming to be the reincarnation of Bonnie Prince Charlie when a contemporary made the same claim fails to give her a chuckle. (How to resolve such a conflict? The occultists apparently just overlooked it.)

Secrets, always secrets, preferably bearing the stamp of the Middle East--Chaldean ways of knowing and Egyptian lore, a pinch of Qabala and a shot of Eleusis, though Mathers himself preferred the Celtic. Strange issue abound: No, Colquhoun downs the rumor; Moïna Mathers did not kill Miss Netta Fornario

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"Leaf by Niggle," and "Smith of Wooton Major," in which Tolkien explores the Platonic and Christian premises which are the source of the beauty of the power of his masterpieces of fantasy.

Patrick Wynne

Fosston, MN

I'm currently reading Vergil's *Aeneid* for the first time and am fascinated by the similarity between certain of its plot elements and those in Tolkien's works. Looking through the Subject Index in ML 31, I found an article called "The Influence of Vergil's *Aeneid* on *The Lord of the Rings*..." Actually, I've noticed more similarities between Vergil and *The Silmarillion* than *LotR*. Aeneas' escape from the fall of Troy with his divinely-destined son Ascanius bears a strong resemblance to Tuor's escape from the fall of Gondolin with his divinely-destined son Earendil, and the burning of the Trojans' ships at Sicily reminded me of Feanor's burning of the ships at Losgar. Some of the names are similar too: Vergil's Agenor and Ucalegon to Tolkien's Aegnor and Ancalagon.

This reminds me of another interesting Roman/Tolkien similarity. In some of the names of the royal houses of the Noldor, the element *fin* 'hair' was used in a non-literal sense to emphasize one's lineage. In the names Fingolfin and Finarfin *fin* is used as a prefix to emphasize the fact that these two sons of Finwe were descended from the fair-haired Vanya Indis rather than Miriel. Both Fingolfin and Finarfin in turn gave their first-born sons names beginning with *fin* to mark them as their heirs; hence Fingon = 'Commander, Heir of the House of Fingolfin,' and Finrod = 'Champion, Heir of the House of Finarfin.' This makes more sense to me than taking the names literally as 'Hair-Commander' and 'Hair-Champion.' Anyway, what this has to do with Rome is that Caesar, originally the family name of the first Roman emperors, and later used as a title by all Roman emperors, meant 'a head of hair.' A hair-raising coincidence indeed...

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PREVIEW

of The Next Issue

Issue 34 will feature "The Childlike Hobbit" by Tisa Ho, "Co-inherence in Lewis and Williams" by Nancy Hanger, "Norse Mythological Elements in *The Hobbit*" by Mitzi Brunsdale, "Lewis Carroll, *scientifictionist*" (part II) by Joe Christopher, all the regular features, and if space permits, other articles.

LEWIS CARROLL continued from page 28

Argonauts" in *Science Schools Journal* in 1888. This beats *Sylvie and Bruno* by one year. (The article on "Time Travel" in Nicholls' *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* credits *The Time Machine*, not "The Chronic Argonauts" and not *Sylvie and Bruno*, with the first controlled trips in time.) Perhaps it is fairer to say that the idea of time travel was "in the air" about 1890.

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the "organic sanctity of meaning." He says "The meaning sanctifies the form, and the form the meaning, lifting the whole experience beyond pleasing instruction to belief. It is here that Lewis achieves the enviable result of making the reader feel the Joy, the sublimely undefineable exaltation of the spirit, which he sought throughout his life." (p. 143)

Glover has stated clearly what Lewis achieves and has even attempted to give the result a name. One might add that despite his useful literary criticism he has not prepared a manual on the art of enchantment. Writers hoping to emulate Lewis in merging "theme and form," or, as Lewis put it, *Poema* and *Logos*, will find that it is one thing to call the art by name. It is another to be able to achieve it!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

CAVALIER TREATMENT continued from page 39

by black magic. "As the incidents leading to Miss Fornario's death did not take place until some eighteen months after Moïna's own, the charge is scarcely worth refuting. Even if the latter had been living, the scratches found on the corpse are less likely to have resulted from an attack by Moïna in the form of a monster cat than from running naked in the dark over rough country, which Miss Fornario had done immediately before her collapse."

They gathered in secret, they wove formulae, they initiated each other and conferred degrees; there is depressingly little evidence that anyone came away happy. But some people of literary talent were affected by the association and among these Colquhoun lists Charles Williams, with critical reflections upon him. This aspect of her book is worth considering. [To be continued.]