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Abstract
Presents information on Williams’s association with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. Gives the convoluted history of the Order and the tension between proponents of mysticism vs. ritual magic. Suggests the level of Williams’s involvement and its significance to him.

Additional Keywords
Order of the Golden Dawn; Rosicrucians; Williams, Charles—Biography; Williams, Charles—Magic; Williams, Charles—Membership in The Golden Dawn; Williams, Charles—Mysticism; Williams, Charles—Occult; Williams, Charles—Relation to The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross; Williams, Charles—Relation to hermeticism

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Even an Adept:
Charles Williams and The Order of the Golden Dawn

Bernadette Bosky

When I first began doing research for this article, I met a colleague of mine in the library. When he asked me what I was working on, I answered, "The importance of Charles Williams' membership in the Golden Dawn to his thought." "Oh," he replied. "There is none."

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, things are actually a bit more complicated. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Williams was a devout Anglican. As Alice Mary Hadfield states, "He remained an unswerving son of the Church of England, and was never seriously tempted by any other centre." [1959, p. 131] In this most, though not all, writers on Williams agree. His faith was idiosyncratic in some ways, and his theology considered suspect by some, especially in what Mary McDermott Shideler and others identify as its romantic aspects, such as its great insistence on the "affirmative way" of closeness to God through the affirmation of images; but Williams is always fully orthodox--a point on which he himself insists.

There is, however, the fascinating biographical detail that, for an unknown time during the earlier part of his life, Williams was at least associated with and quite probably an initiated member of a London offshoot of an occult society, founded in the Rosicrucian tradition, called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

It's certain, for one thing, as R. J. Reilly puts it, that these studies produced at least the trappings of most of his fiction" [Reilly, p. 9]--helping him gain familiarity with a wide range of supernatural devices which he used in a completely practical, dramatic sense, as matters of plot rather than of doctrine, in his seven novels. These "spiritual shockers," or murder mysteries set in eternity," as Robert McAfee Brown puts it [p. 216], each has a supernatural "McCuffin," most of which Williams would at least have heard about in his training in the Order: the tarot in The Greater Trumps, Simon the Clerk's dark magic in All Hallows' Eve, even the Holy Grail as it is used in War in Heaven. These are all, first and often most importantly, catalysts for good, rousing stories. It is clear that much of Williams's information came from his Rosicrucian teachings, or at least that his interest was quickened by them.

But this use, while important, is in some ways secondary. Certainly it does not imply belief or disbelief, let alone endorsement or condemnation. There remains the question of the personal significance to Williams of the doctrines and rituals he encountered: did they ever affect him the way the Church's more orthodox examinations of man's spiritual side seem to have? How does this personal involvement with such an Order coexist with his frequent, staunch denunciation of occult practice, not only in his novels, but argued at length, in propri persona, in his non-fiction study Witchcraft? What--if, pace my colleague, anything--does study of the Golden Dawn, its various splinter-groups and offshoots, and its members and associates, have to contribute to our understanding of Charles Williams' writings, thought, and personality?

I believe that such study can contribute a great deal, some of it of most value because most unexpected. This is an area of Williams studies in which the surface has barely been scratched. The first step is the martailing of facts. In the following discussion I will primarily concern myself with presenting what is known about Williams and the Golden Dawn, but also try to sketch out some implications and areas for future exploration. In the course of my own research, I have also found a number of surprising misconceptions, both personal and popular, about both the Golden Dawn itself and Williams's attitudes as compared to it or indicative of his involvement with it.

Perhaps the most major is that Williams never was a member of the Golden Dawn--technically speaking. He was, rather, an initiated and active member of a Rosicrucian Order, begun by well-known Golden Dawn member Arthur Edward Waite.

Probably the single best discussion of the topic is in Anne Ridler's introduction to Charles Williams' The Image of the City and Other Essays [pp. xxiii-xxvi], although other documents help to illuminate a set of situations she justifiably finds confusing.

The history of the Golden Dawn is a story of schisms, conflicting claims, disension, and the splitting off of rivalries and splinter groups. Although all groups had certain approaches and even rituals in common, there was a wide variety of beliefs and kinds of emphasis from one to another. Moreover, the names chosen by these groups could hardly make things more confusing. Not only will the same group (more or less) use two or more different names at different times, but also the same name might belong, at one time and another, to two or more entirely different groups, sometimes with wildly different objectives. Both of these confusions show up in this case.
The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded by Dr. William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, and Dr. W. R. Woodman, ostensibly as an offshoot of a German Rosicrucian and occult order, in 1887. In 1888 a temple, called the Isis-Urania Temple, started in London, with Westcott, Woodman, and Mathers as the three Chiefs. [Howe, p. 1]

This Golden Dawn indeed followed a tradition of magic. Much of what its initiates were taught was explicitly forbidden in the Bible, including psychic control of others and calling up of spirits, and the basic training of a neophyte included several forms of divination. But there had been, from the beginning, a strongly mystical side as well. A fourth founder of the Order, from whom Westcott claimed to have received the occult ciphers he used as the basis for starting his Golden Dawn group but who died in 1887 [Gilbert, p. 27], was a Reverend A. P. A. Woodford, a country vicar who held a curacy at Notting Hill. [King, p. 42]

King reports the following from a ritual by MacGregor Mathers, perhaps the most important of the founders:

Remember that God alone is our Light and the Bestower of Perfect Wisdom, and that no mortal power can do more than bring you to the Pathway of that Wisdom, which He could, if it so pleased him, put into the heart of a child. For as the whole is greater than the part, so are we but Sparks from that Insupportable Light which is in Him. The ends of the Earth are swept by the borders of His garment of flame, from Him all things proceed, and unto Him all things return. Therefore we invoke Him. Therefore even the Banner of the East falls in admiration before Him. [King, p. 194]

I quote this passage in full because it shows the paradoxical and perhaps difficult-to-understand position the Order of the Golden Dawn often presents.

I could, by taking only the first sentence or two, have excerpted a passage in keeping with most traditional Christian mysticism, in which contact with the divine can be desired by the worshipper but, finally, given only by God; or by taking only from the second or third sentences to the end, I could have produced a passage which, if not entirely magical, is made of ideas heretical to Christianity: the generally gnostic idea that we are or can be identical with God (not holy, created souls, but equal in all ways), the neo-Platonic idea that automatic reunion with God is a consequence of our soul's identity with God (obviously necessitating no salvation), and the implication of invocation which may be as much command as invitation. As Gershom G. Scholem says of the Cabala, a Hebrew-based spiritual school that in fact formed one source for all branches of the Golden Dawn, we can say that the Golden Dawn often "stands on the borderline between mysticism and magic, where the one only too easily passes into the other." [Scholem, p. 277]

It may be hard to imagine such an approach, along with the peculiar potentials and perils it would present, but it is absolutely necessary to understanding not only Williams's association with the Golden Dawn, but many points of his writing. Certainly Williams himself was familiar with this ambivalent twilight zone of the spirit, to an extent that made some of his colleagues uncomfortable. (Probably including Tolkien. [See Rateliff, pp. 277-78, and Carpenter, especially p. 130 ff.]) In this context, it is hard to resist thinking of the domain of Broceliande in Williams's Arthuriad, especially as described by C. S. Lewis [See also Shideler, pp. 92-95]:

...indeed Broceliande is what most romantics are enamoured of; into it good mystics and bad mystics go: it is what you find when you step out of the ordinary mode of consciousness. You find it equally in whatever direction you step out. All journeys away from the solid earth are equally at the outset, journeys into the abyss. Saint, sorcerer, lunatic, and romantic lover all alike are drawn to Broceliande, but Carbonek is beyond a certain part of it only. ...Dante and D. H. Lawrence, Boehme and Hitler, Lady Julian and the Surrealists, had all been there. [Broceliande] is the home of immense dangers and immense possibilities. [Lewis, pp. 284-285]

One thing the Golden Dawn offered, precisely, was a ticket to Broceliande. In fact, Lewis's use of "the abyss," if not coincidental, is quite striking, as the term is used in a very similar way in Golden Dawn and related orders; one of the initiatory grades, the most difficult and yet most important, is often known as "cressing the abyss." A consistent vehicle for reaching Broceliande would be of great value to Williams, as both spiritual seeker and poet. Yet Williams, as Lewis shows here, consistently emphasizes the need for choice between directions within the realm--Carbonek, the seat of the Holy Grail, is only one destination there; another would be the spiritual deserts Simon the Clerk, for instance, inhabits.

Further complicating things, it often seems that some rituals and exercises of the Golden Dawn preserve the form of Christianity without being in any real way compatible with it. Certain Ash Wednesday practices, apparently, took a Christian motto when taking the 5=6 grade, for which Christian terminology was mandatory. [Regardie, pp. 94-95, 173] Yet, though Crowley "took the Order with absolute seriousness from the start," Regardie quotes
Virginia Moore's book on William Butler Yeats, The Unicorn, Yeats thought that from the beginning he took it wrong. For all his mouthing of the word 'Christ,' Christianity seems never to have penetrated." [Regardie, p. 95; Moore, p. 159]

Williams undoubtedly would find abhorrent this kind of divorce between a given language and its core problem and its meaning. In fact, he may be referring to this approach in his portrayal of Simon the Clerk's abuses of language, both sacred and human, in All Hallows Eve. (John P. Gigrich has an excellent discussion of this in An Essay on the Concept of Poetry in the Writings of Charles Williams. Gigrich—rightly, I believe—opposes Simon's abuses of language to Williams's doctrine of poetry as the deepest celebration of the joining of meaning and language. [pp. 66-72])

However, there has always been a genuinely mystical as well as a magical and crypto-magical side of the Order. Neither was representative of the Order. Neither was A. E. Waite. Crowley also shows his attitude in a fine caricature of Waite in the character Edwin Arthwaite in Crowley's novel Moonchild. [Carey, p. 35]

Ellic Howe, in his history of the Order, also shows a bias against Waite and Waite's mystical (rather than magical) orientation, both in his handling of the details of certain conflicts and in which group he chooses to follow as the "true" Golden Dawn when there are branchings out and splittings off. However, he does make several good points about Waite's thought, drawn from indisputable facts and from Waite's own writings, Ellic Howe, in his history of the Order, also shows a bias against Waite and Waite's mystical (rather than magical) orientation, both in his handling of the details of certain conflicts and in which group he chooses to follow as the "true" Golden Dawn when there are branchings out and splittings off. However, he does make several good points about Waite's thought, drawn from indisputable facts and from Waite's own writings. He cites Waite's autobiography, Shadows of Life and Thought: A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs, Selwyn and Blount, 1938, which treats the Order quite negatively, "because," Howe states, "his interests lay in the direction of mysticism rather than Magic." [Howe, p. 71]

Certainly, Waite was ambivalent about the Order from the very beginning—he joined in 1891, resigned in 1892, and rejoined "some years later" in 1899 [Howe, p. 71, 72-74]—and continued to be ambivalent even after he had filled positions of central importance within the Order. A passage Howe quotes from Waite's autobiography, Shadows of Life and Thought: A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs, Selwyn and Blount, 1938, which treats the Order quite negatively, "because," Howe states, "his interests lay in the direction of mysticism rather than Magic." [Howe, p. 71]
pretences, their buskined strutting and
t heir abysmal ignorance of the superstitious
arcana which they claimed to guard." [Howe,
pp. 71-72; Shadows of Life and Thought, p.
99]

With such disparate views and
antagonistic temperaments, one would expect
conflicts and schisms, and there were. R. A.
Gilbert's The Golden Dawn: The Twilight of
the Magicians is probably the most useful
guide to the complicated history. In 1900,
partly due to a conflict with Crowley,
Mathers lost his authority in the original
Isis-Urania Temple of the Order of the Golden
Dawn; on April 27th, 1900, William Butler
Yeats was elected the new leader
("Imperator"). Mathers and Westcott,
apparently, helped run a rival group, which,
confusingly, also called theirs the Isis-
was apparently a member of Yeats's Isis-Urania.
After some other conflicts and compromises,
in May of 1902, Yeats's Isis-Urania elected
three new chiefs, including J. W. Brodie-
Innes, whose name is usually used to identify
this group. [Gilbert, p. 43, identifies the
other two as Percy Bullock and Dr. R. W.
Felkin, King, p. 94, names W. W. Blackden,
with Bullock elected at first but quickly
replaced by Felkin.]

In 1903, the Brodie-Innes/Yeats group
split again. Francis King's opinionated but
illuminating report of this is worth quoting
at some length:

Early in 1903 the triad
submitted the proposed scheme of
government to a General Meeting...
A. E. Waite, who seems to have
desired nothing but to get the
Order into his own hands, proposed
several amendments with the object
of securing a rejection of the
constitution, but to his surprise
and alarm Brodie-Innes and his
colleagues accepted them and
modified their proposals
accordingly. Waite, who loathed
Brodie-Innes and was anxious to
isolate him, then urged the Adepti
to vote against the constitution as
a whole. Although only a minority
of the Order followed Waite in this
course of action there were
sufficient of them to ensure that
the new constitution did not get
the required two-thirds majority.
Waite followed up his success by
speaking, as always, at
considerable length; he said that
the Third Order was non-existent,
that the Order's rituals needed
much revision, and that the magical
tradition should be abandoned as
illusory and a dangerous path,
leading only to the Abyss.
He concluded by announcing that he had
no use for the Order in its present
form, and inviting all those who
agreed with him that the Golden
Dawn should abandon Ritual Magic
and all astral workings and

henceforth teach only an
exclusively Christian mysticism, to
join him in working independently
of the Order as a whole.
Shortly afterwards Waite and
Blackden joined forces and set up
their Temple, which, with little
justification, retained the name of
Isis-Urania. [King, p. 95]

George Mills Harper quotes Waite as later
saying, "those who regard the Golden Dawn as
a mystical instead of an occult
construction should be abandoned as
illusory and a dangerous path...the proof of attainment lies
in the possession of the 'Graces'
of the Spirit, not of the 'Powers.'"
[Harper, p. 122] Waite and Blackden became
two of the Three Chiefs, appointing "the
Reverend W. A. Ayton, an elderly clergymen of
strong alchemical interests, as their Third
Chief." [King, p. 95]

Howe states, in accord with Waite's
statement but in a somewhat different tone,
"Waite wanted to throw overboard the old
'Magical' tradition which derived from
Mathers and be free to pontificate about the
Graces of the Spirit in his own inimitable
fashion." The passage on which Howe
comments, in a letter to Brodie-Innes right
before the split, also shows Waite's views on
magic and mysticism:

We have not met with those members
who are alleged to possess
'practical power'. We do not deny
the existence of such powers but we
deny the importance attributed to
them. We believe in another
path...the proof of attainment lies
in the possession of the 'Graces'
of the Spirit, not of the 'Powers.'
[Howe, p. 255]

This view of magic as something real and
efficacious, yet still to be transcended for
higher supernatural states, is, of course,
evocatively similar to the position seen in
Charles Williams' fiction and non-fiction
alike. As Chad Walsh points out, using
examples from War in Heaven and The Greater
Trumps—one could certainly add Many
Dimensions, Shadows of Ecstasy, and others—
"Magic is real, magic is powerful, but in
Williamsland it is not ultimate. In a
clearcut contest with spiritual power, mere
magic loses...The world of the supernatural
therefore includes magic, but this is merely
one aspect of it. Powers more directly
related to the divine have the final say,
once they go into action." [pp. 68-69]

When Waite took over Isis-Urania, King
writes, "J. W. Brodie-Innes continued his
Amen-Ra Temple in Edinburgh, while Dr. Felkin
and those London members who desired to carry
on the magical tradition and the original
order scheme formed the Amoun Temple,
changing the name of the Outer Order from the
96] One of the London members was Yeats, who
"took the magical side against Waite and his
company in 1903 and became a member of the
Stella Matutina, remaining active until the
1920s," but, unlike many others on the magic
side of the split, remaining on relatively good terms with Waite and his group. [Gilbert, p. 48; see also Harper, pp. 122-125, especially for some of the possible reasons for Yeats's choice.]

Among those who followed Waite or joined his group in 1904 (the earliest record of membership available] were Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, writers of supernatural fiction; Evelyn Underhill, also a writer of supernatural fiction and now better known as a writer of non-fiction studies of mysticism, joined Waite's Independent and Reclaimed Rite in 1905. This was still called the Golden Dawn, although, as King and others pointed out, it did not very much resemble the Order from which it had sprung. In 1910, Waite almost completely re-did the rituals, re-writing some and abandoning most of the others. [Gilbert, p. 71] A letter from Underhill to Waite, cited by Gilbert, says of her training, "I am glad you are inclined to be lenient about the knowledge lecture: I can manage the Hebrew pretty well, but the astrology and fortune telling are quite beyond me. "Divination," Gilbert observes, "was evidently allowed to go by the board if necessary." [Gilbert, p. 72]

Yet this is still not quite the organization that Charles Williams joined. In 1914, Waite's Isis-Urania Temple was dissolved. As Waite reports it in his autobiography,

In 1914 I put an end to the Isis-Urania or Mother Temple, owing to internecine feuds on the authenticity of documents. A few persons attempted to carry on by themselves, but it proved a failure. Of a new Rite which arose, as if from the dead ashes, there will be a word to say in conclusion; but there is no story to tell, either by myself or another. May that most sacred centre give up no outward form. [Shadows of Life and Thought, p. 229; Howe, p. 273]

This passage--besides perhaps making us more sympathetic to Regardie's remarks about Waite's writing style--is more than a little misleading. King and Howe, who also have reasons to downplay Waite's personal success and importance, both take this as evidence that Waite's Golden Dawn related activities ceased altogether. No wonder King argues that Waite "who is, elsewhere, notably inaccurate about dates] was wrong in saying Isis-Urania disbanded in 1914 [King, p. 112]." When it is known that Charles Williams did not even join until 1916 or 1917.

Coming from someone with as much emblematic background in Rosicrucianism and alchemy as Waite, the phoenix in the above-cited passage should have been a certain give-away. Actually, Waite founded a new Order, presumably similar in most ways, though with quite a change-over of members, and most of all under a different name, thus avoiding some of the problems of authenticity of mandate that had led Waite to reject the title of the Order of the Golden Dawn. By 1915, Gilbert explains, "Waite had set up a completely new Order, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, complete with an Inner Order that he called the Ordo Sanctissimus Roseae et Aurea Crucis." [Gilbert, p. 76]

This name is especially important to a discussion of the magical or mystical nature of the Order, given a statement in Waite's book Studies in Mysticism (1906): "So far as the past is concerned, incorporated mystic schools of the conscious order have scarcely existed in England, but there are traces of one sodality which connects with the present subject, and this is the Brotherhood of C. R. C., understood to be the initiates of the illuminated father, Christian Rosy Cross." [pp. 344-345]

Gilbert reports, "Into [Waite's] new Rosicrucian Order he brought numbers of his Masonic friends and a selection of occult-minded ladies from Theosophical circles; he knew very few of the members, even though he still looked upon many of them as personal friends." [p. 76] Another initiate of this Rosicrucian Order, within two years of its founding, was Oxford University Press editor Charles Stansby Williams.

Thus, does not, at this point, take much imagination to see Charles Williams years later, as Anne Ridler describes him, "laughing to remember the quarrels for precedence among the children of the Second Birth," as she refers to the contentious mages and mystics of the Order of the Golden Dawn. [Ridler, p. xxiii] It also adds both poignancy and some support to Lee Speth's remark, "It cannot be proven, but I nonetheless hold as true that the 'study group' in The Place of the Lion reflects Williams's memory of the Golden Dawn" [Speth, p. 26]--or at least the more competitive, catty, and venal side of that experience. (Given Gilbert's mention of the "selection of occult-minded ladies from Theosophical circles" in Waite's Rosicrucian Order, this is even more likely, and there is probably out-and-out doctrinal satire as well.)

Not much is known about Williams' membership in the Order, although biographical studies continue to progress. In Hadfield's 1959 study, An Introduction to Charles Williams, she reports, "He learned a great deal from the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, though his wife says that he never actually joined the Order." [p. 80] However, Humphrey Carpenter, in The Inklings, quotes a letter from Waite to Williams dated September 6, 1917 (now in the Magic Collection, Wheaton College), discussing arrangements for Williams' initiation as a neophyte at the upcoming Autumnal Equinox. [p. 86]

Much new information on Williams' affiliation with the Order came out in 1983, not only from Williams scholarship, but from Gilbert's researches into the Golden Dawn and its associated orders.
A Reverend A. H. E. Lee, "who had been a member of Isis-Urania and was still a close friend of A. E. Waite," was, about the time Waite was forming his Fellowship of the Rosy Cross in 1915, "busy compiling, with the aid of D. H. S. Nicholson, yet another of Waite's Order members, the Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse." [Gilbert, p. 76] Lee and Nicholson went on the become extremely important friends of Williams's, as Anne Ridler reports, Nicholson being "the most intimate friend of [Williams's] middle years" until Nicholson's death in 1936 or 1937, and Lee, the bachelor, "fill[ing] the role...of the Plain Man." [p. xxvi] (This last, of course, is suggestive in light of the image of the humble Anglican priests in Williams's novels, as well as Williams's tendency to incorporate personal situations and self-portrait in his works.)

The proposed collection of mystical verse, as Hadfield points out in her 1983 book, Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work, included six of A. E. Waite's poems. [p. 24] Gilbert says of Lee, Nicholson, and the project:

Their work as editors brought them into contact with a young man at the Oxford University Press named Charles Williams, whose evident interest in ritual, in mysticism and in Waite's poems led Lee to send him on to Waite. ....[Williams] first visited Waite's home on 4 September 1915--two years before his Reception as a Neophyte in the F. & R. C., at the Equinox Ceremony on 21 September 1917. Frater Qui Sitit Veniat, as he became, remained in the Order for eleven years--Waite's last diary reference to him is in 1926--and possibly much longer, for other members still recalled him in 1966. [p. 76-77]

Hadfield's recent book states that Williams was already well read in early theological and mystical literature, Grail and Rosicrucian works among them," when he met Waite, "and would have been acquainted with some ideas and symbols Waite used in ceremonies and rituals." [p. 29] She also quotes a 1916 letter from Williams to Alice Mynell reporting the events associated with Williams's first meeting with Waite:

I sent a copy of my book to Mr. A. E. Waite (do you by any chance know his name?) who is a student of secret tradition in various forms--it was his book on the Grail literature that provoked me!--and he answered very kindly, asking me to go and see him, and saying pleasant things generally.--[Hadfield, 1983, p. 24]

I do not know which of his books Williams meant, although my guess would be The Silver Stair.

Williams seems to have been an enthusiastic participant while he was a member of the Order. "Certainly membership [in the Order]...involved the performance of rituals," Carpenter states, "which Williams, with other books, GreavesQC," entered his life and became...into wholeheartedly; he told his friend Anne Ridler that he had always taken care to learn by heart the words...so that he could participate with dignity, whereas many other members did not trouble to do so, and merely read the words from a card." [Carpenter, p. 87; Ridler, pp. xxiv-xxv]

Two of the major influences of this association on Williams's thought are the Cabala and the Holy Graal--or, as both Waite and Williams spelled it, Graal. Ridler states that Waite's influence was "an important one for [Williams]," especially via two of Waite's books. She reports, "The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal (1909) had its place among the origins of [Williams's] Arthurian studies, as entries in his Notebook show, but it was The Secret Doctrine of Israel (1913) which interested him most--and he continued to admire it, for he recommended me to read it when I knew him in the thirties." [p. xxv] Many critics have discussed in brief the importance of these books to Williams, especially to his Arthurian poems, but much more remains to be done.

Hadfield seemingly contradicts Gilbert regarding the duration of Williams's Rosicrucian activity: "His active membership was probably no more than four or five years. It may be that after his son was born in 1922 he had difficulty in finding a free evening besides his regular lectures and the time he needed for writing. Or he may simply have had enough." [1983, p. 29] Hadfield's view of a shorter "active" membership, however, is not incompatible with Gilbert's evidence of continued association with Waite or even with the Order. It does make it somewhat more likely that lack of time was a deciding factor, rather than simply having "had enough"--something with obvious implications for an evaluation of how much of his Rosicrucian adventure Williams kept or repudiated in later years.

Moreover, Hadfield adds other details that support a lack of total repudiation on Williams's part. There is Williams's explicit adherence to the vow of secrecy regarding the Order, which both Ridler [p. xxiii] and Hadfield [1983, p. 29] mention. More significantly, Williams kept not only the vow of silence, but certain Rosicrucian paraphernalia: "Whether or not he formally resigned and gave back the habit [his ceremonial robe for the Order], he kept some ceremonial items in a drawer of his desk, perhaps including one sometimes illustrated in connection with the Order, a scarf or small banner. When he cleared his desk on moving to Oxford in 1939, he gave them, or some of them, to a friend, who destroyed them." [Hadfield, 1983, p. 31]

Williams apparently not only kept his ceremonial sword, but used it in a powerful
and somewhat disturbing incident, reported by Hadfield, concerning Williams and an unnamed female friend:

In a cupboard in his office there was a ceremonial sword, remaining probably from Golden Dawn days. In silence Charles cleared a space and brought it out. He once called it a hazel wand, the ancient wood of water diviners and metal discoverers, the image in his poetry for measurement or training. He taught her to bend over, in silence and silence he took the sword and made smooth strokes with it over her buttocks. He did not hit, nor touch with his hand. She was fully clothed. All was in silence. Afterwards, she said she did not like it. He replied, 'This was necessary for the poem,' and refused to allow the episode to be mentioned. [Hadfield, 1983, p. 106]

Readers of Williams' poetry will recognize a connection to the slave-girls and hazel-striped of the Arthuriad. This element of Williams' poetry has garnered its share of heated criticism—especially in Robert Conquest's essay "The Art of the Enemy" [particularly pp. 49-51]—and I will not deny that there is a bothersome or even sordid aspect to this side of Williams that even sympathetic commentators like Carpenter and Hadfield have to admit. [Hadfield, 1983, especially pp. 106-07; Carpenter, especially pp. 85-86, 115]

However, we must, as Cavaliero does in his discussion of the Arthuriad, put into context of universal order and coherency. Williams' "hazel" is not—nor at worst, not only—the birch of Victorian pornography; it is the symbol of all order and measure—of "rule" in all senses—and is the baton with which are counted out the paces of what Williams calls, in The Greater Trumps, "the Dance." All unity, hierarchy, correspondence, and order is included in the hazel. As Williams says in "The Departure of Dindrane" in The Region of Summer Stars, "The hazel of the cattle-goad, of the measuring-rod, of the slaves' discipline, of Logres' highway, of Merlin's wand of magic, of her lord's line of verse, of the octave of song, of the footpace under the altar, straight and strong...." [p. 149]  

At the very least, then, Hadfield shows that Williams kept his ceremonial accoutrements for some time, dispensing with them carefully (not just throwing them out) and even using the sword in personally-significant ways. Most important, in my mind, is the significance when in his poetry, Williams identifies magic, poetry itself, government, and the altar with the hazel rod, and the vehicle he uses to enact the symbol in his life is a ceremonial sword, likely from his Rosicrucian affiliation.

One curiosity about Charles Williams' affiliation with A. E. Waite's F. R. C. G. that Anne Ridler puzzles over is that Williams nonetheless "always spoke of himself as having belonged to the Golden Dawn." This may be in part because, as Anne Ridler suggests, although Waite "speaks contemptuously of the Golden Dawn" as we have seen, "it is evident from Waite's own writings that the symbolism of both Orders derived from the same sources." [Ridler, p. xxiv] Another reason may be that by the time of Ridler's conversations with Williams, the term Rosicrucian may have been too well known in conjunction with a completely different group: my casual research shows that "the second cycle of activity of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, in the Americas," the group currently placing all the advertisements in all those magazines, was active at least as early as 1932-1939. [Rosicrucian Digest, July 1986] This would have made the use of "Rosicrucian" by Williams far more misleading than his use of "Golden Dawn" was, though that was confusing enough, as we have seen.

Estimates of how important Williams found his association with Waite and the Golden Dawn-based Rosicrucian Order vary. Nancy-Lou Patterson says, "His biographers tend to underplay his episode as a member of an occult Order, perhaps out of embarrassment." [Patterson, p. 42] Another consideration is whether the writer about Williams is personally more interested in magic or Christianity. On the one extreme, we have George P. Winship, Jr., who feels that Williams "dabbled only" with sorcery, "armored with the breastplate of faith, an imaginative as well as creedal realization of Christianity." [pp. 114-15] On the other, King feels "the Golden Dawn system—or to be more correct Waite's heterodox version of that system—is the key without which the deepest and inmost meaningfulness of Williams can never be unlocked." [p. 112]

Lois Lang-Sims presents a position closer to what I think is warranted by the facts: that the difference between Waite and his Order "can have been second in importance only to that of the Church in Charles' life." [p. 204] It was, I believe, decidedly secondary; aspects of the teaching were assimilated only in conjunction with orthodox Christian teaching, and always calibrated against that unchallengeable standard. But, with his "extraordinary gift of assimilation he picked out and used the best in any set of beliefs" [Hadfield, 1959, p. 131], and this included much in the K. K. C. K. that became an accepted, long-standing, perhaps permanent part of Williams' thought.

I do not believe, as Patterson does, that Williams participated in Waite's group, perhaps succeeded in a search for occult power via the Order, but then disavowed it. [p. 42] Rather, I think he sought out a mysticism-oriented rather than predominantly magical Order to begin with, assimilated much of it but only in compatibility with his own Anglicanism as he knew it, and continued with some of those ideas, goals, and even practices for much of the rest of his life.
One might argue that what Williams encountered in Waite's Rosicrucian Order was not occultism at all, but this is not true either. Both Williams and Waite allow for a tradition that is in keeping with religion, and is totally different from the low and debasing activities most people think of as magic, yet is still a secret, occult, and even magical teaching apart from the main body of the church. Waite, in his introduction to The Book of Black Magic and Ceremonial Magic—a study very similar in style, content, and purpose to Charles Williams's book Witchcraft—calls this desirable and esoteric tradition "high magic":

If Magic in its proper and original meaning be synonymous with wisdom; if that wisdom...means something inconceivably great, it is of certitude that it has no causal connection with the congeries of arts and processes which are understood by Practical Magic. That there was, as there still is, a science of old sanctuaries, I am certain as a mystic; that this science issued in that experience that imparts wisdom I am also certain.... [pp. vii-viii]

The term Waite uses for the low kind of magic is "goetia," which is the term Williams most often uses to name the practices of Simon the Clerk in All Hallows' Eve.

Williams makes a distinction that draws almost identical lines, in the preface to his book Witchcraft. In it, he states that his study inevitably "deal[s] more with the lower level than with the nobler dream," but that noble dream does exist; and, as does Waite, he identifies it with a secret tradition: "The nobler idea of virtue mingled with power either worked itself out eventually as experimental science...or it was kept carefully secluded in its own Rites (and to know them one would have to share them), or it did in fact degenerate into base and disgusting evils...." [p. 9]

There seems to be ample evidence that Williams had reason to think he did, in fact, share at least a hint of such rites. Later in the book, he is extremely reluctant to call this tradition by the name of magic at all, yet he knows that historically he has to, especially when speaking of the Renaissance and 17th century occultism on which his contemporary Rosicrucian and Hermetic Orders were founded:

...neither [John] Dee's concern with spiritual creatures nor [Thomas] Vaughan's with alchemical works, nor that of their contemporaries, correspond to magic, of whatever kind. Yet both, and perhaps all, might have claimed that this was what lay behind the old kind, and was the only valuable thing in it, as Vaughan clearly did. They would have assented...to Pico della Mirandola's saying that 'No science gives greater proof of the divinity of Christ than magic and the Kabbala.' [pp. 228-229]

It is precisely Dee's Enochian magic, the art of alchemy, and the study of the Cabala that formed the basis of the original English Order of the Golden Dawn, and the latter two that formed the core—along with Grail symbolism and the story of Christian Rosy Cross--of Waite's F.:R.:C.:.

The F.:R.:C.: was for Williams just a step along the way in his own spiritual journey to God and the City; yet evidence shows that it was a very important step for Williams—personally, as a writer, and as a thinker. If there has been too little study of this area of Williams's life so far, I can certainly see why; the complications of both events and philosophy sometime seem as wild and impenetrable as the wildest forests of Broceliande. Perhaps this article has contributed to the measuring out of at least a path or two.

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