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# Hermetic Imagination: The Effect of The Golden Dawn on Fantasy Literature

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### Hermetic Imagination: The Effect of The Golden Dawn on Fantasy Literature

#### **Abstract**

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was an English expression of the Nineteenth-Century occult revival in Europe. Dedicated to such practices as ceremonial magic and divination, it valued these more as gateways to true understanding of reality than for their intrinsic merit. The Golden Dawn's essentially Neoplatonic world-view is reflected in the writings of such some-time members as W.B. Yeats, Arthur Machen and Charles Williams.

#### **Additional Keywords**

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# Hermetic Imagination: The Effect of The Golden Dawn on Fantasy Literature

Charles A. Coulombe

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Beyond these fields and this borderland there lies the legendary wonder-world of theurgy, so called, of Magic and Sorcery, a world of fascination or terror, as the mind which regards it is tempered, but in any case the antithesis of admitted possibility. There all paradoxes seem to obtain actually, contradictions coexist logically, the effect is greater than the cause and the shadow more than the substance. Therein the visible melts into the unseen, the invisible is manifested openly, motion from place to place is accomplished without traversing the intervening distance, matter passes through matter. There two straight lines may enclose a space; space has a fourth dimension, and untrodden fields beyond it; without metaphor and without evasion, the circle is mathematically squared. There life is prolonged, youth renewed, physical immortality secured. There earth becomes gold, and gold earth. There words and wishes possess creative power, thoughts are things, desire realises its object. There, also, the dead live and the hierarchies of extra-mundane intelligence are within easy communication, and become ministers or tormentors, guides or destroyers of man. There the Law of Continuity is suspended by the interference of the higher Law of Fantasia.

(Waite, 1961, pp. 3-4)

This rather lengthy quotation serves well as an introduction to the Hermetic or Magical world-view. It is in complete contradiction, needless to say, to the more or less materialistic perspective our education and upbringing have bestowed on us modern Europeans, North Americans, and Australasians. Since at least the Enlightenment, educated opinion has insisted on what we call the scientific method. Relying on the purely measurable, it has provided us with the technology necessary to provide us with all the conveniences we possess – surely a telling argument in any case. But to understand the world-view of W.B. Yeats, Arthur Machen,

and Charles Williams, as well as that of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to which they all belonged, we must first pick up a little of its history.

While the Magical world-view may not be popular among us today, it is an integral part of practically all pre-industrial societies. In Europe, the country-folk from time immemorial to this century (and in some out-of-the-way places even yet) saw this everyday life of ours as interpenetrated with beings and actions from other worlds co-existent with this one:

Often they are described as distant realms, but almost as frequently they are imagined to lie so close alongside normal space that transition from one to the other is only too easy, in both directions. Certain places and times facilitate the transition. Supernatural powers break through into the normal (or can be summoned to it) at turning points of time: midnight, midday, New Year's Eve, Halloween, May Eve, Midsummer Night. Similarly with space; it is at boundaries, thresholds, crossroads, fords, bridges, and where verticality intersects the horizontal, as on top of mounds, down wells, under trees, that Otherworlds are accessible . . . One key is ambiguity, the concept both/and and neither/nor. If a man stands exactly on the boundary where three parishes meet, at the stroke of midnight, in which parish is he, and what date is it? He has cut loose from normal space and time. He has also reversed normal human conduct by going outside at night, the time when supernatural beings are active, but humans should be asleep. In such circumstances, he places himself in contact with "the other"; he can reach, or be reached by, fairies, ghosts, or demons.

(Simpson, 1985, p. 34)

While the same views may be found in all the world's folklore and mythology (as, for example, the Australian aboriginal "dream-time", so often invoked today), in Europe the influence of Christian doctrine made a great impact. Even as Faerie was conceived in terms like those just quoted,

so too were Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, which realms also erupted into our own in various ways. Churches were seen as outposts of the celestial, brought down at the Sacrifice of the Mass and other Sacraments. Purgatory, through the medium of ghosts (*à la* Hamlet's father) played its part. Hell too, through its demons, those of Faerie who were evil (the "unseelie court", as the Scots put it), Werewolves, Vampires, and so on, made its presence felt. Human beings too could align with the infernal in return for supernatural power; these were of course the Witches of song and story. (To those who would claim that this sort of witchery was the invention of Church officials, it should be pointed out that to this day, supposed witches are burned, tortured, and hung in non-Christian places like China, Africa, and remoter Australia; it is this writer's contention that the origins of today's "Wicca" or neo-Paganism lie elsewhere.)

At any rate, the village wise-folk who trafficked with the unseen, the Anne Jeffries sorts of people who stumbled into it, and the generality of villagers who treasured up tales, charms, and beliefs of these kinds were for the most part merely reacting in a half-instinctual manner to the realities they perceived around them. There was perhaps little of a developed theory behind all of this (although this assertion may not be readily defensible – oral cultures can be richer and more complex than we moderns suspect).

Unlike today, however, the learned of earlier days held much the same world-view, albeit in a more reasoned and articulated manner. The Pre-Socratic philosophers "did not oppose matter to mind, soul to body, or subject to object, but had a tendency to approach nature with a nondualistic, noncategorical attitude. In such a view, all being is concrete." (Faivre, 1987a)

Socrates' pupil, Plato, developed the idea of the types or universals – such as "Man", "Horse", "King", and so on – of which their concrete representations which we experience (and we ourselves) are mere shadows. These realities reside in some supernatural realm from whence they cast their shadows upon the Earth. While this theory could lend itself to a real dualism, its effect on philosophers whose psychology was influenced by Pre-Socratic attitudes often led such to consider reality as an interconnecting web of coherences and correspondences, the seen operating upon the unseen, and vice versa. Obviously, such an intellectual context lent itself to any number of religious and mystical beliefs; the obscurest maxims of the Hellenistic Mystery Schools could be considered expressions of wisdom by the most rigorous thinkers of antiquity.

Into this philosophico-religious mix entered, in the first few centuries AD, the Alexandrian writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. Codifying the whole system of analogies which had grown up by the phrase "as above, so below", Hermeticism gave to philosophers and thinkers a model of dealing with the unseen. Neoplatonic Universals came in time to meet Hermetic Analogy. Thus was born the approach to reality our opening quote epitomises; thus was given to age-old magical practise a philosophical basis.

Just as Christianity affected and was in turn affected by the folk-beliefs of its humbler converts, so too did it and was it

by the philosophies of its more educated neophytes. From this encounter emerged many of the ideas of the Church Fathers: St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Justin the Martyr, St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Augustine are prime examples of this process. Similarly, the emerging traditional liturgies of East and West were much affected by ritual commonplaces in contemporary theurgy and prayers to higher spirits. To the sceptic, this interconnexion would doubtless relativise even further the value of Christian doctrine and practise; to the believer, it would simply be a demonstration of his Faith encompassing within itself all truths, revealed or otherwise. From Tertullian's maxim that "the soul is naturally Christian", such a believer would draw the Hermetic analogy that so too is reality as a whole. Thus the demons, angels, and so on spoken of in Neoplatonic theurgy would not be mere pagan engraftings onto Christianity, but simply pre-Christian acknowledgements of actual beings.

The dualism implicit in Neoplatonism, which provided its main distinction from Hermeticism, was lacking in the Christian Neoplatonism of the Church Fathers. For them, as for later Christian philosophers, the Universals did not exist independently, but in the mind of God. This concept gave philosophical comprehensibility to various difficult doctrines. The Fall of Man, for instance, could be seen in terms of the falling of the whole Universal "Man", in the persons of its then only two extant concrete representatives – Adam and Eve. This point of view, which saw the Universals as real and as the pattern from whence come all perceived physical things, is called "Ultra-Realism". Under its influence were composed the Catholic and Orthodox liturgies, most pre-13th Century theological works, and the writings of Mystics of the same period. It is a mark of Ultra-Realism, in fact, that Mysticism (with its concomitant physical phenomena, bilocation, the stigmata, etc.) and Theology – that is, the practise and the study of unity with God – were then considered inseparable. By the same token, astrology (with the proviso that "the stars impel, they do not compel"), alchemy, the Jewish Qabbalah, and the like were taken seriously by devout writers like John Scotus Eriugena, Pope Sylvester II, Bl. Raymond Lully, Roger Bacon, St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Thomas Aquinas, and so on. The acceptance of the reality of the spiritual, and the possibility of exploring it by analogy from the natural, were accepted by all early Medieval Christian thinkers:

In that which concerns speculative philosophy or metaphysics, the same role is reserved there for analogy. All conclusions of a metaphysical nature are based only on the analogy of man, Nature, and the intelligible or metaphysical world. Thus the two principal authorities of the most methodical and most disciplined philosophy – medieval Scholastic philosophy – St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure (of whom one represents Aristotelianism and the other Platonism in Christian Philosophy) not only make use of analogy but also assign it a very important theoretical role in their doctrines themselves. St. Thomas advances the doctrine of *analogia entis*, the

analogy of being, which is the principle key to his philosophy. St. Bonaventure, in his doctrine of *signatura rerum*, interprets the entire visible world as the symbol of the invisible world. For him, the visible world is only another Holy Scripture, another revelation alongside that which is contained in Holy Scripture . . .

(Tonberg, 1991, p. 17)

Given this sort of world-view, it is not too surprising that during the Middle Ages sympathetic magic, based upon natural correspondences, and theurgy, based upon invocation of angels and elementals, flourished (so too, alas, did goetia, with its invocation of demons, and necromancy, with its consultation of the dead. Needless to say, the latter two were particularly discouraged by the Church). But SS. Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, in their own lives and careers, foreshadow the rise of modern philosophy.

St. Bonaventure was a traditional Ultra-Realist. St. Thomas, on the other hand, picked up the Aristotelian view that the Universals derive their reality from the sum total of their concrete expressions: that is, that rather than Men deriving their Mannishness from the Universal Man, said Universal is only identifiable from the shared Mannishness of individual Men. This may sound an arcane distinction, but it was in reality the first chink through which a tide of Aristotelian materialism would in the end divorce theology and the supernatural entirely from philosophy and the physical. "The Platonist sees things in God; the Aristotelian sees God at the summit of things" (Bettoni, 1964, p. 20). As St. Bonaventure was a disciple of St. Francis, first of the 400 attested stigmatics to have been marked down to our own day, it is no surprise that he should have been a Platonist. Indeed, for those who believe in it, the Stigmata might be seen as a concrete proof of Ultra-Realism.

However that may be, Moderate Realism produced over the course of the Middle ages Conceptualism, which saw the Universals as being only human concepts, and Nominalism, which saw them as mere names having no reality at all. It would not be unfair to say that most Modern Philosophy is Nominalism on a spree.

What these philosophical developments meant concretely was the progressive separation of Christian Theology from Philosophy. There was, it is true, during the Humanist movement of the Renaissance something of a recapturing of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. This produced such figures as Cardinal Bessarion, Nicholas of Cusa, Pico Della Mirandola, Reuchlin, and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II). All of these and their ideological kin were also intensely interested in Qabbalah, Alchemy, etc. – in a strictly Christian and Catholic context.

The Reformation, spearheaded by the Nominalist Martin Luther, put an end to all such developments. While the next few centuries would produce a few figures like Jakob Böhme and Claude de St. Martin, for the most part materialism and "modern" scientific method grew in their monopoly of Europe's intellectual life. The Enlightenment was the fruition of this process. Then came the French and Industrial Revolutions, which idolised the materialistic. Almost inevitably, there came a reaction – Romanticism.

Romanticism encompassed many allied themes. To the Materialist assumption of the all-importance of the body and the group, it opposed the individual. To the mechanistic view of nature it replied with a *Naturphilosophie* which again saw nature as at once veiling and representing spiritual realities. To the cult of progress, the Romantics also opposed a love of the Medieval past and the Peasant or Exotic present. Perhaps the greatest of the Romantic philosophers was the incomparable Franz von Baader, who later inspired Vladimir Soloviev.

From the outpouring of all of this throughout the 19th Century, interest arose in much of the literate European public in fantasy literature, spiritualism, and the occult:

The industrial revolution naturally gave rise to an increasingly marked interest in the "miracles" of science. It promoted the invasion of daily life by utilitarian and socioeconomic preoccupations of all kinds. Along with the smoking factory chimneys came both the literature of the fantastic and the new phenomenon of spiritualism. These two possess a common characteristic: each takes the real world in its most concrete form as its point of departure, and then postulates the existence of another, supernatural world, separated from the first by a more or less impermeable partition. Fantasy literature then plays upon the effect of surprise that is provided by the irruption of the supernatural into the daily life which it describes in a realistic fashion . . . It is interesting that occultism in its modern form – that of the nineteenth century – appeared at the same time as fantastic literature and spiritualism. The French term *occultisme* was perhaps first used by Eliphas Lévi (1810-1875), whose work is sometimes somewhat misleadingly identified with the beginnings of occultism itself . . . Like the fantastic and the quasi religion of spiritualism, nineteenth century occultism showed a marked interest in supernatural phenomena, that is to say, in the diverse modes of passage from one world to the other. (Faivre, "Occultism", 1987b).

Not too surprisingly the Occult revival in France which featured men like Lévi, Papus, Peladan, Grillot de Givry, and many others, was paralleled by a similar movement in French literature featuring such names as Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and Huysmans. While many of these considered themselves loyal Catholics, the standard theologians of the time, much under Neo-Thomist influence, regarded them suspiciously.

This phenomenon was not restricted to the continent. In 1875, Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York, which soon spread throughout the English-speaking world. Originally very Western in emphasis, studying such topics as alchemy and the writings of Paracelsus, the Society took on a strongly Oriental tone after Mme. Blavatsky took a voyage to India, and claimed to have made contact with various Tibetan "Ascended Masters". A number of members took issue with this (among whom was Rudolf Steiner, who eventually founded his own Anthroposophical Society in Germany). A further objection

to the course of the Theosophical Society was that its membership were encouraged only to study occult doctrine, not to practise it – that is, not to practise Magic. But an organisation formed in 1888 soon attracted many Theosophists who wished either a more Western teaching or Magical practise, or both: The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

### The Golden Dawn

This society was formed as a result of the discovery in a bookstall of a cypher MS by one Rev. A.F.A. Woodford. Supposedly, this manuscript was written by a German Rosicrucian lady, and invited anyone interested in setting up a similar organisation to contact her. In concert with Macgregor Mathers, a Scottish student of the Occult, and Dr. W. Wynn Westcott, the Golden Dawn was accordingly organised.

From the very beginning, its membership fell roughly into two categories: those who were of a Western-Theosophical bent (many of whom, as just noted, had left the Theosophical Society for that particular reason), and those of a more explicitly Christian orientation. This uneasy mix would erupt later into open conflict; but at the very beginning both camps were united in declaring that “to establish closer and more personal relations with the Lord Jesus, the Master of Masters, is and ever must be the ultimate object of all the teachings of our order.” Unexceptional as this goal was, the Order’s means of reaching it were quite unusual.

The Golden Dawn aspired to be not merely a complete academy of occult knowledge (as indeed the Theosophical Society had claimed to be) but also a forum for Mystico-Magical practise – which Magic was seen as being like that of Eliphas Lévi. In the words of Stephan Hoeller, Magic in this sense is “an umbrella term for the growth or expansion of consciousness by way of symbolic modalities.” To impart both knowledge and practise, an elaborate system of grades was established; as the student ascended these grades, he or she learned ever more esoteric skills.

These latter included knowledge of Qabalah (which Hebrew system’s model of all reality – the “Tree of Life” – provided the Golden Dawn with its basic ideational framework); Tarot; Geomancy; Astrology; Alchemy; and ritual Magic. The workings of the last-named included making of sigils and talismans, communing with Elementals, evocation of Demons, and invocation of Angels. As well, the Golden Dawn initiate was taught “skrying”, which included both clairvoyance and astral travel.

From its beginning, the Golden Dawn attracted a highly literary membership. In addition to the three whom we shall consider, Algernon Blackwood, Dion Fortune, Sax Rohmer, actress Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, E. Nesbit, and Evelyn Underhill were all members at one time or another, either of the Golden Dawn itself or of one of the splinter groups which survived the Order’s disruption in 1900. With the publication of the Order’s rituals by Israel Regardie, we are now in a better position to gauge the ideology of the Golden Dawn than were earlier writers on the topic.

Concurrent with its Western-Theosophic and Qabbalistic

viewpoint (themselves manifestations of Hermeticism and Neo-Platonism) the Golden Dawn also reflected in its rituals the Christian emphasis earlier referred to. While subsequent authorities (notably Regardie) have sought to minimise this in accordance with their own biases, it is still evident from an examination of the material. Indeed, it is alleged that many of the first members of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection (the Mirfield Fathers) were members, although this would be hard to substantiate. Still, there can be no doubt that many Golden Dawn Frates and Sorores achieved in their own devotional lives the same synthesis between Hermeticism/Neoplatonism and Sacramental Christianity that characterised Medieval Ultra-Realists, Renaissance Humanists, and (in a much less conscious way) European folk-culture members. In a word, their Christianity, while tied to the dogmas of Revelation, saw the world as both a symbol and concealment of higher realities, contact with which was obtainable both through magic and divination, and, on a purer and greater level, through the Sacraments.

Most representative of these was perhaps the Catholic A.E. Waite, who formed a separate, more explicitly Christian Mysticism-oriented Golden Dawn group in 1903. Commenting on Claude de St. Martin’s works, Waite wrote: “It is difficult to agree that a system which includes institutions of such efficacy [the Sacraments], and apparently of divine origin, can at the same time transmit nothing. It becomes more apparent . . . that the failure in transmission is not in the Church, but in the ministers. The Church assists us towards regeneration by operating divers effects at divers seasons” (1970, p. 331). He goes on to say “. . . I think the Church Catholic is preferable to the most exotic plant of Lutheranism . . .” (1970, p. 333). A good understanding of Waite’s position is important, because Yeats, Machen, and Williams all elected to follow him, and his view of matters esoteric is the strand of Golden Dawn tradition which informs their work. He wrote of the Golden Dawn itself: “It is not in competition with the external Christian Churches, and yet it is a Church of the Elect, a Hidden and Holy Assembly . . . It is a House of the Holy Graal in the sanctity of a High Symbolism, where the sacred intent of the Order is sealed upon Bread and Wine” (quoted in Carpenter, 1979, p. 82).

Odd though Waite’s views may appear to many today, they were not unechoed on either side of the channel. In her 1963 foreword to Waite’s similarly-viewed French contemporary Grillot de Givry’s *Sorcery, Magic, and Alchemy*, Cynthia Magriel informs us that:

De Givry lived in a moment in history and in France when his views, though strange to most Catholics, could be tolerated. They were shared in part by a number of Catholics who were considered no worse than eccentrics.

Thus the Baron de Sarachaga, a Basque and a nephew of St. Teresa [of Avila], for forty years headed the Institut des Fastes; this school was approved by Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII. Pierre Dujois, a learned hermetist, wrote of this school in 1912: “There exists in Paray-le-Monial [the centre of devotion to the Sacred

Heart of Jesus] a mysterious Cabalic centre, sincerely Catholic it seems, and where the bizarre orthodoxy is nevertheless accepted and even encouraged by the Church . . ."

(p. 5)

So the mixture of orthodoxy and magic we encounter in the writings of our three authors, deriving from the Golden Dawn and particularly from Waite, was not without contemporary as well as past parallels. This is an important point, because for varying reasons Christian and non-Christian writers alike have attempted to set up a dichotomy between the Christian and occult elements in the three's work where there is in fact a synthesis – a synthesis which in these particular cases is the direct result of their membership in the Golden Dawn. Let us look now at each of them.

### William Butler Yeats

Of the three, Yeats' connection with the Golden Dawn is the best known and documented. In his *Autobiography*, pp. 341-342, he discusses his involvement with the Golden Dawn and its history, calling it "the Hermetic Students", but giving Mathers and Westcott their proper names. His *Memoirs*, published posthumously, are full of bits of gossip about the Golden Dawn and its members. Of the Order, he says therein, "I . . . value a ritual full of the symbolism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance . . ." (p. 27). He had come to the Golden Dawn after having been expelled from the Theosophical Society by Madame Blavatsky for actually practising Magic. Yet even before his entrance into the Theosophical Society, he and a number of other Dublin Anglo-Irish youths had formed a "Dublin Hermetic Society" for the study of European Magic and Mysticism, and to a degree of Eastern religion. Why? "All were parched by the desiccated religion which the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church, now purged of their old evangelicalism, provided." (Richard Ellmann, 1964, p. 41). Certainly Yeats' exposure to the folk and fairy lore of the Irish played its part also.

Yeats entered into the Golden Dawn with great gusto in 1890. He followed its practises, and claimed to have particularly benefited from clairvoyance. For Yeats Magic and Poetry were near synonymous. When in 1892 a friend wrote to him questioning the "healthiness" of his Golden Dawn activity, he wrote back:

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "weak" or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my Poetry, the most important pursuit of my life. Whether it be, or be not, bad for my health can only be decided by one who knows what Magic is and not at all by any amateur. If I had not made Magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen* have ever come to exist. The Mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.

(Yeats in Wade 1954, p. 210).

In 1897, Yeats published *Rosa Alchemica*, an allegory of his studies with the Golden Dawn. But in practically

everything he wrote, the world-view enunciated in the opening quote was evident. Whether he was dealing with fairy-lore or mystic visions, the conviction that this world both symbolises and conceals greater realities was ever obvious in his work. In 1915, he wrote a poem for initiation into the highest grade of the Golden Dawn's outer order:

FOR INITIATION OF 7 = 4

We are weighed down by the blood & the heavy weight  
of the bones

We are bound by flowers, & our feet are entangled in  
the green

And there is deceit in the singing of birds.

It is time to be done with it all

The stars call & all the planets

And the purging fire of the moon

And yonder is the cold silence of cleansing night

May the dawn break, & gates of day be set wide open.

It were useless to belabour the point much further. But what is not so well-known is the degree to which Waite (whom Yeats followed in the 1903 split) must have influenced Yeats' views of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. There can be no doubt of Yeats' disenchantment with both the Protestantism of his youth, and with the Irish Catholic hierarchy. He complained in 1907 of the "ingratiating manner . . . of certain well-educated Catholic priests, a manner one does not think compatible with deep spiritual experience" (Yeats, 1953, p. 282). Two years later he wrote in his diary: "Catholic secondary education destroys, I think, much that the Catholic religion gives. Provincialism destroys the nobility of the Middle Ages" (Yeats, 1953, p. 304).

Certainly, at first glance, such anti-clericalism, read in the light of his comment in *Rosa Alchemica* that ". . . I knew a Christian's ecstasy without his slavery to custom", would imply a Mysticism completely un-Christian. But this would be a superficial reading indeed. In fact, it would appear that his view of the central Christian dogma of the Incarnation, while reminiscent of orthodoxy, was given the esoteric emphasis familiar to readers of Waite's work:

Western civilisation, religion, and magic insist on power and therefore on body, and hence these three doctrines – efficient rule – the Incarnation – thaumaturgy. Eastern thoughts answer to these with indifference to rule, scorn of the flesh, contemplation of the formless. Western minds who follow the Eastern way become weak and vapoury, because unfit for the work forced upon them by Western life. Every symbol is an invocation which produces its equivalent expression in all worlds. the Incarnation invoked modern science and modern efficiency, and individualised emotion. It produced a solidification of all those things that grow from individual will.  
(Yeats, 1953, pp. 292-293)

In one sweep, we see that the causes for Yeats' break with the Theosophical Society (Mme. Blavatsky's eastern interests and her dislike of practical magic experimentation) he believed to be linked directly to the Incarnation.

There are other examples of Yeats' specifically Christian

esotericism, derived from the Golden Dawn and Waite. One must suffice, however. In his essay "Ceremonial Union" (in Waite, 1987, pp. 189-194), Waite describes the unity existing between Order members, a unity which permits them to share, via their ritual connexion, each other's pains and difficulties, and so lessen them. Compare Yeats:

A French miracle-working priest once said to Maud Gonne and myself and to an English Catholic who had come with us, that a certain holy woman had been the "victim" for his village, and that another holy woman who had been "victim" for all France, had given him her Crucifix, because he, too, was doomed to become a "victim".

French psychical research has offered evidence to support the historical proofs that such saints as Lydwine of Schiedam, whose life suggested to Paul Claudel his *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, did really cure disease by taking it upon themselves. As disease was considered the consequence of sin, to take it upon themselves was to copy Christ.

(Yeats, 1953, p. 199)

Thus it was that a few years later, in 1917, he would write comparing the contemporary French Poets like Jammes and Peguy to those of his youth like Mallarmé:

Nothing remained the same but the preoccupation with religion, for these poets submitted everything to the Pope, and all, even Claudel, a proud oratorical man, affirmed that they saw the world with the eyes of vine-dressers and charcoal-burners. It was no longer the soul, self-moving and self-teaching – the magical soul – but Mother France and Mother Church.

Have not my thoughts run a like round, though I have not found my tradition in the Catholic Church, which was not the Church of my childhood, but where the tradition is, as I believe, more universal and more ancient?

(1980, pp. 368-369)

It would appear that as Yeats grew older, he did, at least with one part of his complex psyche, ever more closely synthesise esotericism and mystical Christianity. But he would never be a conventional parishioner – nor did he ever settle publicly into any denomination. He would, until his death, remain critical of clerics of every denomination. Yet it may well be that his final word on the matter might be summed up in an editorial he ghost-wrote for the short-lived artistic journal *To-Morrow* in 1924:

#### TO ALL ARTISTS AND WRITERS

We are Catholics, but of the school of Pope Julius the Second and of the Medician Popes, who ordered Michael-Angelo and Raphael to paint upon the walls of the Vatican, and upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the doctrine of the Platonic Academy of Florence, the reconciliation of Galilee and Parnassus. We proclaim Michaelangelo the most orthodox of men, because he set upon the tomb of the Medici "Dawn" and "Night", vast forms shadowing the strength of antediluvian Patriarchs and the lust of the goat, the whole handiwork of God, even the abounding horn.

We proclaim that we can forgive the sinner, but abhor the atheist, and that we count among atheists bad writers and Bishops of all denominations. "The Holy spirit is an intellectual fountain", and did the Bishops believe that, the Holy Spirit would show itself in decoration and architecture, in daily manners and written style. What devout man can read the Pastorals of our Hierarchy without horror at a style rancid, coarse and vague, like that of the daily papers? We condemn the art and literature of modern Europe. No man can create, as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe, with all his blood and nerve, that man's soul is immortal, for the evidence lies plain to all men that where that belief has declined, men have turned from creation to photography. We condemn, though not without sympathy, those who would escape from banal mechanism through technical investigation and experiment. We proclaim that these bring no escape, for new form comes from new subject matter, and new subject matter must flow from the human soul restored to all its courage, to all its audacity. We dismiss all demagogues and call back the soul to its ancient sovereignty, and declare that it can do whatever it please, being made, as antiquity affirmed, from the imperishable substance of the stars.

(Ellmann, 1964, pp. 246-247)

We are close here to Grillot de Givry's desire to build at Lourdes "a gothic jewel", which would "teach the clergy a lesson in architecture which they need", and Waite's gleeful repetition of St. Martin's maxim "The Church should be the Priest, but the Priest seeks to be the Church." It is just such surface anti-clericalism, concealing a desire to reintegrate the Christian Mysteries into Man's Art and conception of reality – whence they had been sundered by the Enlightenment and the Industrial and French Revolutions – which constituted the quest of that segment of the Golden Dawn with which Yeats, Machen, and Williams had affiliated.

This writer has seen in one source an indication that Yeats' first burial at Roquebrune in 1939 was conducted with Catholic rites. Should this be true, it would mean that he must have been received into that Church on his deathbed; such a reconciliation would not have been with the clergy he regarded as being in the main rationalist, but with the Sacramental and Mystical system they represented. It would mean that he had achieved at his death the Hermetic conjunction he at times approached in his work.

#### Arthur Machen

Where Yeats' attachment to Christianity is tenuous, there is no such ambiguity with Arthur Machen. As Ireland did for Yeats, so Wales cast its glamour over Machen. H.P. Lovecraft wrote of him that: "He has absorbed the mediaeval mystery of dark woods and ancient customs, and is a champion of the Middle Ages in all things – including the Catholic faith" (1973, p. 88). Unlike Yeats, Machen was never estranged from the faith of his youth. But the lore of the neighbourhood of Caerleon upon Usk, one of Arthur's



cities, so it was said, worked powerfully upon his imagination. From this early experience he evolved the credo that "Man is made of mystery and exists for mysteries and visions." This view of life turned him early to writing of the fantastic. In "The Novel of the White Powder", he wrote: "The whole universe, my friend, is a tremendous sacrament; a mystic, ineffable force and energy, veiled by an outward form of matter; and man, and the sun, and the other stars, and the flower of the grass, and the crystal in the test tube, are each and every one as spiritual, as material, and subject to an inner working" (1964, p. 57). On his own, with just his admittedly mystical religion and his Celtic imagination, he had arrived at the same conclusions as the Hermeticists, Neoplatonists, and Ultra-Realists. He expressed much of the same viewpoint in "The Great God Pan":

Look about you, Clarke. You see the mountain, and hill following after hill, as wave on wave, you see the woods and orchards, the fields of ripe corn, and the meadows reaching to the reed beds by the river. You see me standing here beside you, and hear my voice; but I tell you that all these things – yes, from the star that has just shone out in the sky to the solid ground beneath our feet – I say that all these are but dreams and shadows: the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes. There *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, beyond these "chases in Arras, dreams in a career", beyond them all as beyond a veil. (1964, p. 62)

These two stories were written in 1895 and 1896. At the time that Machen wrote them, while he was perhaps temperamentally oriented in the direction of such beliefs, he was not inclined to give them much credence in the workaday world – in any case they were hazy, being based upon general impressions of life rather than experience of Magic. This changed with his entrance into the Golden Dawn in 1898. There he gained practical knowledge of what he had guessed. In an 1899 letter written to French novelist Paul-Jean Toulet, he declared:

When I was writing *Pan* and *The White Powder*, I did not believe that such strange things had ever happened in real life, or could ever have happened. Since then, and quite recently, I have had certain experiences in my own life which have entirely changed my point of view in these matters. Henceforward I am quite convinced that nothing is impossible on this Earth. I need scarcely add, I suppose, that none of the experiences I have had has any connexion whatever with such impostures as spiritualism or theosophy. But I believe we are living in a world of the greatest mystery full of unsuspected and quite astonishing things. (Pauwels and Bergier, 1964, pp. 212-213)

In the 1903 split, Machen also followed Waite, whose more Christianised esotericism he apparently found congenial. Three years later, a new collection of his fiction appeared. While it included both of his older pieces, new material was included, in which obtains a certain shift of tone. In the first two works, he had been very vague about

the shape of things, as we have seen. There is in part an almost Manichean quality to his description of reality – as well as a certain tentativeness. But the post-Golden Dawn material is at once more strictly in line with Christian dogma, and more authoritative. So he commences "The White People" with "Sorcery and sanctity . . . these are the only realities. Each is an ecstasy, a withdrawal from the common life" (Machen, 1964, p. 116). After declaring that real sin is an obscene alteration of reality, he writes, "Holiness requires as great, or almost as great, an effort; but holiness works on lines that *were* natural once; it is an effort to regain the ecstasy that was before the Fall. But sin is an effort to gain the ecstasy and the knowledge that pertain alone to angels, and in making this effort man becomes a demon" (p. 119). Similarly, a character in "The Red Hand" remarks "There are Sacraments of evil as well as good about us, and we live and move to my belief in an unknown world, a place where there are caves and shadows and dwellers in twilight" (Machen, 1961, pp. 170-171).

As for Waite, so too for Machen, the Holy Grail was an important theme. Symbolising at once the Eucharist, the Crucifixion, and the ecstasy Machen believed was the heart of Christianity, he returned to it again and again. In "The Great Return", he described the Grail's coming to a remote Welsh village during World War I, and the veil it removes during its short stay from the world around us:

. . . if there be paradise in meat and in drink, so much the more is there paradise in the scent of the green leaves at evening and in the appearance of the sea and in the redness of the sky; and there came to me a certain vision of a real world about us all the while, of a language that was only secret because we would not take the trouble to listen to it and to discern it. (Machen, 1964, p. 222)

The presence of the Grail causes not only miracles but clarity of vision:

Old men felt young again, eyes that had been growing dim now saw clearly, and saw a world that was like paradise, the same world, it is true, but a world rectified and glowing, as if an inner flame shone in all things, and behind all things.

And the difficulty in recording this state is this, that it is so rare an experience that no set language to express it is in existence. A shadow of its raptures and ecstasies is found in the highest poetry; there are phrases in ancient books telling of the Celtic saints that dimly hint at it; some of the old Italian masters of painting had known it, for the light of it shines in their skies and about the battlements of their cities that are founded on magic hills. But these are but broken hints. (Machen, 1964, p. 237)

This union of the Catholic with the Hermetic, of the Christian with the Esoteric, would, it must be again repeated, have made perfect sense to the Ultra-Realist, the Humanist, or the peasant. For Arthur Machen, it required whatever experiences he gained in the Golden Dawn to transmute the iron of impression into the gold of conviction. What began as instinct on his part was, through the medium of his time in

the Golden Dawn, made into experience. This in turn gives his later works the feeling of one who *knows* whereof he speaks. Yet it also presents those of us comfortable with neat compartments marked “religion”, “magic”, and “literature”, with tremendous problems of classification.

So it is that Gunnar Urang in *Shadows of Heaven* is quite perplexed by Machen’s definitions of literature in his *Hieroglyphics*, which he quotes on p. 150:

If we, being wondrous, journey through a wonderful world, if all our joys are from above, from the other world where the Shadowy Companion walks, then no mere making of the likeness of the external shape will be our art, no veracious document will be our truth; but to us, initiated, the Symbol will be offered, and we shall take the Sign and adore, beneath the outward and perhaps unlovely accidents, the very Presence and eternal indwelling of God.

“But”, Urang grumbles in reply, “he proposes another, quite different test: ‘literature is the expression, through the artistic medium of words, of the dogmas of the Catholic Church, and that which in any way is out of harmony with these dogmas is not literature;’ for ‘Catholic dogma is merely the witness, under a special symbolism of the enduring facts of human nature and the universe.’”

For Machen, however, as for Yeats (at least, for Yeats when he was in the mood in which he wrote the earlier referred-to *To-Morrow* editorial), these two tests are not different; rather they are the same. This synthesis between Christianity and ecstasy and the Hermetic would have been well recognised by Bl. Raymond Lully or Pico della Mirandola. That it is not to us tells us much about the avenues in which religious and literary thought have flowed since then. But Machen was able to see the synthesis – precisely because of his experience with the Golden Dawn.

### Charles Williams

Charles Williams stands out among the three both because of his overtly theological *oeuvre*, and because of his close connexion with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. He joined the Golden Dawn in 1917, and was active for at least five years thereafter. He too was attached to Waite’s group, and, as we shall see, some major themes in his work may be derived from that source.

There can be no doubt that Williams’ novels owed their themes to areas studied by the Golden Dawn. *Shadows of Ecstasy* pulsates with the Hermetic dictum, “as above, so below”. *War in Heaven* concerns the Grail, *Many Dimensions* the Philosopher’s Stone, and *The Place of the Lion* the Platonic archetypes. We are confronted with the Tarot deck in *The Greater Trumps*, necromancy in *All Hallow’s Eve*, and ghosts, witchcraft, and damnation in *Descent into Hell*.

Despite this, it is usual to downplay Williams’ membership in the Golden Dawn as a factor in his artistic vision. His close friend, Alice Hadfield, remarks:

In the end, what did Waite’s Golden Dawn mean to him? Surely his outlook and philosophy were not generated, or indeed much affected, by it. He was thirty-one when he joined and his mind was already

well-based, developed and directed. His three following works, *Divorce*, *Windows of Night*, and *Outlines of Romantic Theology*, scatter the shadows of such a suggestion. Referring long afterwards to the making of a magical circle against the dangers of the Dark, he wrote that he still felt the darkness, though it is “known to be merely untrue.”

(1983, p. 30)

This is a view echoed by many other Williams scholars. The distinguished critic Thomas Howard declares:

Williams was not interested in the occult at all except during a brief period in his early life. One might be pardoned for forming the impression from his novels that he was quite caught up in the occult, but this would be a mistake. His imagination was aroused by certain ideas that crop up in occult lore, but he remained a plain Anglican churchman all his life. He accepted the taboos that rule out forays into the occult.

(1983, p. 9)

While both of these statements reflect a very commonly held view, emphasising separation between the esoteric and Christianity, it is in this case based upon a false understanding of what the Golden Dawn was all about. The activities of its best known non-primarily-literary member, Aleister Crowley, have served to bring upon the Order enormous discredit, despite the fact of his early expulsion therefrom. As has been observed the whole point of the Order was, in essence, to reveal experientially to its members the subtler realities of the cosmos. Assuming Christianity to be literally true, such experimentation could only reveal this. We are very far here from the kind of opportunistic evocation castigated by Williams in *Many Dimensions*, *The Greater Trumps*, and *All Hallow’s Eve*.

It is doubtless true that Williams came to the Golden Dawn with a fully formed world-view; so too did Machen and Yeats, for only such would be interested in joining this kind of a group anyway. What the Golden Dawn offered to these men and their colleagues was (a) a coherent philosophy of the esoteric; and (b) some type of actual experience which they, at any rate, accepted as objective factual confirmation of this philosophy (obviously, the exact nature of such confirmation is open to question).

Carpenter admits that “Waite himself discouraged the Order of the Golden Dawn from practising ‘Magia’, the Renaissance term for white magic, and certainly he was opposed to any meddling in ‘Goetia’ or black magic” (1979, p. 82). Neither Williams, Yeats, nor Machen appear to have done much vis-a-vis evocation of demons, in keeping with Waite’s strictures. Presumably the ritual, meditation, clairvoyance, and divination that was practised was sufficient to confirm the Order’s teachings to them. The result has been described by Urang:

Charles Williams, in short, is a thoroughgoing supernaturalist. He predicates modes of existence other than those perceived by the senses and known by reason and takes for granted that the natural order proceeds from and is dependent upon a reality which is invisible and which operates by laws transcending those

discoverable in the physical world. He is eager to insist, however, that the supernatural is not divorced from the natural; one is not to escape from sensory illusion into spiritual reality. It is rather the true form of the natural, so that one knows the supernatural through images within the natural. Shakespeare, says Williams, conceived the whole supernatural life in terms of the natural, and his work should stand as a rebuke to "arrogant supernaturalists".

(1971, p. 56)

This is as true of Machen and Yeats as it is of Williams; it is an outlook directly traceable to the influence of the Golden Dawn.

There are many specific instances one could cite of particular traces of the Golden Dawn in Williams' work. For example, his conception in *Taliessin through Logres* of the Map of Europe corresponding to the human body is obviously connected with the sephiroth of the Qabalistic tree of life. But it is Williams' central doctrines of co-inherence, exchange, and substitution which figure in and inform all his prose fiction which most point up his Hermetic legacy. Alice Hadfield defines them thusly:

*Co-inherence.* Christ gave his life for us, and his risen life is in each one if we will to accept it. Simply as men and women, without being self-conscious or portentous, we can share in this life within the divine co-inherence of the Trinity, and in so doing live as members one of another. In our degrees of power, intelligence, love, or suffering, we are not divided from God or each other, for Christ's nature is not divided.

*Exchange.* The whole natural and social life of the world works as a process of living by and with each other, for good or bad. We cannot be born without physical exchange, nor can we live without it. But we can each day choose or grudge it, in personal contacts, in neighbourhood, and in our society under the law. To practise this approach to co-inherence we can find strength in the risen power of Christ linking all men.

*Substitution.* Another way of approach to co-inherence is by compact to bear another's burden. One can take by love the worry of another, or hold a terror, as one member of Christ's life helping, through that life, another member in trouble.

Williams saw these three principles as operating not only between the living in space and time, but also between the living and the dead – or the unborn.

(Hadfield, 1983, p. 32)

Here we see a proposal strikingly like Waite's in "Ceremonial Union", and reminiscent of Yeats' observations regarding "victims". This is deeply esoteric matter here. Yet it is also profoundly Christian, being a restatement of the idea of the "Mystical Body of Christ", exemplified by St. Paul: "We being many are one bread, one body; for we all partake of the one bread" (I Cor., x, 17). Here we see at once the identification of the Church with her founder, with the Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, binding all together.

In time, Williams felt the need to give some kind of structure to like-minded friends. He founded in 1939 a

loosely organised "Order of the Companions of the Co-inherence". To its membership were given seven guidelines. One of these advocated the study "of the Co-inherence of the Holy and Blessed Trinity, of the Two Natures in the Single Person, of the Mother and Son, of the communicated Eucharist, and of the whole Catholic Church" (Hadfield, 1983, p. 174). Another set down the Order's four feasts: the Annunciation, Trinity Sunday, the Transfiguration, and All Souls (Hadfield, 1983, p. 174). All of this is extremely reminiscent of Waite's version of the Golden Dawn. It is interesting to note that the Golden Dawn observed five feasts; these were the four solstices and equinoxes, and their high festival, the feast of Corpus Christi.

All of these concepts, applied to Christianity, may seem peculiar – particularly as expressed in Williams' fiction. Dr. Howard tells us, ". . . his religious vision was not idiosyncratic. It was a matter of traditional Christian orthodoxy. But his way of *picturing* it all was emphatically idiosyncratic" (1983, p. 17). But it is only idiosyncratic if one is referring to Aristotelian and/or post-Reformation forms of Christianity. Urang (p. 156) tells us that, for Williams, "Particularity must submit to the Idea, individual experience to dogma." Further, "the unity he celebrates is one attained by including the natural within the supernatural. He focuses upon the structures of the natural and derives an 'ontology of love'; but he locates and interprets these structures by means of the insights available in the supernaturalist frame of reference." The Double Truth (the idea that what is true in theology may be false in philosophy) which has undergirded much of Western Christianity for a long time is indeed alien to all of this. But the Fathers, the Ultra-Realists, the Classical Humanists, and the orthodox Romantics would all have recognised this concept. However Williams initially arrived at it, there can be no doubt that he saw it codified and demonstrated while a member of the Golden Dawn.

## Conclusion

One may legitimately wonder what influence the Golden Dawn had on Lewis and Tolkien via Williams. Certainly *That Hideous Strength* is universally acknowledged to have been greatly affected by Lewis' acquaintance with Williams. Its description of the Company of St. Anne's is certainly evocative of Williams' Companions of the Co-inherence; from afar off it carries therefore also the mark of the Golden Dawn.

Ithell Colquhoun, a relative of Golden Dawn co-founder MacGregor Mathers, opines that "*The Lord of the Rings* has a tinge of the Golden Dawn though this may be filtered through E.R. Eddison rather than Williams, since passages near the beginning of *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) are so pervaded by the Golden Dawn atmosphere as to make one speculate on its author's esoteric background" (Colquhoun, 1975, p. 234). But the well-known suspicion J.R.R. Tolkien had for Williams' ideas in this area leads one to suspect a rather different source for the "tinge" Colquhoun detects. Tolkien was a cultural Catholic, deeply read in both folk-lore and in pre-Reformation literature. These were themselves

suffused, albeit more or less unconsciously, with the magical or Hermetic world-view, of which, after all, the Golden Dawn was only one exponent.

Through it, however, and more particularly through the influence of Yeats, Machen, and Williams (to say nothing of Blackwood, Nesbit, etc.), the Hermetic/Neoplatonic world-view has come to be commonplace throughout fantasy literature. Exiled from mainstream Christian theology, academic philosophy, and the sciences, it has nevertheless subsisted, and even thrived – at least among readers of such literature.

But developments in such areas as Depth Psychology and the New Physics suggest that it may indeed have a validity beyond the pages of fiction. The popularity of the New Age might notify Christianity of a hunger unfed by either social activism or doctrinal rationalism.

The Christian Hermeticism encompassed by the Golden Dawn, like all such Hermeticism, might well be symbolised by a scene in the Medieval *Quest of the Holy Grail* (Matarasso, 1986, p. 275), wherein Joseph of Arimathea took from the Vessel a host made in the likeness of bread. As he raised it aloft there descended from above a figure like to a child, whose countenance glowed and blazed as bright as fire; and he entered into the bread, which quite distinctly took on human form before the

eyes of those assembled there. When Josephus had stood for some while holding his burden up to view, he replaced it in the Holy Vessel.

In a real sense, the whole conundrum regarding an authentic understanding of the Golden Dawn's teaching may be symbolised by the Ace of Cups in the Tarot Deck. Considered merely as a fortune telling device, it can mean plans or latent thoughts, ready to be put into action but whose meaning is still hidden. On a higher level it is said to mean psychic protection and knowledge.

But its appearance suggests a world of meaning. For it shows a chalice held by a hand descending from a cloud. The Dove of the Holy Ghost conveys directly into it a wafer bearing a cross, and out from the chalice pour into the sea streams of pure and living water. We have at once a representation of the Sacramental system (the Eucharist and Baptism), and of the Holy Grail. Two mysteries, one attainable only at the end of a long quest, and the other so near as to be taken for granted. Yet they are in fact one.

This is deepest Christian Hermeticism indeed. It is to the honour of the Golden Dawn that the Order both developed an authentic strand of such Hermeticism, and attracted members of the calibre necessary to convey such to a world not without need of it.

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