

Mysteries of Sex in the House of the Hidden Light: Arthur Edward Waite and the Kabbalah

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The British poet, amateur historian, and prodigious author Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942)¹ is not easy to categorize. He has often been perceived as a typical representative of Victorian occultism, and for good reasons, given his life-long involvement in organizations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or his self-created Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. From his own mature perspective, however, the magical pursuits of occultist organizations should be rejected in favor of an idiosyncratic form of Christian *mysticism*; and in this regard, Waite's development is reminiscent of that of one of his chief heroes, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803) (the 'unknown philosopher'), who, in a similar manner, had distanced himself from the practical theurgy of Martinez de Pasqually's (1709 or 1726/27-1774) Elus Coens and its successor movements, in favor of a pious inner-directed Christianity inspired by the Christian theosophy of Jacob Böhme (1575-1624).² The precise nature of Waite's intimate beliefs is not easy to discern, to say the least. His strange, difficult, and ponderous style of writing, his infuriatingly vague way of referring to what he saw as the mysterious reality at work in religious history, his continuous revisions of earlier writings, the fact that he never attempted a synthetic overview of 'the secret tradition' he believed to be at work in history, and his refusal to disclose his inner thoughts in writing or even to those who were close to him – all these factors conspire to keep his actual perspective frustratingly elusive. Even his intimate friend Arthur Machen (1863-1947) was at a loss: 'I have known my very dear friend A. E. Waite for 38 years; and I have not

¹ For Waite's life see R.A. Gilbert, *A.E. Waite: Magician of Many Parts*, Wellingborough 1987.

² See Waite's own biography of Saint-Martin (A.E. Waite, *The Unknown Philosopher: The Life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin and the Substance of His Transcendental Doctrine* [orig. 1901], Blauvelt 1970) and the modern study by Nicole Jacques-Lefèvre, *Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, le philosophe inconnu (1743-1803)*, Paris 2003.

the faintest notion as to his real beliefs'.³ Perhaps the clearest statement appears in Waite's autobiography *Shadows of Life and Thought* (1938), where he discusses his initiatic drama 'The Book of the King's Dole', published in his *Strange Houses of Sleep* (1906):

I believe to this day that ['The Book of the King's Dole'] is a pregnant illustration of truth in the spiritual world; that there is a Church behind the Church on a more inward plane of being; and that it is formed of those who have opened the iridescent shell of external doctrine and have found that which abides within it. It is a Church of more worlds than one, for some of the Community are among us here and now and some are in a stage beyond the threshold of the physical senses. Eckartshausen spoke of it as he could in clouded terms. Loupuhim [sic] was far too much under the influence of the outward forms to be called a chief witness; but at least he bore his testimony, from however far away. There may be well enough such a Holy Assembly at the back of some other great religions. If so, they constitute a Blessed Company in a realm of the Blessed Life. It does not follow that they are in direct communication with the Centre, but they are in the luminous shadow thereof.⁴

This mysterious community was believed to consist of 'men of desire' (*hommes de désir*, a terminology adopted from Saint-Martin) whose aspiration was to reverse the effects of the Fall from divine union by means of a mystical process of interior regeneration.⁵ Waite referred to those who had managed to achieve that goal (whether in this life or in the next) as the 'Holy Assembly', and suspected or believed that the members of this invisible community of mystical initiates had somehow been at work discreetly, in a hidden 'inward' manner, since ancient times, through historical traditions such as alchemy and Kabbalah.

³ Arthur Machen to Colin Summerford in 1925, as quoted in Gilbert, *A.E. Waite: Magician*, p. 163.

⁴ A.E. Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought: A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs*, London 1938, pp. 170-171. References are to Ivan Vladimirovich Lopukhin, *Quelques traits de l'Église Intérieure, de l'unique chemin, qui mène à la vérité, et des diverses routes, qui conduisent à l'erreur et à la perte*, St. Petersburg 1798; and to various works by Karl von Eckartshausen (1752-1803); see the section on the notion of the 'interior church' in Antoine Faivre, *Eckartshausen et la théosophie chrétienne*, Paris 1969, pp. 374-386.

⁵ On the history of this notion, see Mike A. Zuber, 'Spiritual Alchemy from the Age of Jacob Boehme to Mary Atwood', Ph.D. dissertation: University of Amsterdam 2017.

Waite as a Scholar of Kabbalah

If Waite's position between occultist magic and Christian mysticism is quite ambiguous, one can say the same about his position halfway between the perspective of a practitioner and that of a scholar and historian. Without the benefit of any proper academic training, he made his name as an extremely productive amateur historian, publishing a long series of voluminous and erudite books on Rosicrucianism, the Occult Sciences, Magic, Kabbalah, Mysticism, the Graal tradition, Freemasonry, and the Tarot.⁶ Since these domains had been seriously neglected by the academy throughout the nineteenth century, Waite had very little competition, and his oeuvre came to dominate the English-language book market for historical scholarship in what we nowadays refer to as Western esotericism.⁷ The negative effects have been considerable, as pointed out by Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman for the domain of alchemy:

[Waite's editions] are almost invariably based upon corrupt editions and offer texts butchered to unrecognizability by the silent excision of large portions of material and adulterated by the addition of occultist elements and slants completely alien to the originals. [...] Waite's corrupt translations were used regularly by historians of science until the middle of this century, as witnessed by their frequent citation in articles in *Ambix* and *Isis*, as well as in scholarly books; some authors still continue to refer to them. Nearly all have been reprinted and are currently available in inexpensive editions.⁸

Among the various fields covered by Waite's researches, it is only in the domain of Kabbalah that scholarly standards began to improve at a relatively early date, due to the work of Gershom Scholem. In *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, he provided a remarkably balanced and fair assessment, pointing out that if well-meaning but insufficiently qualified amateurs such as Waite could have such an impact on the study of Kabbalah, this meant that better qualified scholars had not been doing their job:

⁶ Complete overview in R.A. Gilbert, *A.E. Waite: A Bibliography*, Wellingborough 1983.

⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 247-252.

⁸ Lawrence Principe and William R. Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe* ed. W. R. Newman and A. Grafton, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, pp. 1-37, 385-431, here p. 395.

It is not to the credit of Jewish scholarship that the works of the few writers who were really informed on the subject were never printed, and in some cases were not even recorded, since there was nobody to take an interest. Nor have we reason to be proud of the fact that the greater part of the ideas and views which show a real insight into the world of Kabbalism, closed as it was to the rationalism prevailing in the Judaism of the nineteenth century, were expressed by Christian scholars of a mystical bent, such as the Englishman Arthur Edward Waite in our days [...] It is a pity that the fine philosophical intuition and natural grasp of such students lost their edge because they lacked all critical sense as to historical and philological data in this field, and therefore failed completely when they had to handle problems bearing on the facts. [I]t is all the more regrettable that [Waite's *Secret Doctrine in Israel*] is marred by an uncritical attitude towards facts of history and philology.⁹

In an earlier review of Waite's *Holy Kabbalah*, published in 1931, Scholem had been even more explicit. He described Waite not only as 'one of England's most outstanding mystical writers', but as one who 'at the same time [...] has an understanding – so rare among authors who are standing on the ground of mysticism – for the importance of historical criticism'. Nevertheless, Waite's sincere attempts at doing serious historical research had been to no avail:

[A]lthough [Waite's *Holy Kabbalah*] unquestionably towers high above everything else that has been written about kabbalah from theosophical and mystical perspectives, in this book we are dealing, nevertheless, with one of the most disturbing documents of the catastrophic conflict between mystical and critical intuition. Admittedly, as he often stresses himself, the author is writing for readers of the first kind (and for these, his merits in the direction of criticism remain considerable), but the entire nature of the book will undoubtedly cause it to be disseminated more broadly and to be brought to the attention of scholarly-oriented readers as well.¹⁰

And that, of course, is the problem. Scholem expressed respect for Waite's 'amazing diligence' in seeking to discern the meaning of Kabbalistic literature from the sources that were available to him, but had to conclude that all these efforts were wasted because Waite lacked the elementary technical expertise needed for the job. Amazing as it may be for an author who published such large tomes on a Jewish tradition, the sobering fact is

⁹ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1974, p. 2 (and see also his further statements on p. 212).

¹⁰ Gershom G. Scholem, 'Review of A.E. Waite, *The Holy Kabbalah*', *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 7 (1931), pp. 633-638, here pp. 633-634.

that Waite did not know Hebrew or Aramaic and relied entirely on translations: his original source was Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's (1636-1689) *Kabbala Denudata*, eventually supplemented by Jean de Pauly's (1860-1903) French *Zohar* translation, which caused him to adopt that author's frequent Christian misinterpretations along with his outright forgeries.¹¹ No less fatally, Scholem continued, Waite appeared to be ignorant of almost all the modern literature on Kabbalah, so that what he wrote about its origins, development, and decline was 'for 80% wholly without foundation'.¹² Finally, although Waite claimed to have searched hard for manuscripts, he was blissfully unaware of the relevant holdings even in the British Museum, not to mention manuscripts in Oxford, Munich, and so on. Scholem's conclusions were therefore unavoidable: 'it is only with sincere regret about the fatal disproportion between [Waite's] great labors and the depth of understanding that was possible for him, on the one hand, and [his] so sadly deficient knowledge of original sources and a useful historical-critical foundation, on the other hand, that one will have to put this book aside'.¹³ In sum: even though Waite's sense of historical criticism may have been superior to that of other contemporary esoteric writers on Kabbalah, it still remained extremely inadequate. He simply lacked the proper instruments needed for the task of really understanding Jewish Kabbalah. Nevertheless, in spite of these failings, by relying on sheer intuition he occasionally got it right. Significantly, as will be seen, Scholem found this to be especially true in regard to (in Waite's formulation) 'the mystery of sex'. In Scholem's words, 'Valuable in this book is the unprejudiced and penetrating attempt to understand the sexual symbolism of the Kabbalah, in which Waite, with good intuition, has perceived one of the kabbala's central positions'.¹⁴ To this we will return.

As regards Waite's essential contribution to Kabbalah scholarship, I do not think there is much to add to Scholem's verdict. However, it may be interesting to take a closer look at his position halfway between nineteenth-century occultist views of Kabbalah, on the one hand, and modern scholarly views, on the other. In this regard, one had hoped to profit from Liz Greene's

¹¹ Waite defended his reliance on De Pauly against Robert Eisler (1882-1949) and Gershom Scholem in A.E. Waite, *The Holy Kabbalah*, London 1929, p. 8 nt 1.

¹² Scholem, 'Review', p. 635.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 638.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 638.

voluminous recent monograph about the Kabbalah in British occultism,¹⁵ but unfortunately it does not help us much further. Greene herself appears to adhere to a perennialist view of ‘the’ Kabbalah that dismisses differences between medieval Jewish Kabbalah, early modern Christian Kabbalah, or Victorian occultist Kabbalah as mere surface appearances that cause us to lose sight of their universal essence.¹⁶ Instead, she sets out to vindicate or rehabilitate the occultist Kabbalah as an authentic manifestation of ‘the real Kabbalah’, against the perceived threat of modern criticism and its emphasis on historical specificity.¹⁷ The essential message of modern textual criticism still does not seem to have sunk in, for Greene follows Waite’s example in assuming that one can speak with authority about the ‘real’ nature of Jewish Kabbalah even if one cannot read the relevant languages: ‘I make no claim to any expertise in reading medieval Hebrew manuscripts; Kabbalistic texts are cited in their English translations’.¹⁸ It remains a mystery to me how, on this basis, one can make such firm statements as she does about the essential

¹⁵ Liz Greene, *Magi and Maggidim: The Kabbalah in British Occultism 1860-1940*, Ceredigion 2012, pp. 301-332.

¹⁶ Regarding Christian Kabbalah, Greene claims that its ‘fundamentals’ do not differ from those of Jewish Kabbalah: ‘What is Christian about the ‘Christian’ Kabbalah is the intent of its adherents, rather than the Kabbalah itself’ (ibid., pp. 10-11). How and where the evidence for this ‘Kabbalah itself’ is to be found, and how it should be distinguished from the historically specific perspectives or ‘intent’ of those who write about it is not explained. Misrepresenting my argument about nineteenth-century concepts – common among both scholars and occultists before Scholem – of a ‘universal Kabbalah’ with non-Jewish roots, Greene seems to assume that it implies a denial on my part of contact and exchange between Jews and their neighbours in earlier periods, or of Greek and Hellenistic influences on Kabbalistic and Hasidic writings (ibid, p. 8). For the actual argument, which makes no such claims, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah: Adolphe Franck and Eliphaz Lévi’, *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. B. Huss, M. Pasi and K. von Stuckrad, Leiden / Boston 2010, pp. 107-128.

¹⁷ Given these essentialist assumptions, it is no surprise that she rejects the idea of an ‘empirical’ methodology grounded in textual criticism (Greene, *Magi and Maggidim*, pp. 23-32). More puzzling is why she finds it necessary to accuse its representatives, without providing any arguments, of ‘methodolatry’ and exclusivist or doctrinal leanings (‘espousing an academic paradigm as though it were a biblical truth’, ibid., 25). Unfortunately, Greene’s section ‘Methodologies, Methodolatries, and Metanarratives’ is riddled with so many inaccuracies and misunderstandings of the approaches she dislikes that it seems pointless to refute them.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

unity of ‘the’ Kabbalah from Jewish medieval sources to those of modern Christian occultists.

Even though Waite’s Kabbalah scholarship fell short of the standards of modern historical criticism, it was still a considerable step forward compared to the original occultist position. The Kabbalah assumed a central place in nineteenth-century occultism thanks to the works of its virtual founder, Alphonse-Louis Constant, better known as Eliphas Lévi (1810-1875). In an article published in 2010,¹⁹ I analyzed this author in connection with his main counterpart on the academic side, Adolphe Franck (1810-1893). I showed that Franck and Lévi both thought of the Kabbalah as a universal tradition with non-Jewish ‘Zoroastrian’ origins and I argued that Lévi’s perspective was grounded essentially in the *prisca theologia* tradition of the Renaissance, derived from Patristic foundations that were well known to him from his Roman Catholic upbringing and his education for the priesthood.²⁰ Lévi’s understanding of Kabbalah was a high Romantic literary invention of considerable brilliance and originality, although obviously lacking in any historical foundation. Waite, for his part, noted in his *Doctrine and Literature of the Kabalah* (1902) – to which we will return – that ‘few have approached the subject with sympathies in the direction of occult science and philosophy who do not owe their introduction to Eliphas Lévi’,²¹ but then proceeded to criticize him at length. Just a few years earlier, Waite had still believed that Lévi ‘had received initiation into a school of traditional knowledge’,²² but in the meantime he had clearly become disillusioned: ‘I do not think that he [Lévi] ever made an independent statement upon any historical fact to which the least confidence could be given with prudence’.²³ The only point on which he still agreed with his French predecessor was precisely Lévi’s non-historical perennialism (‘that there is a religion behind all religions’); but he had come to dismiss Lévi’s assumption that this religion ‘is the veiled mystery of Kabalism, from which all have issued and into which all return’.²⁴ Instead, he now held that the

¹⁹ Hanegraaff, ‘Beginnings’.

²⁰ For this point, cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 244-247. In terms of my analysis in *ibid.*, pp. 12-17 and pp. 28ff (esp. pp. 53-68), Lévi’s perspective on Kabbalah can be seen as a latter-day permutation of the ‘Zoroastrian’ variant of Platonic Orientalism (rather than the ‘Mosaic’ variant typical of Pico della Mirandola’s original conception of Christian Kabbalah).

²¹ A.E. Waite, *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabalah*, London 1902, p. 398.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 399.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 399-400.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

Jewish Kabbalah was merely one of multiple channels through which the original ‘secret doctrine’ could be accessed.

Waite’s Three Books on Kabbalah

It would seem that Waite began his Kabbalistic studies out of a sincere belief in the occultist doctrine of a universal Kabbalah as proclaimed by Eliphas Lévi. Eventually, however, he came to dismiss it as incompatible with what he learned from the sources at his disposal. Scholem is quite right in pointing out that, in spite of his evident deficiencies, he still had a much better sense of historical criticism than was usual among occultists or mystics of his generation, and it is on this basis that he began to draw conclusions of his own and create a new synthesis as best as he could. The first product of his researches was ready by 1899, but publication was delayed due to a disastrous fire at the building of the Press, which destroyed the sheets and type. It was finally published in 1902, not by the original publisher Redway but by the Theosophical Publishing Society in London, under the title *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabalah*. Waite’s second large book on Kabbalah was published eleven years later, in 1913, as *The Secret Doctrine in Israel: A Study of the Zohar and its Connections*. His third and final volume on the subject, *The Holy Kabbalah* was published in 1929; however, this was not an entirely new book but a thoroughly reworked, revised, and updated combination of materials taken from the 1902 and 1913 volumes.

In all three books, Waite presented the Kabbalah as consisting essentially of *Sefer Yesirah* and the *Zohar*. He had a very restrictive view of what Kabbalah was all about: for instance, he dismissed magical elements as extraneous to its real nature (e.g. ‘it is by the perversion of the Kabalah that we have obtained the grimoires’²⁵) and ridiculed exegetical techniques such as *gematria* as silly aberrations (‘these solemn follies, which appear so childish and ridiculous at the present day’²⁶). About non-*Zoharic* Kabbalists such as Abraham Abulafia (‘a quixotic adventurer and a Messianic enthusiast, whose opinions it is unnecessary to determine’²⁷) or Isaac Luria (‘a wild fantasist’ whose doctrine ‘is greatly curious, yet fitly described as a reverie’²⁸) he had not much positive to say.

Chapters one to six and nine to eleven of *The Holy Kabbalah* were largely reworked versions of *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabalah*.

²⁵ Waite, *Doctrine and Literature*, p. 445 (and see the whole of his chapter ‘The Kabalah and Magic’, *ibid.*, pp. 438-449).

²⁶ Waite, *Holy Kabbalah*, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 413, 420.

Regarding the contents of these chapters, basically, Waite did not change his mind between 1899 and 1929. Chapters seven and eight, however, were new. Here one sees the influence of Waite's analysis of the *Zohar* that had been published as chapters five to seventeen of *The Secret Doctrine in Israel*. The main factor that accounts for the development of Waite's ideas between 1899 and 1929 was Waite's thorough study of Jean de Pauly's French *Zohar* translation, published in six volumes from 1906-1911.²⁹ This work convinced him of the centrality to *Zoharic* mysticism of what he came to refer to as 'the mystery of sex'. Chapter seven of *The Holy Kabbalah* (based upon chapters five to fifteen of *The Secret Doctrine in Israel*) was titled 'Ways of God with Man', and discussed the myth of the earthly paradise, the serpent of Genesis, the Fall of the angels and the Fall of Man, the legend of the deluge, the covenant with Abraham, Moses and the Law, the Temple in Jerusalem, the expectation of the Messiah, the doctrine of *Sheol*, and ideas about resurrection. Chapters sixteen and seventeen of his *Zohar* analysis of 1913 were set apart and turned into a separate chapter in *The Holy Kabbalah*. This chapter eight was titled 'The Higher Secret Doctrine', and it was here that Waite discussed what he saw as the true heart of *Zoharic* and hence of Kabbalistic mysticism. These two chapters discussed 'the mystery of Shekinah' and 'the mystery of sex', and we have seen that even Scholem spoke of them with a remarkable degree of respect. Interestingly, we will see that precisely in these discussions of Kabbalistic eroticism, Waite came closest to expressing his personal understanding of 'true mysticism'. That understanding, however, was ultimately grounded not in Waite's study of Jewish Kabbalah but in intimate personal experiences that had very little to do with Jewish tradition. In all likelihood, or so I would suggest, it is only *because* of those experiences that De Pauly's discussion of Kabbalistic sex practices had such an impact and made so much sense to Waite. In her dissertation discussed above, Liz Greene rightly points towards a connection between 'the mystery of sex' and a remarkable book published in 1904 by Waite together with his friend Arthur Machen and titled *The House of the Hidden Light*.³⁰ Although my interpretation differs from hers, I agree that this title is crucial to Waite's oeuvre as a whole. So what is this book all about, and what is its relevance to Waite's Kabbalah?

²⁹ Jean de Pauly, *Sepher ha-Zohar (Le livre de la splendeur)*, 6 vols., Paris 1906-1911.

³⁰ Greene, *Magi and Maggidim*, pp. 326-327.

The Transformation of Desire

The House of the Hidden Light is an extreme rarity. Published in 1904 by ‘The High Fratres Filius Aquarum and Elias Artista’, its print-run was limited to exactly three copies, two for the authors and one for the publisher. It is therefore fortunate that the leading Waite specialist R. A. Gilbert published a new edition (limited to 350 hand-signed copies) in 2003. The book consists of thirty-five letters that were exchanged between Waite (‘Frater Elias Artista’) and Arthur Machen (‘Frater Filius Aquarum’), preceded by an Introduction titled ‘The Pastoral’ and two Tables of Contents. As seen from the opening sentences of ‘The Pastoral’, *The House of the Hidden Light* presents itself as a book of deep secrets and mysteries:

It is known, beloved, among those who have partaken of the mysteries, who have eaten the bread of angels and have communicated in the cup of memory, that Nature is a secret doctrine variously expounded in accordance with the hierarchic distributions of the True Word, with the symbols and the substitutes thereof. But the magisterial interpretation is classed among the King’s secrets, whereof it has been said – *Abscondere bonum est*. It is not to be supposed that such a secret is attained except hardly or that it is disclosed lightly, but there are orders of initiation and degrees of reception by which the proselytes are led upwards, and are guided in the recovery of those treasures of which they are the heirs, natural and elected.³¹

This sample of mystery language is typical for the book as a whole. So what are those mysteries, secrets, and treasures? What is this book all about? The thirty-five letters exchanged between Waite and Machen refer to what the two friends saw as their *annus mirabilis*, which had begun in the autumn of 1899. The artist and occultist Ithell Colquhoun has suggested in 1975 that they had been experimenting with ‘sexual congress with praeternatural beings’,³² but Robert Gilbert has shown convincingly that this is a myth.³³ While the book does have a real ‘hidden’ meaning, it refers to practices that – at first sight at least – would seem to be remarkably non-esoteric. Waite and Machen had quite simply been enjoying a series of late-night evenings of heavy drinking (alcohol, absinth) and wide-ranging discussions in

³¹ Anonymus, *The House of the Hidden Light, Manifested and Set Forth in Certain Letters Communicated from a Lodge of the Adepts by The High Fratres Filius Aquarum and Elias Artista* [orig. 1904], Carlton-in-Coverdale 2003, pp. 1-2.

³² Ithell Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and ‘The Golden Dawn’*, London 1975, p. 288.

³³ R.A. Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, Anonymus, *House of the Hidden Light*, pp. v-vi.

London taverns, together with two intimate female friends and some other companions. Through the exalted esoteric language of *The House of the Hidden Light*, these meetings are transformed into initiatic events of deep spiritual importance. As Gilbert puts it, they were ‘a mixture of high intent and low practice’.³⁴

To explain what was going on, some biographical background is necessary. Arthur Machen’s dearly beloved wife Amy Hogg had died of cancer earlier in 1899, after a sickbed of six years, and this loss had a devastating effect on him. In his autobiographical notes *Things Near and Far*, he describes how, sitting at home one afternoon in November, ‘a horror of soul that cannot be uttered descended upon me’; and in his acute despair, he decided to experiment with a certain ‘process’ to dull the pain.³⁵ Unfortunately we do not know what that process involved, but whatever it was, it appears to have had an incredible effect on him.

What I received was not a mere dull lack of painful sensation, but a peace of the spirit that was quite ineffable, a knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed [...] Everything, of body and of mind, was resolved into an infinite and an exquisite delight; into a joy so great that – let this be duly noted – it became almost intolerable in its ecstasy.³⁶

Apparently such altered states and experiences of rapturous bliss kept returning over the next weeks or even months, and Machen describes them in terms that are reminiscent of the mystery language of *The House of the Hidden Light*. For instance, he speaks of ‘the great gusts of incense that were blown in those days into my nostrils, of the odours of rare gums that seemed to fume before invisible altars in Holborn, in Claremont Square, in grey streets of Clerkenwell, of the savours of the sanctuary that were perceived by me in all manner of grim London wastes and wanderings’.³⁷

This does not mean that the pain about Amy’s death was over, and it would seem that the drinking evenings with Waite were deeply therapeutic for Machen. He came to those evenings accompanied by a new lady friend, Vivienne Pierpoint. He sometimes called her ‘the Shepherdess’, but in *The House of the Hidden Light* she is called ‘Soror Ignis Ardens’ (Sister of the Ardent Fire) or ‘Lilith’. Waite, for his part, came accompanied by Annie Lakeman, usually referred to as Dora. Now Dora had been the love of his

³⁴ Ibid., p. xxii.

³⁵ Arthur Machen, ‘Things Near and Far’, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen*, London 1951, p. 270.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 272-273.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 267.

life since the first time they met, in 1886. The attraction seems to have been mutual, but Waite could not offer her financial security, and so Dora got married to a well-to-do older gentleman, Charles Granville Stuart-Menteth (1769-1847). Waite had to make do with her rather dull sister Ada, whom he married one year later. In *The House of the Hidden Light*, Dora appears under the pseudonym ‘Soror Benedicta in Aqua’ (Sister Blessed in the Water). The precise nature of the relation between Waite and Dora remains elusive, but may have developed into some kind of a clandestine erotic relationship or at least came very close. Be that as it may, the intimate evenings that these four people shared together appear to have been extremely intense, emotional, even bordering on the ecstatic.

Why did Machen and Waite, in their letters, choose to imagine these meetings as esoteric initiations, and how serious were they in doing so? As the text of the *House of the Hidden Light* progresses, one sees an increasing focus on the mystical and transcendent union of male and female; and Gilbert describes the true theme of *The House of the Hidden Light* as ‘the transformation of desire’.³⁸ To understand what that might mean, we need to take a somewhat closer look at the text. It is a literary product of considerable complexity and subtlety, and to arrive at a truly convincing exegesis one would need an extensive critical apparatus of footnotes identifying the multiple allusions to biblical, Kabbalistic, alchemical, Arthurian, and other materials, as well as to the writings of Machen and Waite – not to mention the many heavily concealed references to real events in the life of the protagonists. What follows is just a very short and preliminary overview.

In ‘The Pastoral’ that precedes the letters, Machen and Waite appear as ‘two poor brothers of the spirit, friends of God and members of the sodality, having dwelt after the common manner of men in the desert of this mortal life’.³⁹ In ‘taverns by the way’, during the *annus mirabilis*, they receive ‘a certain consecration and infusion of light and a participation in the glory’.⁴⁰ Eventually, they are solemnly admitted into the hall of the Neophytes.

At this time also there were given unto them two sisters, daughters of the House of Life, for high priestesses and ministers. Into the hands of these sisters were put wands of enchantment, wands of sorcery, wands of power, with liturgies and rituals written in sibyltine books, from which they sang and celebrated throughout the wonderful year. These were children of the

³⁸ Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, p. xxvi.

³⁹ Anonymus, *House of the Hidden Light*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

elements, queens of fire and water, full of inward magic and of outward witchery, full of music and of song, radiant with the illusions of Light.⁴¹

The two poor brothers then proceed ‘through many sub-grades of the Secret Order of the Dawn’.⁴² The *annus mirabilis* now comes to an end, and with it the First Degree of initiation. The two brothers enter a period of spiritual darkness and deprivation, waiting anxiously for signs that announce the mysteries of the Second Degree. Finally, ‘they heard bells ringing and a great voice crying: *Introibo ad Altare Dei*’,⁴³ and they are admitted to a new sanctuary. Presumably this refers to Machen’s ‘Order of Tossspots’ created in 1901 – another drinking group, but characteristically described in *The House of the Hidden Light* as an order concerned with ‘mysteries of the Second Degree, mysteries of the Golden Order, mysteries of compassion and of unction, mysteries of healing, mysteries of the purgation of joy’.⁴⁴ The mysteries of the Third and highest Degree have not yet been attained, but of these ‘in due time there may be put forth a true memorial’.⁴⁵

‘The Pastoral’ is followed by two Tables of Contents, in which the thirty-five letters exchanged between the brothers are described in two quite different ways: first as ‘Aphorisms and Maxims of the Secret Mystery According to the Order of the Light’, and then as ‘Versicles and Symbols of the Secret Order According to the Mysteries of Love’.⁴⁶ The symbolism of Light is indeed pervasive throughout the book, as indicated by its very title: its permutations are fascinating and would deserve an extensive analysis. The symbolism of Love is frequently alluded to as well, but in a somewhat more indirect manner.

In the First letter (written ‘From a Tarrying place of the Fraternity’), Elias Artista (Waite) is invited by Filius Aquarum (Machen) to participate in ‘the Veritable, Ancient and Rectified Rite of לילית [Lilith]’⁴⁷ (a reference, as we have seen, to Machen’s female partner Vivienne Pierpoint). The invitation is written, of course, in exalted mystery language full of biblical references, allusions to the Arthurian Legends, alchemical symbolism, and so on. Elias Artista responds positively in the next letter (‘From the Passes of the East’), and presumably the series of late-night evenings now begins. Around the time of the tenth letter (‘From Within the Circles of Light’),

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴² Ibid., p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-21.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

however, something seems to have happened: the next letters indicate that Soror Ignis Ardens (Lilith) has left, and this departure of Vivienne Pierpoint is interpreted by the two brothers as an event of deep initiatic significance. With Dora Stuart-Menteath there seem to be problems too: for instance, in letter fourteen ('In the Place of Admonishment'), Machen reports that he has received 'tidings recently from our venerable and elect sister *Benedicta in Aqua*, which to my judgment shows that a certain purging is being operated within her, and that her soul longs for the Light. But she alleges that you have altogether neglected her. How is this, brother in the Light'?⁴⁸

The next letters are replete with dense gnostic, alchemical, and platonic symbolism referring to processes of purgation, liberation, purification, and sublimation. It is clear from these letters that the 'transformation of desire' involves a painful and deeply emotional process of accepting the limitations of earthly love in exchange for a higher ideal of spiritual attainment. A good example is letter twenty-two ('In the Place Where They Are United'), where Machen is doing his best to comfort Waite in his sorrow over his impossible love for Dora:

And so it seems to me, *carissime doctor viae*, that these mortal things which we enjoy, and these mortal ministrants which surround us are but as promises and notes of that which shall be. For let us suppose that a man were shown a most exquisite picture of the most sweet valley in all the world, and in it the fairest abode imaginable, and with it the likeness of the most precious and desirable of all ladies: can we conceive such a man to be bitterly distressed or in any anguish, if the picture, being shown him, were taken away, with an infallible promise that presently he should enter that valley, and dwell in that prepared mansion, and be wedded for ever to that sweetest of all the maids of God? Does not a man who is athirst crave for drink rather than the choicest picture of a fountain [...] ? And so I think that our Lilith and our Lady of the Waters are but 'pictures' and 'Promises' of certain supernal and ineffable things which shall assuredly be ours if we will but proceed on our journey.⁴⁹

In his response (letter twenty-three, 'With The Doctors in the Temple'), Elias Artista writes that 'the understanding which I am daily receiving in the Words of the Sages'⁵⁰ makes it easier for him to accept the wise words of his brother. This is undoubtedly a reference to his intense studies of the Jewish Kabbalah at that time, to which we will return.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 103-104.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

In letter twenty-five ('From the Heart of a Pomegranate') Elias Artista wishes his brother 'secret joy and true union when the bells ring for your marriage'⁵¹ – a direct reference to Machen's actual marriage (on 25 June 1903) to Vivienne Pierpoint's successor, Dorothy Purefoy Hudleston. It is therefore clear that the mysteries of Lilith now belong to the past, or are transformed into the mysteries of a new Lilith, and Machen has found true happiness (letter twenty-six, 'From the House of the Admixture'): 'For now, in truth, the meanest cup is filled with a celestial drink, the ministrants of the flesh are stoled and crowned, and the swell and triumph of a great music drowns the idle rumours of the streets'.⁵² Waite, for his part, is resigning himself to the inevitable: the true union with his soul mate Soror Benedicta in Aqua will never take place during this life. He is now looking back at the previous events as a painful but necessary spiritual process understood in alchemical terms (letter twenty-nine, 'Beneath a New Star in Serpentarius'): 'In the time of darkness, we were purged by the Black State of the Mystic Stone. We have passed with joy triumphantly through the White State, and the greatest of all will follow, which is the glow and the redness signifying a more perfect transmutation'.⁵³ The true union will only take place in that third state, which stands under the sign of an apophatic mysticism reminiscent of Dionysius the Areopagite (letter thirty-three, 'From a Place of Setting Out'):

O Lux Lucis, fons, origo et abyssus [O Light of Light, Fountain, Origin, and Abyss], in thy light or thy darkness we know that there is a place of union, past all the ways of love, and that there the higher Lilith and the higher Benedicta are conjoined eternally in the repose of a great ecstasy, wherein we also shall rest at length when we have attained the end of our revolutions, having put off all human interest.⁵⁴

The thirty-fifth and final letter is called 'In Via Unitiva'. Elias Artista reminds Filius Aquarum that 'We have comforted one another with great and sounding words, far echoing through the halls of time ... and it is time now to make an end of these flying scrolls, with their prophecies [...] because another day is at hand'.⁵⁵ He closes with some impressive passages

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵² Ibid., p. 120.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 133.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

of apophatic mysticism about the ultimate center of the light that is ‘neither Light nor Darkness’, and finally announces the coming of

another Order, a secret ritual, a great experiment, a joy and bliss to come. I announce to you the Order of Life. We shall need no longer to go in search of the *Soror Benedicta in Aqua* or of the *Soror Gloriosa in Igne*, for they will come to us and will dwell with us after a secret and most intimate manner, even as the life of the beloved is hidden in the life of the lover.⁵⁶

To do justice to *The House of the Hidden Light*, I suggest we should distinguish between three levels of interpretation. The first level, highlighted by Robert Gilbert in his indispensable commentary, is essentially reductive/historical: behind the impressive esoteric language, he suggests, we find no deep spiritual meanings at all but just a series of very mundane practices and events. The initiations are really just drinking parties; the mysteries consist of the erotic tension and interplay between two men and two women who cannot give in to their desires; and for the rest, the ecstasies are essentially induced by alcohol and absinth. On the second and much more serious level, however, it seems clear that *The House of the Hidden Light* describes a process of psychological healing and transformation, a deeply emotional therapeutic process through which the protagonists learn to come to terms with the inescapable realities of their lives and loves. This is one way of understanding Gilbert’s statement that the book is about ‘the transformation of desire’. But that formulation can be understood on a third and final level as well: according to such a reading, the ‘transformation of desire’ should be understood additionally in spiritual and metaphysical terms. To understand this level of significance, it is useful to place *The House of the Hidden Light* within the context of Waite’s work as a historian of the occult. Whether this third level was also significant for Machen remains very much an open question that I will not try to answer here.

The Esoteric Heart of Waite’s Kabbalah

We saw that in *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah* (finished in 1899, right before the beginning of the *annus mirabilis*), Waite had not yet discovered the ‘mystery of sex’ as the central doctrine of Kabbalah: that insight came only after his reading of De Pauly. But if we look at his way of describing that mystery in his books of 1913 and 1929, we realize that it must have been inspired quite as strongly by the very personal events and intimate experiences referred to in *The House of the Hidden Light*. In *The*

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

Holy Kabbalah, Waite emphasizes that Kabbalistic sex practices could only take place between husbands and wives: ‘the Sacred Name is never attached to an incomplete man, being one who is unmarried, or one who dies without issue’.⁵⁷ However, in an apparent attempt at downplaying civil marriage as a mere social contract without deeper spiritual import, he and Machen appear to have been involved in intense speculations about – and possibly even ritual enactments of – what they referred to, mysteriously, as ‘Hermetic Marriage’.⁵⁸ The two friends seem to have disagreed about its precise nature, and one would like to know more. But what seems evident is that Waite was looking at his ‘Soror Benedicta in Aqua’ as his true spiritual partner in the alchemical ‘mysteries of love’.

The central theme of *The House of the Hidden Light* can in fact be understood as a combination of Platonic, alchemical, and what I would call ‘elemental’ doctrines of Eros. In Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, the spiritual ascent from matter to the ideal is spurred on by the powerful force of Erotic desire, understood as the inborn desire of the soul to unite itself with the true source of ultimate beauty, goodness, and truth. In its original ancient Greek context, this process was understood in homoerotic terms; but heteroerotic interpretations had become prominent during the Renaissance, after Ficino (1433-1499),⁵⁹ leading eventually to what might be called a veritable ‘religion of beauty in woman’.⁶⁰ Everything indicates that Dora was the idealized image of such feminine beauty in Waite’s understanding of the mystical ascent.

The Platonic ideal of Eros has often lent support to attitudes of ascetic renunciation, because bodily love is considered just a surrogate that falls short of the spiritual ideal. But Waite was no ascetic, and had no taste for celibacy. In his mind, the erotic search for ultimate union with the Absolute merged with the alchemical imagery of sexual union between male and

⁵⁷ Waite, *Holy Kabbalah*, p. 378.

⁵⁸ Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁵⁹ See discussion in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticisms of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno’, *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* ed. W. J. Hanegraaff & J. J. Kripal, New York 2011, pp. 175-207. Interestingly, Ficino himself still presented ‘Socratic Love’ in homoerotic terms, and this must be understood in the context of his own infatuation with Giovanni Cavalcanti (ibid., pp. 184-194). The heterosexualization of Socratic Love took off after Ficino (Hanegraaff, ‘Under the Mantle of Love’, pp. 194-205).

⁶⁰ Jefferson Fletcher, *The Religion of Beauty in Woman, and Other Essays on Platonic Love in Poetry and Society*, New York 1911.

female, sun and moon, king and queen.⁶¹ The symbolism and imagery was understood in a spiritual sense, not as an escape from the body, but as a spiritual process of transmutation and purification of the *whole* person, ultimately leading up to a higher or even perfect divine state. Because Waite believed in a universal ‘secret tradition’, it was natural for him to see the Platonic and alchemical ideals as just two manifestations of the same thing.

Next to Platonism and alchemy, a third reference was present in Waite’s and, undoubtedly, Machen’s mind. As indicated by their pseudonyms, the two mystical ‘sisters’ in *The Book of the Hidden Light* are associated explicitly with fire and water, and this makes them reminiscent of the Paracelsian elemental beings (salamanders and nymphs, in this case). These had been popularized due to Henri Montfaucon de Villars’ (c. 1836-1673) famous novel *Comte de Gabalis* (1670),⁶² were picked up in Bulwer-Lytton’s even more famous occult novel *Zanoni* (1842), and had become a topic of fascination in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn of which both Waite and Machen had been members. The *Comte de Gabalis* famously claimed that elemental beings had no immortal soul, but could be immortalized by means of ‘marriage’ with a human being. Writers, artists, and satiricists had been quick to explore the obvious sexy as well as humorous possibilities of that idea.⁶³ We seem to be dealing here with an important but underestimated theme in the emergence of modern occultism. For instance, the Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 during an evening at which George Henry Felt (1831-1895) claimed that he could make elementals visible through a ‘chemical and Kabbalistic process’ – a direct reference to Comte de Gabalis; and members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had in fact been experimenting very seriously with

⁶¹ Such erotic and sexual imagery is pervasive in alchemical publications since the 15th and through the 17th centuries. For a concise discussion of its backgrounds, see Lawrence Principe, ‘Revealing Analogies: The Descriptive and Deceptive Roles of Sexuality and Gender in Latin Alchemy’, *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* ed. W. J. Hanegraaff & J. J. Kripal, New York 2011, pp. 385-431.

⁶² See the excellent critical edition by Didier Kahn: Henri de Montfaucon de Villars, *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou entretiens sur les sciences secrètes*, Paris 2010.

⁶³ Didier Kahn, ‘L’alchimie sur la scène française au XVIe et XVIIe siècles’, *Chrysopoeia* 2:1 (1988), pp. 62-96; Kahn, ‘Introduction’, de Villars, *Comte de Gabalis*, pp. 117-136; cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 222-230.

rituals for ‘marrying an elemental’.⁶⁴ Finally, and most relevant to our concerns, it was a commonplace among nineteenth-century occultists that this entire tradition of elemental marriages was somehow ‘Kabbalistic’. Le Montfaucon de Villars introduced *Le Comte the Gabalis* as ‘a Great Kabbalist from Germany’, and his very name was a reference to Paracelsus’ idiosyncratic understanding of ‘Gabalia’. In his oeuvre, it stood for the ancient ‘ars cabalastica’, a subcategory of magic that was supposed to have emerged among the pagans and had been transmitted through the Chaldaeans and the Hebrews.⁶⁵

Conclusion

We have seen that Waite’s mature understanding of Kabbalah was heavily influenced by De Pauly’s French *Zohar* translation (1906-1911), which caused him to focus on ‘the mysteries of sex’ as the heart of the Kabbalistic mystery. His personal understanding of those mysteries, however, reflected his intimate real-life experiences with ‘Soror Benedicta in Aqua’ as documented in *The House of the Hidden Light*. Together with Arthur Machen, Waite created an esoteric narrative of initiation that allowed them to speak of those deeply therapeutic events in the language of Christian Platonism (especially Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), early modern alchemy, and occultist speculation about Elemental marriage. These non-Kabbalistic contexts must be taken into account to understand his emphasis on the erotic language of the *Zohar* and its descriptions of union with the Shekinah. Consider, for instance, this passage:

There is – in the true sense of this term – a spiritual union below for the Sons of the Doctrine, so that they are encompassed by two females – the wife who is on earth and the Unseen Helpmate. [The condition for this consists in] the raising of the heart and mind on the part of the Lover and Beloved, to the Most Holy Shekinah, the glory which cohabits and indwells, during the external act. The *absconditus sponsus* enters into the body of the woman and is joined with the *abscondita sponsa*.⁶⁶

In thinking of the *abscondita sponsa*, Waite must have imagined the transfigured image of Dora Stuart-Menteth, his ‘Soror Benedicta in Aqua’. He probably played with the idea that during the sexual act, it might be

⁶⁴ References in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 227 nt 286.

⁶⁵ Paracelsus, *Theologische Werke I: Vita Beata – Vom Seligen Leben*, ed. U. L. Gantenbein, Berlin / New York 2008, p. 311; cf. Kahn, ‘L’alchimie sur la scène française’, p. 94 with notes 79-80.

⁶⁶ Waite, *Holy Kabbalah*, pp. 375, 381.

possible for his soul to somehow unite with Dora's soul, even though their bodies could not. In any case, Waite seems to have lived the rest of his life in the hope or expectation that the 'Hidden Light' and the 'Mysteries of Love' would be fully revealed and celebrated on a superior plane after death: even though Arthur Edward Waite could not marry Annie (Dora) Lakeman, Elias Artista would one day be united with his Soror Benedicta in Aqua. At the heart of Waite's writings on Kabbalah, then, we find the deeply human tragedy of an unfulfilled love. It informed his reading of Kabbalistic texts and determined his choices about what was essential and what was not. Only very few people who were in on the secrets of his intimate life, then, would ever understand what chapters VII and VIII of *The Holy Kabbalah* were ultimately all about.

Arthur Machen

[From Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune](#) by Susan Johnston Graf [SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions, SUNY Press, 9781438455556] pp 57-78

Then to return to our main subject, you think that sin is an esoteric, occult thing? —Arthur Machen, "The White People"

Arthur Llewelyn Jones-Machen (1863-1947), who wrote under the shortened form of his name, Arthur Machen, was initiated into the Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn on November 21, 1899.¹ He and Algernon Blackwood were among the last to be initiated into the original Golden Dawn before internecine feuding and scandal would irrevocably damage the order and lead to schism.¹ The year 1899 was a pivotal one in Machen's life, marking the end of the most creative and productive decade of his life and of almost thirteen years of marriage to his first wife, Amelia (Amy) Hogg, who died of cancer on July 31, 1899.

It is difficult to find direct documentation of Machen's marriage or his spiritual beliefs before 1900 because he does not write about them. He does, however, write about his Golden Dawn involvement in Part Two of his autobiography, *Things Near and Far*, but he is contradictory throughout the narrative. He makes more negative than positive statements, and they come near the end of *Things Near and Far*, the second installment of his memoirs. There is the often-quoted statement that the "Order of the Twilight Star," a veiled reference to the Order of the Golden Dawn, did nothing for him:

I supposed that the Order, dimly heard of, might give me some light and guidance and leading on these matters [the strange occurrences surrounding Machen at the time of Amy's death and his "process"]. But, as I have noted, I was mistaken; the Twilight Star shed no ray of any kind on my path.

In the same section of *Things Near and Far*, Machen makes another derogatory statement about the order:

But as for anything vital in the secret order, for anything that mattered two straws to any reasonable being, there was nothing of it, and less than nothing. Among the members there were, indeed, persons of very high attainments, who, in my opinion, ought to have known better after a year's membership or less; but the society as a society was pure foolishness concerned with impotent and imbecile Abracadabras.

Machen also did not believe the story of how the order was founded, as it was claimed to be descended from a Rosicrucian order of antiquity. Machen, with the help of A. E. Waite, determined that the story was apocryphal and that the order was formulated by master masons in the 1880s. Machen was disgusted that some members were gullible enough to believe the story: "Any critical mind, with a tinge of occult reading, should easily have concluded that here was no ancient order from the whole nature and substance of its ritual and doctrine." For Machen, then, the order was, in a very real sense, fraudulent.

On the other hand, Machen praises an order with equal fervor in *Far Off Things*, but this may be Waite's Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn rather than the original version of the organization that Machen initially joined:

I am reminded of one of the secret societies with which I have had the pleasure of being connected. This particular society issued a little MS. Volume of instructions to those who were to be initiated, and amongst these instructions was the note: "remember that nothing exists that is not God." "How can I possibly realise that?" I said to one of the members of the society. In *Things Near and Far*, just paragraphs before he lambastes the order, he has this to say in introducing the whole topic: "There is one episode of this period of which I may say a little more, that is the affair of the Secret Society.... And I must confess that it did me a great deal of good—for the time."

It is hard to come to a definitive conclusion about Machen's attitude toward the Golden Dawn, and it may not be just because he is obfuscating. He truly may have harbored conflicting feelings about his involvement in the Order of the Golden Dawn and its offshoot, the Independent and Rectified Rite. He may have been embarrassed when he thought about it retrospectively, but he also may have had conflicting feelings not long after he was initiated.

One sticking point that caused Machen to rethink his opinion of occult societies was his objection to the idea of initiation as it was practiced in the Order of the Golden Dawn and other occult groups. Here again, however, we find Machen contradicting himself because he found the initiation ceremony compelling at the time he was initiated:

To stand waiting at a closed door in a breathless expectation, to see it open suddenly and disclose two figures clothed in a habit that I never thought to see worn by the living, to catch for a moment the vision of a cloud of incense smoke and certain dim lights glimmering in it before the bandage was put over the eyes and the arm felt a firm grasp upon it that led the hesitating footsteps unto the unknown darkness: all this was strange and admirable indeed; ... All this was very fine; an addition and a valuable one, as I say, to the phantasmagoria that was being presented to me.

Five years later, in December 1905, Machen penned a letter to Waite in which he questions the concept of initiation as it was practiced in the Golden Dawn:

And another point: the average secret society presupposes, as you yourself have said, that the initiator is, in a certain sense, superior to the initiated, superior that is, because he possesses certain information which he imparts to the neophyte; who is by this process, admitted into a circle of knowledge, outside which, (by the hypothesis) he stood, before initiation.

Occult groups are organized around the concept of initiation and the idea that there is secret knowledge that only can be imparted to an elite group: the privileged, spiritually advanced vanguard made up of members. Thus, to question the idea of initiation is to undermine the basis on which occult societies are founded. But question Machen did. Not only did he question, but he also conceived of a different kind of initiation. He proposed a secret society that

makes no pretense of knowing anything which the outsider, the neophyte, does not know; which has no temple or circle to which admittance is given; which bids its members to look

within, & uncover, & remove, & Behold, & Make the Great Interior Entrance—from Within to Within, instead of Without to Somebody Else's notion of Within.

Machen seems to be suggesting a group composed of autonomous mystics who would meet together but maintain a very Protestant sort of personal relationship with whatever they considered to be a supreme state of consciousness.

Machen's objection comes, at least partly, out of the disillusionment he experienced when he got to know the members of the Golden Dawn who were supposed to be initiated into the inmost secrets. He came to know that those people had feet of clay. He complains about Florence Farr Emery and Marcus Worsley Blackden specifically. Both were members of the inner order, and Machen must have expected enlightened behavior from such initiates. Instead, he found that they were "about as complete a pair of `rotters' as I have ever seen."

Machen's disappointment also may have been the result of his advanced understanding of things occult before he entered the order. Machen did not come to the Golden Dawn as an occult studies greenhorn. He had been deeply immersed in occult studies at least since the time before he was married when he compiled a catalogue of occult texts entitled "The Literature of Occultism and Archeology" for George Redway in 1885. He details some of the works he catalogued:

There were the principal and the more obscure treatises on Alchemy, on Astrology, on Magic; old Latin volumes most of them. Here were books about Witchcraft, Diabolical Possession, "Fascination," or the Evil Eye; here comments on the Kabbala. Ghosts and apparitions were a large family, Secret Societies of all sorts hung on the skirts of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, and so found a place in the collection. Then the semireligious, semioccult, semi-philosophical sects and schools were represented: we dealt in Gnostics and Mithraists, we harboured the Neoplatonists, we conversed with the Quietists and the Swedenborgians. These were the ancients; and beside them were the modern throng of Diviners and Stargazers and Psychometrists and Animal Magnetists and Mesmerists and Spiritualists and Psychic Researchers.

Redway also published works by MacGregor Mathers, among them *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, in the 1880s, so Machen may have had access to Golden Dawn materials as early as the 1880s. Machen was, consequently, in a position to realize that the secrets being imparted within the walls of Isis-Urania Temple were available to anyone who had the wherewithal to read and research.

The impetus for Machen to decide to be initiated within the Golden Dawn was the uncanny state of mind in which he found himself after the death of his first wife. In his memoirs, Machen completely obscures the fact that he was a married man from 1890 to 1900, omitting any mention of his marriage in 1887. In fact, he never mentions his first wife's name. He writes about the books he wrote, his trip to France, his long walks, even his childhood, but he does not include Amy Hogg in any of the events he recounts from the years they were married.

The one event that Machen does divulge is the terrible heartbreak of Amy's death. He writes about the agonizing force of his grief even though Amy had been sick for six years before her death:

I had borne what had to be borne with some measure of solidity and stolidity; the torture of six years of lamentable expectation had, as I supposed, seared and burned my spirit into dull, insensitive acquiescence: but I was mistaken. A horror of soul that cannot be uttered descended upon me, on that dim, far-off afternoon in Grays Inn; I was beside myself with dismay and torment; I could not endure my own being.

Such is the description of a man who has just lost the love of his life or at least a deeply loved mate. Why then is she not included when he writes about his life during the time he was married to her? Gerald Suster suggests that Machen omits references to his first marriage out of deference to his second wife, Purefoy, with whom he had his two children and to whom he was married for forty-four years." Amy Hogg and Machen did not have children, so when he and Purefoy were married and then had a family, it would not have been unusual, at that time, to downplay the first marriage, especially in front of the children. Machen may have been in a bit of a bind when he wrote *Things Near and Far* and *Far Off Things* if his children were not told about his previous marriage. Thus, he would have had to omit it in the story of his life.

It is also likely that Machen silently and privately repudiated his life during the "yellow nineties," and a large part of that life would have been his intimate, married life with Amy Machen who was the muse that inspired Machen's sexually dark, spiritually dangerous oeuvre. The works written in the 1890s, *The Great God Pan*, *A Fragment of Life*, *The Three Imposters*, *Ornaments in Jade*, "The White People," and *The Inmost Light*, are Machen's best. They made his name, and he rode on that for the rest of his life. He never achieved that level of brilliance again, and it may have something to do with a change in his lifestyle after Amy's death and a change in his spiritual beliefs beginning around 1903.

At that time, Machen followed his good friend Arthur Edward Waite into the Independent and Rectified Rite of the Order Golden Dawn, an offshoot of the original order, having an emphasis on mystical Christianity. Sometime just after September 24, 1904, Machen sent an undated letter to Waite in which he writes: "The torn and soiled hem of the Raiment of Holy Church compared with the whole Sacristy of 'occultism' is as Fair Rubies and Orient Pearls compared with Mud and Dung."

Machen had revised his beliefs, reverting to the High Church Anglicanism of his forebears. His father was the rector at Llandewii Rectory near Carleon-on-Usk, Wales, and that is where Machen was raised. Machen's occultist forays during the 1880s and 1890s were given up in favor of Graal legends and mystical Christianity. It is no wonder that he found himself being embarrassed by his earlier interests and practices. He may have been too embarrassed even to write about them, but then he never suggested that his autobiography was an actual history. He explains to Waite, in a letter of May 18, 1936 when Waite was laboring to write his memoirs, *Shadows of Life and Thought*, what he was trying to achieve in writing *Far Off Things* and *Things Near & Far*.

Now for your Memoirs. What you are looking for, I suspect, is the point of view, the key, from which & in which they are to be written. Since a man can only illustrate usefully from his own experience: I may say that I experienced your difficulty, in writing my memoirs (called 'Far Off Things' & 'Things New & Far'). Referring to them now, I seem to have solved the problem by writing a book which might have been called 'Pictures, Memories, Impressions, & Digressions'. Nothing in the least systematic, no tinge of: 'I was born on March 3, 1863, at Caerleon-on-Usk,

in Monmouthshire. My father, & etc' Think then of topics & not dates, & of topics in which you have a vivid interest.

Far Off Things was first published in 1922, followed the next year by the sequel, *Things Near & Far*. Machen had changed dramatically in the twenty-two years after the death of his first wife in 1899. He was approaching sixty, had been happily remarried for almost twenty years, and had two fairly young children. It is understandable that he did not wish to disclose some of his questionable experiences during the halcyon days of his youth during the Decadent decade of the 1890s. Still, he could not omit a seminal experience, that of the mysterious "process." He admits, however, that he agonized over whether to write about it: "I confess that I have written all this [details of 'the process' and the autumn of 1899] with difficulty, and with doubt as to the decency of writing it at all. ..."

"The process" was some act in which Machen engaged in order to change his consciousness and alleviate the suffering he experienced as a result of grieving for his first wife, Amy. He never directly explains that the "torment" was because of Amy's death. He only writes about "the most dreadful pangs of grief" and being "in a state of very dreadful misery and desolation and dereliction of soul." Machen's dark night of the soul happened just when Amy died, so the conclusion that it was a direct result of his heartbreak at her death seems reasonable. At the time of Amy's death, she reverted to the Roman Catholicism of her youth, according to Waite:

I remember that, to his [Machen's] great satisfaction, she was reconciled to the Latin Church—that of her childhood—before she passed away. I do not know if she had drifted into open disbelief or had merely become neglectful. In any case, she made a good end and a safe one, from his point of view.

Waite was not only a lifelong friend, but also a strong influence on Machen, and Waite was a Roman Catholic early on and later a Christian mystic. That is why he was compelled, in 1903, after the Golden Dawn had been publicly disgraced by a child abuse ring involving a couple who had attained order documents from MacGregor Mathers in Paris, to form his own version of the order called the Independent and Rectified Rite. The offshoot focused on mystical Christianity. After 1903, Machen became more Anglican, much to Waite's satisfaction and due more than a little to his influence.

As for Amy Machen, Waite claims that he did not know what her religious beliefs were before her deathbed reversion: "She [Amy] was one of the most human people I have ever met, deeply interested and concerned over persons and things, but religion was never mentioned between us, so far as I can recall." Amy's family attended the same Roman Catholic Church as Waite's mother. He describes her parents as "elderly Anglo-Indians," which raises the question of whether Amy lived in India when she was young. Amy was living on her own in London during summer 1886, but Waite met her during a visit she made to her parents at Worthing where Waite was living with his mother. Amy was thirty-six at the time, thirteen years older than Machen. Waite provides the only extant description of Amy Machen:

She was taller and thinner than her sister, a free spirit, with a budget of living experience among people and things, in a circle utterly foreign to my own. She was emancipated, it seemed to me, in respect of religious belief and without further concern therein. As to Occultism, Spiritism, Psychical Research and the rest, no doubt we talked about them.... Whether she herself had private means or some occupation in London to keep her craft afloat, I should not remember

now, supposing that I heard them. She was quite of the type to have found her *métier* in light journalism and should have done well among women's papers.

This description indicates that Amy and Waite did talk about religion. His definition of religion had narrowed severely by the time he wrote *Shadows of Life and Thought* in the late 1930s when he was a much older man. I can only infer that the term religion meant to him only Christianity or some other major, authorized belief system, which he did not discuss with Amy. However, his description of her in 1886—the time when she and Machen would have been courting—indicates that she shared Machen's and Waite's interest in occultism. She sounds like a turn-of-the-century New Woman: independent and intellectual, or as Waite put it, "emancipated" and "a free spirit." Amy Hogg brought Waite and Machen together. She knew kindred spirits when she saw them, and Waite reports that it was "her firm resolve that he and I should meet as soon as possible when I returned to London,"

Amy and Arthur met in the drawingroom of Lewis Sergeant, the journalist for whom Machen was working when he first went to London in 1881. According to John Gawsworth, Machen and Amy Hogg were friends from 1881 onward. In 1887, they lived near each other in Bloomsbury and by July of that year they were engaged. During the early 1880s, Machen was often depressed, destitute, and lonely. His early life in London sounds much like that of Lucian, the protagonist in *Hill of Dreams*, and Machen remarked on his inability to penetrate London's literary circles and make friends. Nonetheless, he found a friend in Amy Hogg, and he married her on August 31, 1887. Machen's father died the following month, and between the money that came to him after his father's death and another inheritance from his mother's relatives in Scotland (his mother had died in 1885), Machen found himself a married man of independent means. Thus began the decade of his creative genius.

The consensus seems to be that his financial independence allowed him the freedom to achieve his greatest artistic expression. He lived a carefree existence and decided to use the money, which was not enough for an entire lifetime, until it was gone and not worry too much about it:

By it I was enabled to live for eleven or twelve years under pleasant and humane conditions. Not in luxury, be it understood, for luxury has always been utterly detestable to me.... But if luxury tempts me not at all, I care a great deal for homely comfort, and I lived in considerable comfort in the days of which I am speaking.

Machen explains that having the money did have an influence on his writing: "I was able to write purely to please myself; and what a queer pleasure it was." However, the money and the marriage to Amy Hogg happened almost simultaneously, so it stands to reason that both acted to stimulate Machen's creative juices.

Although Machen had silenced himself in regard to his first marriage, Waite's description of Amy can fill in some of the blanks. Machen was taken in hand by an independent woman, thirteen years his senior, who held heterodox religious views, and shortly thereafter he began writing fiction filled with dark and forbidden sexual innuendo. I will not push this line of reasoning much further because it relies too much on conjecture, but admittedly, much of the power of the 1890s narratives is due to the sexuality inherent in them. This is particularly true of Machen's *tour de force*, *The Great God Pan*. That same power does not enter Machen's oeuvre after Amy's death. It could be argued that those works were products of the time, and the *Zeitgeist* included Pan and sex-crazed femmes fatales and drugs. Maybe

so, or maybe the sexual alchemy that Machen had found through his marriage to Amy allowed him to dream his dark dreams and turn them into brilliant narrative.

A short novel that Machen produced just before Amy's death offers a window into his ideas about marital intimacy and the psychic mysteries that are a part of it, even for the seemingly most mundane of couples. According to Machen, *A Fragment of Life* was begun in May or June 1899.³⁴ Amy died that July, and as she had cancer, it is a fair bet that she was progressing toward death when Machen penned *Fragment*. He explains that the inspiration for the story arose from a walk with a friend "on a bleak Sunday afternoon" in March 1899 through Ball's Pond or Dalston where all the houses looked orderly and identical. Machen observed a young couple with a baby, reporting his impressions of the scene:

A colourless, mildly whiskered man, and a foolish-looking young woman, his wife, in her foolish black satin Sunday dress holding a simple baby on her knee, and I thought, [sic] glancing, at them: "These, silly as they look, limited as they doubtless are, these two also have been initiated into the everlasting mysteries and have partaken of the great secrets, and have known what is concealed under the barley in the sacred basket of the holy procession of Eleusis.

The observed couple became the prototype for Edward Darnell and his wife, Mary. The Darnell's, like the Machens, had no children, however.

Machen's inspiration for the story, which is really about the alchemy of marriage, was the realization that even the most normal, unenlightened couples experience the mystical secrets of sexuality, the whispering in the darkness known only to each other, the joyous alchemy of man and woman becoming one. From that realization, Machen created a story in which two mundane people living a banal existence in the suburbs of London become psychically charged and experience altered states of consciousness. Did Machen observe that young couple during his walk and remember the magic of intimate life with his wife before she became desperately ill? He claims that all couples, through their marriages, are initiated into secret rites like those at Eleusis. Not all would agree with him, but perhaps he was generalizing from his own experience with Amy.

When Amy died, Machen was bereft of the secret rites the two may have shared, and so he engaged in a mysterious process that altered his consciousness so that he could bear his unbearable grief, and that change in consciousness ultimately led, through his close friend Waite, to Machen's initiation within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. No one knows what "the process" entailed. We only know the results of it because Machen records them in detail in his memoirs. Apparently the elevated consciousness and charged psychic atmosphere in which he lived in fall 1899 was one of the defining experiences of his life. Just as he refuses to discuss his marriage to Amy in his memoirs, he also refuses to divulge exactly what he had done to achieve his ecstatic state of mind. It has been suggested that he engaged in autohypnosis, magical masturbation such as that practiced in the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, Buddhist meditation, extreme celibacy, and hallucinogenic drug use.

Curiously, Machen uses the same word, "process," to describe the rituals used by the teenage witch in "The White People." In the "Epilogue," Ambrose tells Cosgrave in regard to the experience of the girl who wrote the memoir that Ambrose had lent to Cosgrave,

'I can only say that it is no doubt better for the great mass of people to dismiss it all as a dream. But if you ask my veritable belief—that goes quite the other way. No; I should not say belief, but rather knowledge. I may tell you that I have known cases in which men have stumbled quite by accident on certain of these "processes," and have been astonished by wholly unexpected results. In the cases I am thinking of there could have been no possibility of "suggestion" or sub-conscious action any kind.'

When a writer, a wordsmith, uses a certain word carefully in the way that Machen uses "process" in both his memoirs and "The White People," it is difficult to be dismissive. Presumably, he chose his words carefully. He wrote "The White People" in 1897, two years before the 1899 "process." In the story, he uses the term to mean ritual used to obtain a result. Perhaps he had been performing a ritual to ease his grief. He was not a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, or, presumably, any other society for the practice of ritual magic when he engaged in "the process." However, because Machen was an autodidactic occultist, he may have been acquainted with ritual long before he entered the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He confirms that he was experimenting based on occult knowledge he had gleaned both from extensive reading and knowing occultists, and he also denies that the process had anything to do with hypnotism:

Well, I made my experiment, expecting, very doubtfully, almost incredulously, certain results. The results that I obtained were totally different from my expectation. I couldn't have hypnotized, or "magnetized," or mesmerized, or suggested, or Couéd, or in any way bedeviled myself into the obtained condition for the good reason that I had never heard of it, had no faintest notion of it, and was, in fact as I have stated, not a little alarmed by it, half-thinking, if the truth be told, that I was very near to death. I may state, by the way, that in the course of a pretty extensive acquaintance with "occult" company, I only once heard of anything at all comparable with the strange adventure of mine.

The outcome was just as Ambrose, the learned hermit of "The White People," had predicted: Machen "was astonished by wholly unexpected results" after he performed the process.

Machen would not have undertaken the experiment if he had not required immediate relief from deep despair, what we might today call clinical depression, following Amy's death. The process was an act of desperation, "without any more exalted motives than those which urge a man with a raging toothache to get laudanum and take it with all convenient speed." Whatever the process entailed, it was an active, positive action, suggesting ritual magic rather than some more passive mental, meditative effort. Machen says that he "did what had to be done," sounding as if there were actions that had to be performed, the doing of something.

Machen scared himself by performing the act or acts that made up the process, but he was exalted by the outcome:

For when I rose, afraid, and broke off the process in which I had been engaged, I found to my utter amazement that everything within had been changed. Amazement; for the utmost that I had hoped from my experiment was a temporary dulling of the consciousness, a brief opium oblivion of my troubles. And what I received was not mere dull lack of painful sensation, but a peace of the spirit that was quite ineffable, a knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed, that that which was broken was reunited.

His choice of the word "reunited" is curious, given that the circumstance that made the process necessary was soul sickness caused by grieving for his dead wife. What, exactly was reunited? He goes on to claim that "Everything, of body and mind, was resolved into an infinite and an exquisite delight ...," so perhaps he means that body and mind were reunited. If that is so, we have to wonder if his grief dissociated them. He does not report having physical pain or any other somatic ailments before the process."

Another possibility suggests itself: Perhaps the process reunited Machen with his wife on some level. He repudiated spiritualism, saying that "an enormous mass of occultism ancient and modern, may be brushed aside at once without the labour of any curious investigation." He goes on to enumerate some of the facets of occultism that could be brushed aside, and spiritualism is one of the facets he, along with most ritual magicians, deemed useless. Therefore, Machen would not have experimented with spiritualism, nor was he mediumistic: I am not suggesting that he was talking with his dead wife. However, if Machen and his wife had maintained a strong, esoteric married life as is suggested by Machen's statements regarding the inspiration for *A Fragment of Life*, then it is possible that his process did, in some way, have to do with sexual polarity and the balancing of male and female principles within himself that could have been thrown out of balance by the celibacy of his life as a widower.

Whatever the process, its results were immediate and potent. There were hallucinations: "shivering pictures that seemed on the point to dissolve and return into chaos." His explanation could be taken to mean that there were paintings or prints hanging on the wall that appeared to move and change. In another reference to the phenomenon, Machen explains: "I have pictures on the wall opposite to the window that looked on the garden of the Inn." It was the wall with the pictures on it that "trembled," however, so is more likely that he was experiencing entire psychic scenes that were appearing and disappearing before his eyes much as those reported by users of LSD or other hallucinogenic drugs. Machen himself draws the parallel by comparing his hallucinations to those induced by taking *Anhelonium Lewinii*, the scientific name for peyote. The hallucinations were accompanied by bliss, what Buddhists term *Samadhi*: "There was no more grief; there was no more resentment; there was no more anger." Machen explains that he only hoped for the cessation of pain, but what he experienced was far beyond his hopes:

And what I received was not mere dull lack of painful sensation, but a peace of the spirit that was quite ineffable, a knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed.... Everything, of body and of mind, was resolved into an infinite and exquisite delight; into a joy so great that—let this be duly noted—it became almost intolerable ecstasy.

He would make artistic use of his experience when he wrote *The Great Return*. By that time he had become a mystical Anglican and he connected the blissful state to the return of the Holy Graal to Wales, where an entire community experiences bliss.

Machen also experienced heightened, extremely pleasurable tactile and auditory sensations that he attributed to the process. He reports that the sound of the

omnibus bell, the grind of the many wheels upon the cobble-stones sounded to me as marvelous and tremendous chords reverberating from some mighty organ; filling the air, filling the soul and the whole being with rapture immeasurable.

At the same time "touch became an exquisite and conscious pleasure." The final, dramatic consequence of the process was that Machen healed himself of migraine headaches for the rest of his life. He explains that he had suffered from cyclical bouts of migraine every five to seven weeks. He felt the onset of such a headache and wondered if he could stave it off and reports the outcome: "I placed the tip of the forefinger of the left hand upon my forehead. I felt the sense as of a dull shock: and the pain was gone." He never experienced another migraine.

Both the process and Machen's initiation happened within six months after Amy's death, but not simultaneously. If we are to believe Machen's report in *Things Near and Far*, he may have done whatever it was fairly soon after her death. He writes about the horror of learning that she had died, despite expecting it: "A horror of soul that cannot be uttered descended upon me, on that dim, far-off afternoon in Gray's Inn." Machen probably endured the "torment," as he calls it, for an unspecified time, maybe until late summer at most. Machen's initiation occurred at the end of November.

Waite, who had been a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn since January 1891, must have been privy to the details of Machen's process. Waite would have understood the workings of ritual and matters of psychic health, and he was concerned about his friend. The Golden Dawn and all of the occult orders that grew from it cautioned against practicing or dabbling unless an individual was an initiated, trained occultist. Occultists believe in the potency of the forces with which they work, so they do not consider the work to be without danger. The purpose of initiation and training is to learn to safely work with powers invoked or evoked by learning how to control one's will. Waite may have feared for Machen because he was working with occult forces but did not necessarily know what he was doing. Trained and initiated occultists believe that insanity, at worst, and emotional instability, at best, can follow from untrained dabbling. That may be why, according to R. A. Gilbert, "Waite saw the danger facing his friend and drew him away from his dark ecstasy into the disciplined occultism of the Golden Dawn." Waite must have convinced Machen that "the Order, dimly heard of, might give [him] some light and guidance and leading on these matters."

Machen's initiation did not curtail his strange state of mind. Rather, it accentuated it. In his recounting of fall 1899, Machen blurs the distinction between the effects of the process and the effects of initiation within the Golden Dawn. The process, his initiation, and the change in his lifestyle after the loss of his wife all coalesced to create the "singular rearrangement of the world" that he experienced. Machen reports:

I began to be conscious that the world was being presented to me at a new angle. I find now an extreme difficulty in the choice of words to convey my meaning; "a new angle" is clumsy enough, "here in this world he changed his life" is far too high in its associations; but there certainly came to be a strangeness in the proportion of things, both in things exterior and interior.

However, careful reading of *Things Near and Far* exposes the effect of Machen's initiation.

Machen was initiated on November 21, 1899, and he recounts another hallucinogenic experience that happened on "a bright, keen morning of November." The experience happened as he was "walking up Rosebery Avenue." I have to wonder if Machen is engaging in wordplay, since The Golden Dawn is a Rosicrucian society; hence the rose and cross are its major symbols, with the rose being a major symbol of the archetypal feminine. Machen experienced "walking on air" as he strolled on "Rosebery Avenue" with a friend: "The pavement of that horrible street had suddenly become, not air, certainly, but resilient; the impact of my feet upon it was buoyant; the sensation was delicious."

Machen may be hinting that the day was either the day of his initiation or the day he decided to join the order and undergo initiation: "I may mention that that very morning I had made a certain interior resolution; but I do not venture for one moment to connect this with that; I only tell what happened to me." This is the typical obfuscating Machen: Why is he compelled to "mention" that he had made some kind of "interior resolution" only to explain immediately that he is not connecting it to his hallucination? He apparently did think there was a connection or he would not have thought to mention the "interior resolution" at all. The olfactory hallucinations of incense that he experienced as he walked throughout London were also probably incited by his Golden Dawn initiation.

The Golden Dawn initiation was a serious and dramatic psychological experience. Members believed that they were leading the neophyte onto a pathway to his or her higher self, to dangerous and little-trodden byways of the human psyche, and to communication with and command of powers that reside in the cosmos. The undertaking was not for the weak or timid, and the initiation itself was designed to change the initiate forever. Earlier in this chapter I presented Machen's own description of the ceremony. What he omits are the actual oaths he would have sworn: to keep all order materials secret, to maintain honest and kindly relationships with fellow members, to refuse to be hypnotized by anyone outside the order, and to refuse to practice "Evil Magic." At the end of all the promises, he would have acknowledged that he was aware that breaching any of them would cause him to be killed by "the Divine Guardians of the Order, Who live in the Light of their Perfect Justice, and before Whom my Soul now stands." Machen entered the order with a new identity and a new name: *Frater Avallaunius*. Machen's original title for *Hill of Dreams* was *The Garden of Avallaunius*. He explains that he made up the word, taking it from the Roman-British name, Vallaunius. Machen thought the word should be Avallanius, meaning the man of Avalon, a reference to the mystical region beyond the veil in Arthurian legend.

Machen ends chapter nine of *Things Near and Far* by announcing that he does not want anyone to think that he became a Theosophist or was in any way connected to Eastern Mysticism, calling a person with such interests an "Oriental Occult Ass." Some members of the Golden Dawn were also members of the Theosophical Society, but even among those who had joined the society at a certain point, Yeats, Blackwood, and Fortune for example, there was the conviction that Western magical methods were the only ones suited for Europeans. Machen apparently shared that view, as he explains:

I can bear better I think the (more or less) Occidental Idiot, who will speak of Shin—the letter of the Hebrew Alphabet, not the delicate portion of our anatomy—attribute it to the Tarot Trump called the Fool, and just throw in a reference to Salt, Sulphur and Mercury.

Here Machen showcases a bit of his occult knowledge by talking about correspondences that pertained to the grade of Practicus that he had attained.

For a short time, Machen must have taken seriously his Golden Dawn initiation and the work that was incumbent on him as a neophyte. He was excited to meet new people, some of "very high attainment," as he put it. And he may have allowed himself the idealism of one new to a venture: In the beginning he would not have discovered that the order was about to fall into violent and mean-spirited internecine feuding that would bring out the worst character traits of the major players within the order.

Presumably, the initiation had the desired effect immediately, but by the end of 1900, roughly one year later, he had grown disillusioned with the order and found himself back in his normal state of mind. He puts it metaphorically: "It was towards the end of 1900 that I perceived that as I had lost sight of the admirable Syon, so Bagdad was wearing badly enough."

Nonetheless, Machen remained in the Order of the Golden Dawn throughout its tumultuous period from 1899 to 1903. By May 5, 1900, Machen had attained the 3=8 Practicus grade within the order. In 1903, Waite assumed control of the order briefly, spearheading a reorganization that amounted to the formation of his offshoot, the Independent and Rectified Rite, which curtailed the practice of magic and rewrote the rituals in a more Christian form. Machen followed Waite into the Rectified Rite in 1903.

Curiously, Purefoy Machen, Machen's second wife whom he married in December 1902, also joined the Independent and Rectified Rite. She was initiated on Saturday, September 24, 1904. Machen writes to Waite: "We shall meet on Saturday; and after the Rites you will come home with us. Purefoy will be at M. M. H. [Mark Masons' Hall in Great Queen's Street] at 1:30 for examination." It is not clear how long Arthur and Purefoy Machen remained members of the Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn. They were still active in 1907 as evidenced by a letter Machen wrote to Waite in March or September of that year, referencing "Tea and Equinox," the equinoxes being one of the mandatory meeting times for the order. The Machens did not, however, join Waite's Holy Order of the Golden Dawn, opened in 1915.

The operative question, in terms of this study, is in what way and how much Machen's involvement in the Order of the Golden Dawn influenced his creative life. The answer is that it was not a great influence. Most of Machen's best fictional works were written before 1899 or early in that year before his late November initiation. Although all of the works written during the decade of the 1890s were rife with paganism, ritual, and the occult, he must have learned about those topics on his own.

It is telling that Machen's protagonists do not often possess developed psychic abilities such as those that a trained ritual magician would have been reputed to possess. For example, there is no one among Machen's characters of the John Silence or Dr. Taverner type. His protagonists are usually men of science with some knowledge of archeology or neurology. The occult forces in the stories are usually out-of-control elemental entities having to do with earth forces at power spots (usually in Wales) such as those in "The Shining Pryamid" or *The Hill of Dreams*, or forces unleashed by medical hubris and botched medical practices and procedures such as those in *The Great God Pan*, "The Inmost light," or "The Novel of the White Powder." Actually, *The Great God Pan* brings both kinds of power together

between Dr. Raymond's work and the forces with which Helen communes, and perhaps that accounts, in part, for its great popularity.

"The White People" is the most magical (in terms of ritual magic) of all the works, and it is the most beloved by occultists who write about Machen such as Ithell Colquhoun and Gerald Suster. Meister Crowley actually annotated his copy of the story. In that story, a teenage girl practices witchcraft rituals she was taught as a young girl by her nurse. Here again, however, the rituals are not those of high ceremonial magic; rather they are those of folk paganism. Ambrose, the old hermit-philosopher in the story is the closest Machen ever comes to characterizing a magus, but there is not even a hint that Ambrose studied occultism and developed psychic sensibilities. However, his dissertation on the nature of sin and evil could have come directly out of the mouth of Meister Crowley, and its substance agrees with the Golden Dawn conception.

It is tempting to believe that *The Three Imposters* must have been influenced by Golden Dawn contacts and based on people Machen met within the order, most notably Yeats, "the Young Man in Spectacles." However, we have to take Machen at his word when he says that one of the strange occurrences of 1899 to 1900 was meeting Yeats and realizing, after the fact, that he was the Young Man in Spectacles and that Miss Lally was also seemingly based on a Golden Dawn member:

I presently became aware that something very odd indeed was happening: certain characters in *The Three Imposters* showed signs of coming to life, a feat which, perhaps, they had failed to perform before.

Machen insists that he met Yeats and other initiates at a café once he was a neophyte. He does not call Yeats by name, but describes him as "a dark young man, of quiet and retiring aspect, who wore glasses." He also reports that he met the man at his initiation: "he and I had met at a place where we had to be blindfolded before we could see the light." The give-away that this person is probably Yeats is the story that he supposedly told Machen that night about "the doings" of a black magician "who hung up naked women in cupboards by hooks which pierced the flesh of their arms." It is questionable that Yeats put it quite like that—Machen is probably having some fun—but the black magician would have been Meister Crowley with whom the order was then engaged in a fight, both mundane and occult. In 1900, Yeats became emperor of Isis-Urania Temple amid terrible infighting between Mathers and Crowley and many of the high-ranking members. "The dark young man" told Machen that the black magician had hired a band of thugs from Lambeth to kill him for a fee of eight shillings.

Machen claims that after he went home the night of the meeting in the café he realized that "the dark young man" was the Young Man in Spectacles. There is no record of Machen knowing Yeats or being involved with the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1894-1895 when he wrote *The Three Imposters*. It would have been possible for Machen to have met Yeats and other initiates before he wrote the book because Waite, Machen's closest friend at that time, had been a member of the order. However, there is no record of such a meeting, and Machen reports in his memoirs that it did not happen until 1899.

Even if the Order of the Golden Dawn, per se, did not influence Machen's writing, occultism did. He was a voracious reader, an autodidact, and had access, through George Redway and the British Museum, to most available occult sources. He and his first wife shared an interest in occultism and may have

engaged in practices together as part of their married intimacy. Finally, Machen continued to think about and study the Kabbalah, the basis for most of the Golden Dawn system, for the rest of his life. In a letter to Waite penned on April 11, 1936, he asks the former head of his order:

And since we are discoursing of interior things: tell me if I am right in declaring that the Serpent did not ascend beyond Daath (the logical understanding) in the Tree of Life? And furthermore; that being so, we may speak of the world of Kether, & the works of it as uncorrupted? [sic] Or, in terms of literature, may it justly be said that Pope's Character of Addison is of Daath, while Coleridge's Kubla Khan is of Kether?

Machen was thinking about whether the energy of nature, "the Serpent," ascended to the border of the highest realms, according Kabbalistic lore. Daath is a path on the Tree of life that acts as the threshold to the realm of Godhead.

Although Machen was thinking about the Kabbalah late in life, it is fair to say that occultism did not remain a central topic for him. An interest in The Holy Graal and the Celtic Church replaced the occultism of the 1890s. His tenure within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was not lifelong; it probably lasted for eight or so years. He repudiated his involvement after the fact, and he did not advance beyond the grades of the outer order. He learned about the occult independently between 1880 and 1900 by reading on his own and working for Redway. For most of his life, Machen was a High Church Anglican, and his Golden Dawn experience, according to his own assessment, was classed with the excesses of young adult life during the 1890s in London. <>