

■ WESTERN ESOTERICISM AND LITERATURE ■

What is the relationship between Western esotericism and literature? This seemingly straightforward question formed the basis for a workshop held on May 4-5, 2017 at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg. Organised by Henrik Bogdan and Dag Hedman, the participants included Karolina Enqvist Källgren (University of Gothenburg), Per Faxneld (Mid Sweden University), Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling), Christian Giudice (University of Gothenburg), Manon Hedenborg White (Uppsala University), Henrik Johnsson (Aarhus University), Sten Wistrand (Örebro University), and Andreas Önnarfors (University of Gothenburg). The question was approached from the perspectives of literature studies, history of religions, and history of ideas, and the examples discussed ranged from occultist authors such as Stanislaw Przybyszewski, Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, Jack Parsons, Kenneth Grant, traditionalist authors such as René Guénon and 20th-century philosopher María Zambrano, to well-known authors such as Marie Corelli, Gustav Meyrink, Gérard de Nerval, and now near-forgotten Swedish suspense fiction author Frank Heller.

In discussing the relationship between esotericism and literature, a first distinction might be made between works of fiction which include esoteric tropes (such as magic and alchemy) written by non-esoteric authors, i.e., authors who do not use fiction as a means to transmit or convey esoteric teachings, practices or »truths«, but rather as »fiction« in its more commonly held definition, as something imaginary which is not based on history or fact. However, such seemingly non-esoteric works can sometimes be interpreted by its readers as esoteric works in themselves. An illustrative example of this might be the eldritch works of the pulp-horror fiction author H.P. Lovecraft, whose now-celebrated stories such as »The Rats in the Walls«, »The Call of Cthulhu«, and »The Colour Out of Space«, often center on apparently occult themes such as forbidden, secret or destructive knowledge, and the worship of ancient and hideous deities. While Lovecraft made it clear that he was inspired by his own dreams and nightmares, and that he had no personal interest in esoteric practices or teachings, many later occultists, such as Kenneth Grant, argued that Lovecraft's works of fiction in fact convey occult truths. A similar example, discussed by Manon Hedenborg White in the present issue of *LIR-Journal*, is the fiction-based esotericism of the rocket scientist Jack Parsons, whose so-called Black Pilgrimage was based on Gothic horror writer M.R. James' »Count Magnus«, and R.W. Chambers' short-story collection *The King in Yellow*.

A second distinction might be the opposite, i.e., works of fiction written by occultist authors, with the expressed aim of conveying esoteric teachings and practices. One of the most intriguing aspects of this type of literature is, arguably, the motif of experiential knowledge. Scholars of esotericism such as Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Kocku von Stuckrad have argued that the claim to absolute knowledge or Gnosis is central to most forms of esotericism. But what sort of knowledge are we dealing with? According to Hanegraaff, it is possible to distinguish between three types of knowledge: (1) scientific knowledge, which is transmissible and verifiable, (2) religious knowledge, which is transmissible but non-verifiable, and (3) esoteric knowledge, which is non-transmissible and non-verifiable.<sup>1</sup> The reason why the esoteric knowledge is classified as non-transmissible is because it is believed to be experiential, something which you need to experience yourself in order to fully understand. Experiences are notoriously difficult to put into words, a fact which is abundantly clear from literature on mystical experiences. Words often fail to transmit the mystical experience, or to limit and reduce it, and the same, apparently, applies to claims of esoteric experiences. These esoteric claims are, furthermore, often veiled in discourses of secrecy, as something which one should not talk about, as something reserved for the initiates. One of the functions of secrecy in esotericism is thus the non-communication of something which is non-communicable – a transformative experience. A case in point would be the experience of undergoing a (secret) masonic ritual of initiation: you can only partake of the experience by becoming a mason yourself; the ritual should therefore be secret, i.e., not talked about. Another example would be the importance placed on transformative experiences in the magical system of the British occultist and author Aleister Crowley. Deeply influenced by his time in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Crowley developed an initiatory system in which two transformative experiences were of particular significance – the Knowledge and Conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel, and the Crossing of the Abyss. Despite the fact that he devoted considerable effort in explaining how to reach these altered states of consciousness, he was conspicuously silent about his own experiences, even in his private diaries not intended for publication.

Occultist authors seem less reluctant, however, to describe experiential knowledge and altered states of consciousness when writing works of fiction. There are, for instance, two long passages in Crowley's roman à clef *Moonchild* (1929) which describe the main female protagonist Iliel's »waking« visions. These visions, which have a transformative effect on Iliel, are brought about by invocations of the moon during her pregnancy. The second and longest vision covers over 11 pages

(pp. 221–232), and begins with an interesting description of Iliel's state of mind when having the vision:

— She was more languid than ever before, that night. It seemed to her as if her body were altogether too heavy for her; she had the feeling so well known to opium-smokers, which they call »cloué à terre.« It is as if the body clung desperately to the earth, by its own weight, and yet in the same way as a tired child nestles to its mother's breast. In this sensation there is a perfect lassitude mingled with a perfect longing. It may be that it is the counterpart of the freedom of the soul of which it is the herald and companion. In the Burial Service of the Church, we read »earth to earth, dust to dust,« coupled with the idea of the return of the spirit to the God that gave it. And there is in this state some sister-similarity to death, one would not say sleep, for the soul of the sleeper is usually earth-bound by his gross desires, or the memory of them, or of



Cover of Aleister Crowley's *Moonchild* (1929).

his recent impressions. But the smoker of opium, and the saint, self-conscious of their natural celestial, heed earth no more, and on the pinions of imagination or of faith seek mountain-tops of being.

It was in this state or one akin to it that Iliel found herself. And gradually, as comes also to the smoker of opium, the process of bodily repose became complete; the earth was one with earth, and no longer troubled or trammelled her true self.

She became acutely conscious that she was not the body that lay supine in the cradle, with the moon gleaming upon its bloodless countenance. No; she was rather the blue mist of the whole circle of enchantment, and her thoughts the sparkling dew-spirits that darted hither and thither like silvery fire-flies.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to sleep, death and the effect of drugs in describing Iliel's state of mind when having her visions has its parallel in the British occultist Dion Fortune's perhaps most well-known novel, *The Sea Priestess* (1938). The novel's main protagonist, Wilfred Maxwell, learns to commune with the moon after an asthma attack that forces him to take drugs to relieve effects of the attack. While recovering from the attack and still under the influence of the drugs, Maxwell undergoes a transformative experience in the form of a vision of the moon.

— I suppose I had been pretty drastically drugged; at any rate I was only semi-conscious and seemed to be half in and half out of my body. They had forgotten to draw the blind, and the moonlight was blazing in right on to the bed and I was too weak to get up and shut it out. I lay watching the full moon sliding across the night-sky through a light haze of cloud, and wondering what the dark side of the moon was like, that no man has ever seen, or will ever see. [...] As I lay there, doped and exhausted and half hypnotised by the moon, I let my mind range beyond time to the beginning. I saw the vast sea of infinite space, indigo-dark in the Night of the Gods; and it seemed to me in that darkness and silence must be the seed of all being. [...] It seemed to be a marvellous thing that I should lie there, practically helpless in mind, body and estate, and yet trace my lineage to the stars. And with the thought there came to me a strange feeling, and my soul seemed to go forth into the darkness, yet it was not afraid.

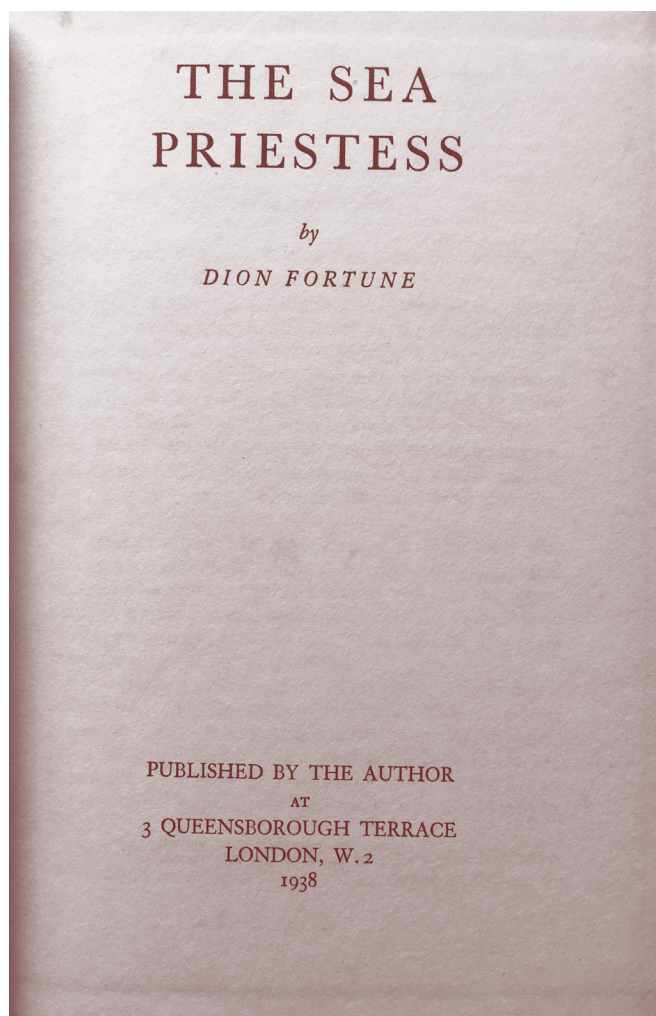
I wondered if I had died as I thought I should die when I clung to the banisters, and I was glad, for it meant freedom.

Then I knew that I had not died, and should not die, but that with the weakness and the drugs the bars of my soul had been loosened. For there is to every man's mind a part

like the dark side of the moon that he never sees, but I was being privileged to see it. It was like inter-stellar space in the Night of the Gods, and in it were the roots of my being.

With this knowledge came a profound sense of release; for I knew that the bars of my soul would never wholly close again, but that I had found a way to escape round to the dark side of the moon that no man could ever see.<sup>3</sup>

The visions described in *Moonchild* and *The Sea Priestess* can be interpreted as altered states of consciousness leading to an existential shift for the two protagonists: both Iliel and Wilfred Maxwell are left with a sense of liberation and a deeper connection to reality (in this case, the moon). What we can take away from these two examples, and many other like them, is that experiential knowledge is a significant motif in occultist literature. Furthermore, this motif is characterised by a number of recurrent components, such as (1) unusual circumstances (illness, pregnancy, invocations), (2) the experience is spontaneous, (3) a state between awake/dreaming/dreamless sleep (4), the



Title page of Dion Fortune's *The Sea Priestess* (1938).

characters are not in control of the visions, (5) access to a particular type of knowledge (absolute knowledge or *gnosis*), (6) communication or contact with some sort of higher intelligence, being or principle, (7) the experience is transformative, (8) the experience is associated with feelings of happiness, freedom, release, etc., (9) the experience ends by itself.

The motif of experiential knowledge is significant in the sense that it is directly linked to definitions of Western esotericism, as discussed above. The study of this motif can thus offer an important perspective on central issues in the theoretical study of Western esotericism. However, as the contributions to the present special issue of *LIR-Journal* will show, there are other, equally important perspectives that the study of Western esotericism and literature can bring. It is our hope that the essays you are about to read will not only add to your understanding of Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1851), Frank Heller's *Andarna och Furustolpe* (*The Spirits and Furustolpe*, 1920) and his short stories on séances, Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* (1913-1914), and the fiction-based esotericism in the Black Pilgrimage of Jack Parsons and Cameron, but also that they will lead to theoretical reflections about the relationship between Western esotericism and literature.

— Henrik Bogdan

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1 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 87–93.

2 Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild: A Prologue* (London: Mandrake Press, 1929), pp. 221–222.

3 Dion Fortune, *The Sea Priestess* (London: Published by the Author, 1938), pp. 13–14.

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