Sten Wistrand, »Gustav Meyrink’s The Golem. A Sensationalist Shlock Novel or an Esoteric Vision of the World?«

ABSTRACT

Gustav Meyrink lived in a time when the interest in spiritism, theosophy and occult phenomena was widespread. He joined about every esoteric society available, attended séances, experimented with diets and drugs, and practiced alchemy and yoga. But he also, in a way, was a sceptic. In some circles, he still has a reputation as a man with deep insights in the true nature of being and has even been seen as a man with prophetic gifts. Controversial in his lifetime, his reputation as an author is still disputable. Jorge Luis Borges praised his works, while Ernst Pawel, in his Kafka-biography, dismisses The Golem as »a shlock novel«.

In The Golem Meyrink transforms the Prague legends of Rabbi Loew’s creature of clay into a book of esoteric wisdom putting into play Kabbalistic and alchemist thinking, tarot cards and metempsychosis. The novel also has been both referred to, and rejected, as a story of horror or Gothic fiction, and described as purely fantastic. I would like to discriminate between effect and function and maintain that Meyrink takes advantage of Gothic effects in order to convey his spiritual vision of the world. That aside, it is reasonable to argue that his foremost interest, as an author of fiction, was to tell us a good and interesting story. For that reason you might also question if his references to esoteric traditions are to be taken wholly seriously or rather are to be seen as motifs in the hands of a quite self-indulgent novelist.


Keywords: Western esotericism, occultism, Gustav Meyrink, tarot, kabbalah, alchemy, 20th-century literature

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INTRODUCTION

"Many occultists have also been enthusiastic novelists," Wouter J. Hanegraaff notes in his *Western Esotericism*, and goes on to say that this "category of esotericists trying their hand at literature as a vehicle for their beliefs merges almost imperceptibly into that of literary writers influenced by eso-
In this latter category, he incorporates the important oeuvre of Gustav Meyrink, which is wholly permeated by esotericism. Corinna Treitel, in *A Science for the Soul*, discriminates between authors being occultists themselves and those only using the occult as a literary motif, ranking Meyrink among the former: “Authors of the caliber of Rainer Maria Rilke and Gustav Meyrink drew on occult ideas and experiences to fuel their creative processes; others, like Thomas Mann and Franziska zu Reventlow, eschewed occult acts but often took occult topics as their subjects.”

I have no ambition to give a full account of Meyrink’s relations to specific esoteric and occult traditions. This would be the more difficult considering his lifelong engagement and extremely wide reading in the field. What interests me is a more specific question, namely the relation between the esoteric motifs and the narrative in his novel *The Golem*. Are we reading a novel using esoteric motifs or an esoteric guidebook in the form of a novel? Whatever the answer to this question, there is a possible conflict between the desire to convey an esoteric vision and the desire to tell a good story. In 1917, after the publication of Meyrink’s second novel, *Das grüne Gesicht* («The Green Face»), Kurt Tucholsky remarked that: “It’s a shame that a great seer has cost us a great artist.”

Meyrink has attracted at least two types of readers: those content with an entertaining and strange story and those yearning for esoteric wisdom and guidance. The former can rejoice in fantastic – some might say weird – stories, while the latter are looking for more or less hidden messages. Googling Meyrink will take you to homepages and blogs of vast diversity in terms of type and quality, some of them quite difficult, to say the least, to evaluate. Some people even tend to ascribe him prophetic powers. For example, his short story «Petroleum, Petroleum» has been interpreted as predicting the oil spill in the Mexican Gulf in 2010. If you have that disposition you could also add the apocalyptic ending of *The Green Face* where the «twin towers» (!) of St. Nicholas in Amsterdam are falling: «One collapsed suddenly; the other whirled up into the air and exploded like a rocket.»

Meyrink’s name also figures in different traditionalist and right-wing circumstances, something he himself presumably would have found highly confusing, not to say embarrassing. His early reputation as a satirist, writing for magazines like *Simplicissimus* and *Der liebe Augustin*, and chief editor of the latter, caused him severe troubles during the First World War and later in a time of growing fascism. He was persecuted by German and Austrian nationalists and hated by everyone who considered themselves völkisch and conservative. The whole business attained such a magnitude that is has been named the *Meyrink Hetze* and it continued up till his death – and even afterwards; in 1933 his books were banned and publicly
burned by the Nazis. The rather puzzling association between Meyrink and traditionalism and the radical right movement could probably be traced back to the prolific, and politically problematic, esoteric thinker Julius Evola, who introduced Meyrink in Italy and translated three of his novels, though not Der Golem. It is obvious that Evola regarded Meyrink not only, or even foremost, as a fiction writer but rather as a man of esoteric insights. In the anthology Introduzione alla Magia quale scienza dell’Io, which collects articles published in the occult journals UR and KRUR by members of the UR Group, in which Evola was a leading figure in the 1920s, one chapter is entitled »The Path of Awakening According to Gustav Meyrink.« This chapter is a compilation of quotations from The Green Face and The Golem. It seems reasonable to regard the right-wing hijacking of Meyrink as a kind of spill-over effect.

Yet Meyrink’s reputation as an author is quite obscure mainly for other and artistic reasons. He is normally not mentioned in common handbooks of »consecrated« authors of the 20th century, not even in overviews of horror or Gothic fiction. Lee B. Jennings opens an article on The Golem with these words:

—— Writers sympathetic toward Gustav Meyrink’s work have stressed that he was a serious and devoted student of mystical and esoteric doctrine. Less sympathetic critics, especially those favoring a sociological approach, have tended rather to treat his work under the rubric of »Trivialliteratur.«

Ernst Pawel, in his Kafka biography, dismisses The Golem as a »best-selling shlock novel« and one might imagine a deep and tired sigh accompanying these words by Cathy S. Gelbin: »the plot disintegrates into a tangled mess of doubled characters and subplots resisting any narrative cohesion.« Others, like Amanda Boyd, consider Meyrink to be much more than simply a representative of early-twentieth-century »Trivialliteratur.« Although he often worked within the conventions of popular literature, Meyrink was a thinker who, from a uniquely occultist viewpoint, considered pressing philosophical and religious issues that had their origins in the crisis of modernity. Boyd is backed up by, for example, Luis Montiel, who maintains that »Meyrink is a much more interesting writer than is commonly recognized.« Eric J. Klaus states that: »While his place in literary history may be in dispute among literary critics and scholars, the status of his first novel is not; it is regarded as a classic of German modernism and of the Fantastic, as well as an important work of the period.«
It is not surprising that Meyrink’s oeuvre can evoke such different opinions. However, the main problem when it comes to his novels is not, as I see it, his affiliation with popular culture but rather his passion for the esoteric, which on some occasions threatens to turn him into a preacher instead of a storyteller. But when it comes to Meyrink’s best works, like *The Golem*, I definitely find them worth our serious attention.

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**BACKGROUND**

**Gustav Meyrink – Some Brief Biographical Remarks**

*Gustav Meyrink: Ein Leben im Bann der Magie* (»A Life Under the Spell of Magic«) is the telling title of Hartmut Binder’s Meyrink biography from 2009. Mike Mitchell’s one-year earlier *VIVO: The Life of Gustav Meyrink* has a more concealed significance. »VIVO« (I live) reads the inscription on Meyrink’s tombstone. This might seem paradoxical but ought to be understood as his sincere conviction. He died on the 4th of December 1932. His wife Mena had promised not to give him
any analgesic; in lotus position, his eyes looking into the sun, he wanted to, fully conscious, experience the transition into another state of the mind.

Meyrink was the illegitimate son of the Austrian actress Marie Meyer and a German nobleman, Friedrich Karl Gottlob Freiherr Varnbüler von und zu Hemmingen, whose part in the affair was exposed only after his death. Together with his mother, the fifteen-year-old Gustav arrived in Prague in 1883, the same year Kafka was born, and remained in the city for nearly twenty years. He was known as a sportsman and a swordsman and a decadent dandy with extravagant habits. But he also showed a keen interest in occultism, which of course was in no way startling at a time when tables were dancing from Moscow to Boston. Yet Meyrink’s engagement was extraordinary. He joined about every secret society and mystic order available, Rosicrucian, theosophical, spiritual – you name it. These had fanciful names like *Ancient and Primitive Rite of Masonry*, *Brotherhood of the Ancient Rites of the Holy Grail in the Grand Orient of Patmos* and *Old Gnostic Church of Eleusis*. He himself founded the theosophical *Lodge of the Blue Star* in Prague, made a startling career in Helena Petrovna Blavatsky’s society, and became friends with Annie Besant. He also performed experiments with diets and drugs, and had keen interests in alchemy, anthroposophy, tantrism, sufism, Kabbalah, and Taoism. But the only constant in his life, apart from yoga, was following what he named the pilot of his life, or »the masked figure,« a kind of spiritual leader to be found inside rather than outside himself. His *nom de guerre* in one of the societies was Theravel, which means »I go; I seek; I find.« The problem, however, was that he seldom found what he was searching for and sooner or later left in disappointment every society he had joined. Being both a seeker and a sceptic, he once, at a séance led by the physician and parapsychologist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, snatched a piece of ectoplasm from the medium and had it scientifically analyzed as a piece of cheesecloth prepared with chemicals. On the other hand, he never gave up his search for the path leading to other dimensions and to eternal life, to a state of being where you are able to mentally control your body, where you are master of your own destiny and where you no longer worship gods but transform yourself into a god.

--- Meyrink’s novel and the golem in Jewish tradition

*Der Golem* was published in 1913 and 1914 as a serial in the magazine *Die Weissen Blätter*; the book appeared in 1915 and was printed in several editions. But it had been a grueling effort to finish – getting a vast amount of material into order, killing darlings and structuring the rest into a functional whole.
The result was a bestseller and when it comes to establishing Prague as, to quote André Breton, «the magic capital of Europe», it might well be that *The Golem* has been of more importance than the works of Kafka.\(^{18}\) You might say that Meyrink did to Prague what Dickens had done to London, Sue to Paris, and Gogol to Petersburg – and, although himself a *goy*, he merged mystical Prague with Jewish Prague, referring to Jewish tales and legends and plunging into the world of Kabbala. He continued to explore the city in *Walpurgisnacht* (1917), but this time its gentile districts. Meyrink himself had left Prague back in 1904, after a financial debacle followed by some months in prison, falsely accused of fraud.

Title page, *Der Golem* (1915).

When *Der Golem* was to appear in the German bookshops in December 1915, the publisher Kurt Wolff Verlag had it advertised in several issues of *Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*, describing it as equally exciting as the most sensational detective story but also as a deep and thought-provoking work. The golem motif is said to have been transformed in a fantastic way, turning the book into an ethical crime novel as well as a magical and visionary text concerned with the human soul and the destiny of man. But the importance of the Prague setting was also stressed, the golem being characterized as...
the demon of the city. A brief version of this text could also be read on the book cover of the first edition. Actually, this is a quite satisfying description of the novel and its relationship to the traditional golem tales. In the novel, the puppeteer Zwakh retells some of these legends about the creature of clay coming to life when his creator, a Prague rabbi never mentioned by name, attaches «a scrap of paper with a magic formula» behind the teeth of the creature, «attracting free stellar energy from the cosmos» (56). But Zwakh also recounts events that have nothing to do with the existing folklore.

The Hebrew word *golem* means «the unformed, amorphous» and could be used for a being without a soul, like Adam before, as Gershom Scholem puts it, «the breath of God had touched him.» Since Medieval times, however, it is mostly thought of as a manmade, artificial being that comes to life through the use of magic in the sense of combining the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in a certain way.

Today, the golem figure is first and foremost associated with Prague and the Talmudic scholar and rabbiJudah Loew ben Bezalel, also known as the Maharal. This would probably have surprised the learned man; during his lifetime he had no reputation whatsoever of being a miracle rabbi. His name was likely attached to the golem stories because he lived in the same town as the contemporary Rudolph II, well known for his interest in alchemy, astrology, magic, and everything strange. In one of the stories about the rabbi, he has some encounters with the king. But it was only long after his death that Loew’s name was associated with tales of this kind; the first known text, by Berthold Auerbach, dates from 1837. This reference is only a short passage in Auerbach’s novel about Spinoza, in which he lets Loew retell a story told by his German housemaid. More substantial are the texts by Franz Klutschak (1841), Abraham Moses Tendlau (1842) and Leopold Weisel (1847), all of which also vaguely indicate that they might draw on an older oral folklore tradition. These early stories are quite harmless, the golem being a kind of servant chopping wood and carrying water, although he also can go amok if the rabbi forgets to remove the letters giving him life.

According to Curt Leviant, it was not until the Polish rabbi Yudl Rosenberg in 1909 published his *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague* that the golem was given a name, Yossele, and became a protector of the entire Jewish community and not only a servant of a single rabbi. However, this is not quite true, since already in 1893 the Polish Yiddish author I. L. Peretz wrote a very short story in which the Maharal creates the golem in order to guard the Prague ghetto against marauders. The golem fulfills his duty in a very decisive way, filling the city with corpses and forcing the gentiles to plea for peace. It is hardly far-fetched to associate...
this new orientation with the pogroms in the Russian empire at that time and, when it comes to Rosenberg, the so-called Hilsner Affair 1899 in Bohemia.27

In the years to come, the figure was to appear in literary works by, for example, Chayim Bloch (1919), Halpern Leivick (1921), Dovid Frishman (1922) and Shloyme Bastomski (1923), in movies by Paul Wegener (1915 and 1920, the first one being lost) and Julien Duvivier (1935–36), and in operas by Nicolae Bretan (1924) and Eugen d’Albert (1926). Since then, the golem has caught the interest of Willy Kyrklund (1953), Jorge Luis Borges (1958), Isaac Bashevis Singer (1982), Elie Wiesel (1983), Cynthia Ozick (1997), Elizabeth Swados (2015), and many others. He also appears in popular culture, where the creature can turn into a regular monster.28 Wegener’s film, a classic from the silent film era of German expressionism, is often referred to as an adaptation for the screen of Meyrink’s novel but actually has nothing at all to do with it. It was instead inspired by the stories of Rosenberg and Bloch, where the latter largely just rewrote Rosenberg’s book. Even Kafka gave the golem a weird try in his diary from 1916 but never finished the story.29 One might add that Rosenberg’s version has made no visible impact on the novel by Meyrink.

Cathy S. Gelbin quotes an entry in the diary of Gershom Scholem, who in 1916, after reading The Golem, asked himself: »What mysticism is this / That this man casts so lustily / in dead rags?« Scholem continues on to say that Meyrink »knows nothing« of Judaism and ends: »I’ve tired now of Meyrink!«30 Later, Scholem remarked that in The Golem »Indian rather than Jewish ideas of redemption are expounded« and that the »alleged Kabbalah that pervades the book suffers from an overdose of Madame Blavatsky’s turbid theosophy.« He also points out that the golem figure in the novel »owes very little to the Jewish tradition even in its corrupt, legendary form.«31 Scholem seems merely to notice these circumstances but Elizabeth Baer is upset and finds that the novel »manifests a disdain for Judaism itself« and that Meyrink has made »a disrespectful intertextual appropriation« of »a Jewish legend.«32

Baer and Cathy S. Gelbin heavily bring out the alleged anti-Semitism of the novel. The latter mentions »Meyrink’s invocation of anti-Semitic discourse« and his use of »antisemitic stereotypes« but also maintains that he »reverses antisemitic mythology« and finally she actually speaks of »Meyrink’s ambiguous portrayals of Jews and Jewish spirituality.«33 I will not take this discussion further, but it could be worth mentioning that Meyrink in the contemporary nationalist German propaganda was disdained and attacked, on false grounds, for being Jewish himself.34
Meyrink never called himself an esotericist and seems to have had an ambiguous relationship with occultism. In her dissertation, Amanda Boyd makes no real distinction between these two concepts but most frequently uses occultism. Instead, Montiel points out a kinship with Jung’s analytical psychology, arguing that Meyrink discovered for himself the psychic event that Jung called the ‘individuation process’ and reflected it in his novels. The point is that Meyrink has not associated magic with supernatural powers, or at least not with powers outside man himself but considers these powers to be a psychic ability.

According to Antoine Faivre, the distinction between esotericism and occultism did not really enter the vocabulary until the middle of the nineteenth century but he also notices that the problem in terminology is complicated by the fact that ‘occultism’ is sometimes used in the sense of ‘esotericism.’ For Faivre, the point is to distinguish a certain world view from the different ways of manipulating it: ‘If esotericism is a form of thought, occultism would instead be a group of practices or a form of action that would derive its legitimacy from esotericism resting on the doctrine of correspondences, or the law of universal interdependence, which expresses a living and dynamic reality.’ In order to define esotericism, he selects six characteristics, emphasizing four of them as fundamental: 1) Symbolic and real correspondences [...] are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen and they are intended to be read and deciphered. This means that the entire universe is a huge theater of mirrors and that everything is a sign and that every object hides a secret. 2) Nature must be read as a book and is essentially alive in all its parts. 3) The idea of correspondences presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds, such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits. It is the imagination that allows the use of these intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis and could be seen as the tool for knowledge of self, world, Myth and for rendering the invisible visible: The accent is placed on vision and certainty, rather than belief and faith. 4) The experience of transmutation, a term borrowed from alchemy, is essential, and transmutation should be distinguished from transformation as it is a question of metamorphosis, a passage from one plane to another, a modification of the subject in its very nature.
in this article. I might just as well say right from the start that in the following it will be obvious that *The Golem* is permeated by the four categories highlighted by Faivre. But that does not mean that the novel could not also be read as a kind of guidebook for human fulfillment by means of occultism. Nor does it say anything about the way Meyrink uses the different motifs in building a novel.

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**THE GOLEM – FRAME AND EMBEDDED STORY**

Elizabeth Baer maintains that »providing any kind of plot summary here is a challenge« and I can only agree. The structure of *The Golem* is complicated, with different but nevertheless intertwined storylines. There is a love affair, a kind of crime mystery, and the protagonist’s quest for his suppressed memories and past; demoniac villains and angelic women are involved as well as lunatics and men of wisdom. Meyrink is not afraid of confronting us with seemingly unlikely coincidences and painting with vivid and loud colors. A short summary can easily give the impression that Pawel’s opinion of the book as a sensationalist scrap novel is correct.

A crucial question is how to describe the complex relation between the frame and the embedded story. Baer, for example, seems to have misunderstood it completely when she writes: »the narrator, an engraver of jewelry by trade who also restores books and antiques, mistakenly picks up a hat belonging to Athanasius Pernath and metamorphoses into that person.« Actually it is Pernath who is the engraver and who restores books. She also maintains that the novel takes place »around 1890, just as the destruction of the ghetto is getting underway.« That is correct when it comes to the embedded story but not for the frame, which takes place 33 years later, the »golem interval.«

Theodor Harmsen also makes the relation between the two levels more confusing than necessary. According to him, the narrative point of view is »constantly shifting« between the dreaming Athanasius Pernath and the often dreaming I-narrator, who he calls the chief character of the novel. But he concludes by saying that the two characters in the frame and the embedded story are blended into a new »I.« Lee B. Jennings holds, reasonably enough, that a »man troubled by puzzling dreams gradually resolves into the figure of Athanasius Pernath, a gem engraver living in the Prague ghetto.« But he concludes quite bewilderingly, saying that in the end »we discover that Pernath’s history, though apparently true, was dreamt by yet another man, who now awakes.« Eric J. Klaus is more to the point. According to him, the unnamed narrator in the frame in his »drifting between waking and slumber« is transported to the Prague ghetto decades earlier where the »psyche of the slumbering narrator, his ‘T’, melds with
The appearance of the golem. Illustration by Hugo Steiner-Prag for *Der Golem* (1916).

Pernath’s, establishing the doppelganger motif. However, to understand the relationship between the different narrators I think we have to pay attention to the concept of *ibbur*, or the impregnation of souls. I will come back to that later.

Boyd quotes Meyrink saying, in a newspaper interview from 1931, that in his stories the point is often found in the very beginning. That is true also for *The Golem*, even though the point is presented as a riddle. The novel opens with the anonymous narrator’s experiencing I, let us call him X, lying on a bed in a hotel room. He beholds the moonlight shining on the foot of his bed, »lying there like a large, bright, flat stone.« He is reminded of a Buddhist story of a crow who mistakes a stone for a lump of fat and, disappointed, flies off, like »we – we, the tempters – leave Gautama, the ascetic, because we have lost our pleasure in him.« The stone keeps haunting X but he cannot figure out what it is trying to tell him and feels powerless.
As he falls asleep, his senses are detached from his body and in chapter two he suddenly finds himself »standing in a gloomy courtyard« looking at »a Jewish junk-dealer,« and then becoming aware that he has »been living in this neighbourhood for a long time now« (26). He recognizes the fourteen-year-old red-haired Rosina, and continues to present inhabitants of the ghetto by their names. Suddenly, a woman rushes into his room, addresses him as »Herr Pernath« (32) and asks him to hide her.

Then we are back in the room of the sleeping man who asks himself where he might have read that name, Pernath. He remembers he once by mistake took the wrong hat somewhere, »and even then I was surprised that it fitted me so well, since my head has a very individual shape« (32). On its lining he reads ATHANASIUS PERNATH. The hat frightens him and suddenly the question of the stone that looks like a lump of fat flies toward him like an arrow. He avoids it by quickly imagining Rosina’s »sickly-sweet grin« and concludes that he soon will be back, »safe and sound,« in his room in Hahnpassgasse and has nothing to worry about (33).
From now on, the autodiegetic narrator is Athanasius Pernath. It is only in the last chapter that we return to X in his hotel room and learn that everything we have experienced in between took place thirty-three years ago. X sets out to find Pernath in order to return his hat. It turns out that he lives on the Street of the Alchemists in the Castle area, but obviously in another dimension. X gets a glimpse of him: »His face is so like mine, that it is as if I were looking into a mirror« (262; Meyrink's italics).

In other words, most of the novel is the story of Athanasius Pernath as told by himself. But of course we understand that this story also has something to say to X (and to us) and might hold the answer to the question attached to the stone and the lump of fat. As already mentioned, the confusing relationship between X and Pernath has caused critics and scholars much trouble and, as I see it, their descriptions of it have added to the confusion rather than dispersed it.

The book cover of the first edition declared that the story is to be understood as a dream (»eigentlich ein großer Traum«) and that is how it generally has been described. But is this the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Formally, it is reasonable to describe the story of Pernath as the dream of X but functionally, this is a bit pointless. What happens in chapter 3 is best described as a dissolving and that means that the story of Pernath is really the story of Pernath and not the story of X dreaming about Pernath, although X and Pernath are interconnected. But the dissolving is not as clear-cut as in, for example, movies like Clint Eastwood’s The Bridges of Madison County and James Cameron’s Titanic. There are some pages where X and Pernath are hard to distinguish from each other.

Carl Gustav Jung refers to the episode in discussing hats as »something that epitomizes the head« and draws the conclusion that X, by putting on the hat of Pernath, »becomes involved in a strange experience« in the form of »an emergence of the unconscious.« However, understanding the story of Pernath as a kind of allegory for the unconscious of X does not really lead anywhere. The fact that the dissolving in this case is somewhat blurred might be explained by saying that Meyrink was incapable of properly handling the device. But I think that would be doing him an injustice. It is actually congenial in its context, and that has to do with the concept of ibbur, »soul impregnation,« introduced but not fully explained in chapter 3. It is a kind of metempsychosis discussed in the Kabballistic tradition. But you have to keep the concept of ibbur distinct from the concept of gilgul, which means »transmigration« or »reincarnation.« Chaim Vital (1542–1620), main disciple of Isaac Luria, explains the difference in his work Sefer Hagilgulim:
Reincarnation ([gilgul]) and soul impregnation ([ibbur])? You should know that reincarnation is as follows: when an embryo is leaving its mother’s womb, a soul enters its body. [...] This soul has no permission to leave the body until the day of death. By contrast, soul impregnation is when a secondary soul comes down into this world and enters into a person who has already been born in the world, once they have grown up.

There can be two different reasons for this impregnation:

— The first is when this new soul that comes to impregnate a person does so for his own needs. This is because this new

Athanasius Pernath receives »Book of Ibbur« by a stranger. Illustration by Hugo Steiner- Prag for *Der Golem* (1916).
soul is lacking a certain commandment, which it did not perform in a previous incarnation. [...] Therefore it impregnates this person in order to perform that commandment which is lacking. It is also possible, however, that it impregnates the person for the sake of the person himself, to aid him, to give him merit and to guide him, while this extra soul does not actually lack anything for itself.

There is a difference between them, however, for the impregnating soul which comes for the sake of completing its own lack spreads throughout the body of that person, just like the original soul of the body itself. It suffers all the pain and distress of that body just like the original soul. It remains there till that commandment which is lacked is performed. After it is performed, then the soul leaves the person and departs. The extra soul which comes for the sake of aiding the person, however, does not suffer any of the distress and pain of the body at all. This is because it does not lack anything and has not come out of its own need. Also it does not have any fixed time to leave.⁵¹

Ideas like this explain why we shouldn’t necessarily regard the story of Athanasius Pernath as only a dream or fantasy in the head of X or, like Jung, as representing his unconscious. Rather, you might say that the soul of Pernath has impregnated that of X in order to help him come to terms with the crucial questions of life by letting him re-experience the experiences of Pernath. This interpretation is also in line with the ending of the book. Pernath sees, or has a vision of, his beloved Miriam and her father Shemaiah Hillel through a window just before he falls to the ground and dies. At this moment, X wakes up in his hotel room:

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I am in bed. In my hotel.
And I’m not called Pernath.
Was it all a dream? No, dreams are not like that. [...] In my dream I experienced everything this Athanasius Pernath experienced; in the course of one night I saw, heard, felt everything as if I was Pernath. But then why did I not know what he saw through the barred window at the moment when the rope broke and he called out, »Hillel, Hillel!«?
That, I realized, was the moment at which he separated from me [my italics/SW]. (253–254)

These last words clearly indicate that Meyrink uses the concept of ibbur in the same way as Vital. That said, I do not know whether or not he had actually read the above quoted passages from Vital or if he at all was acquainted with his
work. Neither Binder nor Mitchell nor Harmsen nor anyone else who I have come across has anything to say about these matters. Nevertheless, the concept was obviously known and used in Meyrink’s circles. But whatever source Meyrink might have had, my main point is: understood in the same way as Vital explains it, the concept of ibbur explains and makes sense of the relationship between X and Pernath, which is crucial for understanding the story.

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**ROSINA, ANGELINA, MIRIAM – THREE POSSIBLE PATHS TO TAKE**

Pernath has encounters with three women, who we also understand represent three different paths for him to take and which will determine his future as both a carnal and a spiritual being. In the chapter with the telling heading »Eve,« a feeling of being in love has tormented him the whole night through:

> At first it had been Angelina’s body nestling against mine, then I was in the middle of an ostensibly innocent conversation with Miriam; hardly had I torn up that image, than Angelina returned and kissed me only to turn into Rosina, dancing with drunken, half-closed eyes, wearing a tail-coat, but otherwise naked.« (164–165)

The red-haired and lascivious young Rosina is a human animal whose flesh is white »like the axolotl […] in the tank of salamanders in the pet-shop« and with eyelashes »as repulsive as those of rabbits« (26–27). She represents sexual lust and earthly bestial desires.

Angelina, the woman who dashed into Pernath’s room hunted by Wassertrum and asked him to save her, turns out to be an old acquaintance, then a little girl living in a castle. Pernath is »mesmerised by her radiant blue eyes,« »beguiled by her charm and presses his teeth, mad with love, into the ball of her thumb« (my italics/SW). She calls herself »frivolous« and says that she wants to close her eyes and »plunge into life’s glittering bubbles« (174–177). She represents human and earthly love.

Lastly, there is Miriam. She is the innocent and good-hearted daughter of the Warden of the Old-New Synagogue. According to Pernath, she is a »strange girl,« a type of girl he has »never come across before« (114). He wants to cut her portrait as a cameo and choses a moonstone for it. This is Meyrink’s symbolic way of connecting her to the story of the crow and the lump of fat, since that parable came to X’s mind when he saw the moonlight lying on his bed like a stone. Pernath had initially meant the moonstone for a cameo representing the Egyptian God Osiris, »inspired by the vision of the hermaphrodite from the Book of Ibbur« but »gradually came to see such a close resemblance to the daughter of Shemaiah Hillel that he alters his plan (123). Later her profile is said to be closer to »the
sixth Egyptian dynasty – though much too spiritual, even for that – than to our age with its rationalistic types (156). We also learn that for Miriam «the important – the essential – thing about the Bible and other holy writings» is «the miraculous element and that alone, and not moral or ethical commandments [...] which could just as well be in the Civil Code» (142). In other words, she is not only linked to the concept of the Hermaphrodite but also to Osiris, the God traditionally seen as personifying the principle of spiritual rebirth. In short, Miriam is not quite of this world; she represents spiritual love and sensitive intelligence, rebirth and fulfilment.

In other words, Pernath is standing at a fork and has to choose which of the three paths to take. It might also be compared with a staircase, which he must decide whether to ascend (Miriam), descend (Rosina) or remain on the floor where he is standing (Angelina).

It is quite clear which path he ought to take and Meyrink demonstrates this in his symbolic way. After Angelina and Pernath have fallen into each other’s arms, Pernath, who, as we have seen, was mad with love, is «staggering like a drunken man down through the evening mist to the town» and finds himself «walking round in a circle» (177). This is an obvious allusion to an earlier image of a brain-damaged cat «staggering round and round in a circle» (63). He also recalls how the fountain where he and Angelina many years ago had bidden farewell «was full of rotting elm-leaves» (178). Not long after this episode Rosina seduces him. In this case no love is involved, only lust. The day after is described as dull and gray and when Pernath awakes after a «lifeless, dreamless sleep, for all the world as if I were dead», he finds his stove «full of cold ashes» (188).

As mentioned, Rosina is compared to an animal. But she is not the only one. The junk-dealer Wassertrum has «fish’s eyes and a gaping hare-lip» and is likened to a «human spider that can sense the slightest touch on its web» (28). The bestial metaphors are recurrent in the descriptions of disabled and unsympathetic characters. Rosina is chased by the «deaf and dumb» Jaromir who is roaming «like a wild animal» (30) and a man who turns out to be a pedophile has a «puffy, frog-like face» (41). The medical student Charousek talks of the inhabitants of the ghetto as «toothless predators, who’ve lost their strength and claws» (43). Even Angelina, though in a more subtle and gentle way suitable for her, is associated with an animal on one occasion when «her coquettish face» is said to be «beaming out of a mountain of furs» (174).

Meyrink’s use of beast similes for certain characters is not surprising. In his non-fiction, he uses the concept Tiermenschen (»animal/beast men«) for people who have no other ambition than to live an everyday life, »slaves of the demiurge,« as he puts it. He practiced yoga with the objective of developing from...
a Tiermensch into a superior being, and also described this transformation of the self in alchemistic terms, saying that true alchemy is not a question of transforming lead into gold but of transforming Tiermenschen into Goldmenschen. Amanda Boyd elaborates on Meyrink's relation to the Nietzschean concept of the Übermensch and maintains that he is giving it new meaning within a framework of his occultist notion of transformation, or Verwandlung. But you can just as well say that he echoes neo-platonic and gnostic traditions and ideas of the great chain of beings as manifested in, for example, the Florentine Academy in the 15th century. One recalls these famous words from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man, where God speaks to Adam:

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We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

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In The Golem, it is Miriam who represents the path to divinity, which the ending of the novel also confirms.


I will present these features under three different headings but, as will become clear, they all are interconnected.

--- Alchemy, the Hermaphrodite, and Osiris ---

Lee B. Jennings remarks that even a casual reading should bear out the author’s serious endeavor to provide a fictionalized account of the mystical struggle toward the higher self. In various works, Meyrink draws upon different areas of esoteric lore to symbolize this struggle; in this novel, the Kabbala, the tarot, Gnosticism, and alchemy are favored. On the other hand, Theodore Ziolkowski, in The Alchemist in Literature, maintains that although The Golem is a fantastic novel, it does not involve alchemy. This opinion might be correct from an occultist point of view, but not from an esoteric. There is no activity with retorts and so on going around in the novel but the alchemist’s idea of the purification of the self is crucial. In his work on the occult in symbolist literature, John Senior maintains that the alchemist process is actually both chemical and psychological. […] the basic forces of self and universe are identical – as one acts on metal, one acts on self. The true alembic is the
experimenter’s soul which goes through the process as the chemicals do in ordinary glass in the laboratory. Alchemy is a yantra also by which the experimenter produces in himself the ‘sun,’ or ‘philosopher’s stone,’ of enlightenment.63

The central symbol for fulfillment in Meyrink’s novel is the hermaphrodite, which also is a salient feature in alchemist tradition.64 It usually represents »the fusion of opposite polarities, and therefore characterizes a major development on the spiritual path to transcending duality.«65 The hermaphrodite is also connected with Kabbalistic cosmogony, being the crown of the Tree of Life from which the Demiurge creates male Wisdom and

![The Hermaphrodite (Rebis) from Compendium Alchymist (1706) by Johann Michael Faust](image-url)
female Intelligence. In The Golem, Pernath has a vision, when reading the Book of Ibbur, which includes an entwined couple being »transformed into a single figure, a hermaphrodite, half male, half female, sitting on a throne of mother-of-pearl« (36). Later, Miriam, whose connection with Osiris has already been established through the cameo, tells Pernath »that it is one of the goals of life for two beings to fuse into one, into – have you ever heard of the Egyptian cult of Osiris? – something of which the ‘hermaphrodite’ is a symbol.« (173) She continues: »By that I mean the magic union of the male and female principles in the human race to create a demi-good. As a final goal! No, not as a final goal, as the beginning of a new course, which will be eternal, which will have no final end.« (173)

Not long after that, Pernath one night happens to take the wrong way and ends up in »‘Goldmakers Alley’ where, in the Middle Ages, the adepts of alchemy heated the philosophers’ stone and poisoned the moonbeams« (179). Strangely enough, there is a house blocking the end of the street, a house he has not seen before. He goes through the gate and through the window beholds an ancient man who »turns his head towards the dusty alchemical flasks and retorts on the shelves« (180). Later, his friend Prokop tells the legend of the »Wall by the Last Lamp,« a house on the Street of the Alchemists only visible in fog »and that to a ‘Sunday’s child’ alone« (184). At daytime you will only see a large, gray rock:

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Beneath the rock, according to the legend, there’s a huge treasure buried. The stone itself is said to have been laid by the ‘Order of Asiatic Brethren,’ whom some people claim founded Prague, as the foundation stone for a house which will not be inhabited until the end of time, by a person – or rather, by a hermaphrodite, a being composed of man and woman. And this being will have a hare on its coat of arms. By the way, the hare was the symbol of Osiris [...].

Until the time is come, Methuselah himself, so the legend goes, will keep watch at the place to stop Satan flying down and treading the stone [...]. (184–185)

At the end of the novel, the anonymous X is looking for Pernath and finds him and Miriam in the same transcendental house on the Street of the Alchemist. The double gate in front of it is decorated with a hermaphrodite »with one half on each side, the right-hand one female, the left-hand male.« The figure is seated, just as the hermaphrodite in Pernath’s earlier vision, on a »throne of mother-of-pearl« and the garden wall is »covered with mosaics [...] depicting the cult of the Egyptian God Osiris« (261). In other words, Miriam’s dreaming of the magic union seems to be fulfilled by her and Pernath.
The hermaphrodite brings us to Meyrink’s use of the tarot. According to Irene Gad, the figure of the Magician reminds us of a hermaphrodite, sufficient unto himself and self-fertilizing [...], the integration and connection of good and evil, above and below [...]. He signifies the absolute container of all possibilities. Together with the Hanged Man (der Gehenkte), another trump card, the Juggler/Magician (der Pagat) plays a significant role in the novel.

In A History of the Occult Tarot, Ronald Decker and Michael Dummett give Meyrink and The Golem credit for the increased German interest in the tarot after the first World War. Meyrink obviously shares the esoteric opinion that the pack of cards can be seen as part of a Kabbalistic tradition, or at least this is how it is presented in the novel. Anyhow, the archivist Hillel, who keeps the register of the living and the dead (117; Meyrink’s italics), as he himself puts it, explains briefly that the word tarock or tarot is the same as the Jewish word Tora, ‘the Law’, or the old Egyptian tarut, which means ‘One who is asked’, and the ancient [Zoroastrian/SW] Zend word tarisk, which means ‘I demand an answer.’ He also pays attention to the fact that...
the trumps are twenty-two, »precisely the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet« and that »our Bohemian cards have pictures which are obviously symbols.« He exemplifies this with the Juggler, »the lowest trump.« It is »the first card in the pack« and in the same way, he explains, »man is the first figure in his own picture book, his own double: the Hebrew character Aleph, which is formed after the shape of a man, with one hand pointing up at the sky and the other downwards, saying, therefore, 'As it is above, so it is below; as it is below, so it is above.'«

These last words are actually quoted from the »Emerald Tablet,« which alchemists attributed to Hermes Trismegistus: »What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below,« to accomplish the miracles of one thing. The Tablet goes on to say that you must ascend from the earth to heaven and then descend to the earth and unite together the powers of things superior and inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and obscurity will fly away from you. John Senior, from whom I am quoting the Tablet, is not commenting on Meyrink but still draws a conclusion highly valid when it comes to the thinking of Meyrink and the opinion that alchemy is a question of self-transformation: »Translated into the less symbolic language of India, the alchemical operation is yoga, whereby the opposites are ‘yoked.’ The operation of the sun is the realization of the Self.«

One might observe that Hillel, as quoted above, keeps the register of the living and the dead. In doing this, he resembles the Egyptian god Thoth, the god of wisdom and magic, who kept account of the deceased and together with Osiris presided over the judgement of the dead. It was Thoth who helped Osiris to resurrect after being killed and chopped up by his brother Seth; in later traditions he has also been associated with hermetic knowledge and even the tarot.

In one of the uncanniest scenes in the novel, Pernath finds himself trapped in a closed room in a house where the golem is reported to disappear after haunting the streets of the ghetto. Here, Pernath’s eyes fall on a tarot card, the Juggler, which he recognizes as painted long ago by he himself.

It is important to highlight the way Pernath has reached the chamber. He has realized that he must »set up an interpreter« within himself »to translate the things instinct whispers without the aid of words.« That, he thinks, is »the key« to establishing »a clear language of communication with my own inner being.« The very word »key« makes him think of a key to a neighboring studio with a trap door. »I was inflamed with desire to see where the square trapdoor in the studio led« (104). Narrow steps are »descending into the blackness« and he finds himself in a labyrinth of forking underground passageways. He searches his ways at random while he feels the »comforting
presence of Shemaiah Hillel, whom he vaguely associates with the idea of help and guidance (105). The passage becomes so low that he has to bend down but suddenly he perceives a shimmer of light coming from the ceiling. This proves to be an opening with a horizontal cross at the top. He pulls himself up and, standing on the cross, he sees a paneling letting through the light in a pattern of lines: "To my astonishment I realised that they formed the precise shape of a six-pointed star, such as is found on synagogues" (106). He finds himself in a room with no other entrance despite being on the level of the third floor. "The floor was ankle-deep in dust, as if no living being had been here for decades" (107). Poking what he believes is a white box, a piece of paper flutters into the light. It shows that the box actually was a pack of tarot cards and the one showing is the Juggler. A shiver of horror creeps up his spine and he feels as if he were turning into ice as he counts...
the cards to see if the pack is complete. To get warm he pulls on some rugs lying in a corner, a suit »in an ancient, curious style.« He sits down staring at the Juggler card, »still in the ray of light.« The picture, »painted in watercolours by a child’s hand, represents the Hebrew character Aleph in the form of a man with one hand raised and the other pointing downwards. Pernath throws it into the corner but the figure is still gleaming at him »through the gloom.« (109) Suddenly he realizes where he is, namely in the room without entrance in »the ancient house in Altschulgasse that everyone avoided! Many years ago someone had let himself down by a rope to look in through the window and the rope had broken and ... Yes! I was in the house where the ghostly figure of the Golem disappeared each time!« (110; Meyrink’s italics). He is terrified and tries to convince himself that the Juggler is just »a miserable, stupid little playing card«:

but in vain ... now it was ... was taking on human form ... the Juggler ... and was squatting in the corner and staring at me with vacant eyes out of my own face!
For hour after hour I sat there without moving, huddled up in my corner, a frozen skeleton in mouldy clothes that belonged to another. And across the room he sat, he... I... myself.

Mute and motionless, we stared into each other’s eyes, the one a hideous mirror-image of the other. [...] Step by step I wrestled with him for my life, for the life that is mine because it no longer belongs to me. He grew smaller and smaller, and as the day broke he crept back into the playing card. I stood up, walked across the room and put the Juggler in my pocket. (110–111; Meyrink’s italics)

Suddenly the room seems strangely familiar to him and he recognizes the cards as painted by himself as a child: »It was an ancient set of tarot cards. With Hebrew signs. Number twelve must be the Hanged Man, I seemed to remember, hanging downwards with his arms behind his back? I flicked through the pack. There! There he was!« (111). He returns the way he came and in the streets he is mistaken for the golem because of the old clothes he is wearing.

The whole chapter can be described as a katabasis followed by an anabasis. Pernath is going down to the underworld but he is also coming back from it – and the whole episode in that way connects to the Osiris motif, that of death and resurrection, in the novel. But Pernath has also confronted himself in the form of the Juggler and managed to go further, putting the card in his pocket. Seeing Zwakh and Hillel later, they come to speak of the Kabbala and tarot and although Hillel directs his words to Zwakh we understand they are just as much meant for Pernath:

—— Do not tempt fate, Herr Zwakh. If you do, you can find yourself straying into dark passages from which no one has ever returned unless he bore a talisman with him. There is a legend that once three men descended into the realm of darkness; one went mad, the other blind, and only the third, Rabbi ben Akiba, returned safely home and said he had met himself. (120; Meyrink’s italics)

He continues to say that he is not speaking of men, like Goethe, who have met just a reflection of their own consciousness, and not a true double, not what is called »Habal Garmin, ‘the breath of the bones,’ of which is said, ‘As he went down into the grave, in bone incorruptible, so will he rise up on the day of the last Judgement.’ « Hillel’s gaze pierces deeper into Pernath’s as he says that this Habal Garmin is said to live »high above the ground in a room without a door, with only one window, from which it is impossible to communicate with mankind.
And anyone who manages to bind him and to refine him, will be reconciled with himself (120). Like Rabbi ben Akiba before him, Pernath met himself as he descended into the realm of darkness and managed to return safely home, the Juggler card being his talisman. But the card is also his double, Habal Garmin, who he managed to bind.

But why did he search especially for the Hanged Man? Later Pernath is »immersed in reflections on [the cards'] hidden meaning, especially the Hanged Man« (165). He finds the symbol incomprehensible. But the reader might notice that his reflections take place at a time when his situation is confused and he is attracted in one way or another to each of the three women – Miriam, Angelina and Rosina – and does not know which path to take. Traditionally, the Hanged Man »indicates a reversal in the direction of applied will, an interruption in the former flow of action« and »connotes sacrifice of the ego and the breakdown of obsolete structures.« In other words, if the Juggler represents Pernath’s self you can say that the Hanged Man represents his situation. The story of Pernath ends with him, released from prison, going back to the golem house where he rents a room. A fire breaks out and Pernath lets himself down by a rope in front of the house. When he passes the window to the secret room he sees, or has a vision of, the presumably dead Hillel and Miriam:

And I see… I see… My whole body becomes one great, echoing shout of joy:
»Hillel! Miriam! Hillel!«

I make a jump for the bars. Miss. Lose my grip on the rope.
For a moment I am hanging between heaven and earth, head downwards, legs forming a cross. (252; Meyrink’s italics)

In other words, his body enacts the tarot card of the Hanged Man. Then the rope breaks and he falls to the ground. As he falls he grabs the window-ledge but his hand slips off; the stone is smooth: »Smooth, like a lump of fat« (252; Meyrink’s italics). Viewed in its context, this is not to be seen as a catastrophe but rather as indicating that he is no longer going astray. Trying to reach the window is no solution but rather a temptation (what seemed to be of stone was like a lump of fat); he has to let go. His situation has reached a solution, an interpretation confirmed on the last pages of the novel where we find Pernath and Miriam living in another dimension under the sign of Osiris and the Hermaphrodite.

We can also notice that the House at the Last Lamp is connected with the novel’s initial parable of the crow and the stone that looked like the lump of fat. As we might remember,
X comes to think about this parable because the moonlight on his bed looks like a flat stone. When Pernath first comes across the mystic house he is guided by a mysterious light and ends up on the Street of the Alchemists, which makes him think of the philosophers’ stone. When Prokop a bit later tells the legend of the house we learn that the Order of Asiatic Brethren laid the foundation stone for the house and that a huge treasure is buried there. Prokop of course believes it to be a traditional and worldly fortune but we, reading an esoteric novel, are just as prepared to understand it symbolically. In choosing the stone and not the lump of fat, Pernath has found the real treasure.

--- The Golem Figure ---

Given the title of the novel, the golem figure might seem surprisingly peripheral and evasive in the story. Baer complains that »Meyrinck gives us no final word on the fate of the golem,« as if he were a character to follow like the others, and according to Gelbin, »the golem figure’s function in the novel is to obscure rather than signify the deeper truths attached to it.« For her, the golem is connected to anti-Semitic stereotypes and exemplifies the Jewish ghetto type with its lack of essence and its Eastern physical types and she maintains that his mongoloid features can be viewed in the light of Otto Weininger’s ideas of the Jew as an admixture of Mongolian blood. However, I think it is hard to recognize anything at all specifically Jewish in the appearance of the golem – and you must also remember Meyrink’s high estimation of Asian wisdom as opposed to Western. In other words, the golem’s Asian look is not supposed to be derogatory but rather the opposite.

It is the puppeteer Zwakh who, in the chapter »Punch,« introduces the golem after Pernath’s odd encounter with the stranger bringing him the Book of Ibbur. He mentions some of the old tales of the clay figure coming to life. But in saying »there is something abroad in the Jewish quarter, something connected with it that never dies« (56), he leaves the traditional folklore for Meyrink’s own inventions, marked by esoteric thinking where the golem is transformed into a kind of secret sign or symbol to decode. According to Zwakh, »[r]oughly every thirty-three years« (57) something happens in the ghetto that creates a sense of horror for which there is no justification nor any satisfactory explanation: at these intervals a completely unknown person, smooth-faced, with a yellow complexion and mongoloid features, dressed in faded, old-fashioned clothes and with a regular but oddly stumbling gait, as if he were going to fall down on his face at any moment, is seen going through the ghetto from the direction of Altschulgasse until... the figure suddenly vanishes. (57–58)
Zwakh speculates about a spiritual epidemic that causes a kind of spiritual mirage of someone who yearns for physical form, a kind of spiritual explosion blasting our unconscious dreams out into the light of day and creating, as electricity does the lightning, a phantom that in expression, gait and behaviour, in every last detail, would reveal the symbol of the soul of the masses, if only we were able to interpret the secret language of forms? (59). He then refers to Hillel, who is said to believe that the unknown figure that haunts the district must be a phantasm that the rabbi in the Middle Ages had first to create in his mind, before he could clothe it in physical form. It reappears at regular intervals, when the stars are in the same conjunction under which it was created, tormented by its urge to take on physical existence. We also get to know that Hillel’s wife once saw the golem face to face but was firmly convinced that it could only have been her own soul which had left her body for a moment and confronted her for a brief second with the features of an alien creature that could only be part of her inmost self. Later Hillel declares that he would not believe in the golem even if I were to see it standing before me in this very room (116).

Regardless of belief, everyone who has an encounter with the golem becomes paralyzed and terrified. It is clear that Pernath’s strange visitor must have been the golem, although he should probably not be understood as a living person but rather as a physical manifestation of something in Pernath’s mind.

The chapter ends with Vrieslander carving a doll’s head from a piece of wood, and suddenly Pernath recognizes the face of the stranger. The puppets of Zwakh have mask-like faces and this one is also described as identical with the golem. While Vrieslander is carving, the head moved to and fro in the painter’s hand, which made it look as if it were alive and were peering into every corner of the room. Pernath is staring into its eyes as if hypnotised and is convinced that he had turned into it [the doll] and was lying on Vrieslander’s lap, peering round. (66) Vrieslander throws the head down into the street and Pernath loses consciousness.

The connection between the golem and a mask is significant. In his autobiographical texts, Meyrink presents what he calls the Pilot (der Lotse) wearing the cloak of invisibility and the Masked Figure, two names for the same kind of experience, as I understand it. The Pilot or Masked Figure is a personal inner guide protecting and leading Meyrink to knowledge by signs and symbols that are to be interpreted in a correct manner; it is a question of learning to understand what the Masked Figure intends by imposing our fate on us. Meyrink also mentions that he started hinting, in novels and stories, at the Masked Figure behind the scenes. In connection with the problem of gaining true sight of the golem, one might also quote this...
sentence from "The Transformation of the Blood": "Anyone who is on the right path to 'union' will never see the Masked Figure; how could one see something that is, basically, oneself?" In his article "Allegorical Slumber," Eric Klaus more or less identifies the golem with the Masked Figure: "It transmits cryptic images and symbols that Pernath must learn to decipher, just as the disguised one did for Meyrink."

The connection between Pernath and the golem is carried further in the already mentioned episode where Pernath finds himself trapped in the secret room connected with the golem. When he eventually manages to escape the room, he is clothed in some old rags he has found in it and people take him for the golem.

But although the golem in many ways functions as Pernath's double, it would be wrong to identify him uniquely as such. He is the double of everyone who meets him, just as he is also an incarnation of the psychic tensions in the ghetto. You might say that Meyrink has seen and taken advantage of the metaphorical potential of the traditional golem figure. Being a creature without a soul, a kind of automaton with no free will, he can function as a memento, a reminder that we act like puppets and live like we are dead although we believe ourselves to be in command of our lives. This is a motif that returns in different variations throughout the novel. Only he who dares to confront the golem can, if he really wishes and strives for it, overcome the material confinements preventing our spiritual liberation — like Pernath in the secret room where the Juggler and the golem can be symbolically seen as united.

In other words, the golem is not a character in his own right; there is no final fate of him to tell. He only exists in relation to someone or something else, a kind of reflection or emanation. This means that he has no meaning in himself and means different things to different persons and on different occasions. Like the Pilot, he can push a person in the right direction, if that person is willing and has the ability to read the signs given — but most people are ignorant and try to escape him. People fear him because they are afraid of themselves; to see the golem is to be reminded of your anguish and the parts of yourself that you have suppressed, including the possibilities for spiritual rebirth and perfection which you can only achieve if you dare to reject your desire to live in the world. As Hillel remarks, the golem signifies the awakening of the dead through your innermost spiritual life.

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CONCLUSIONS

Recapitulating Faivre's four fundamental demands for something to be identified as esotericism, it is quite clear that The Golem can thematically live up to them all. As I hope has become clear, the novel is built on symbolic and real...
correspondences where everything is a sign and every object hides a secret, or, to quote Hillel in the novel: »Each thing on earth is nothing but an eternal symbol clothed in dust.« (83) Nature, including the city of course, is to be read as a book and is essentially alive. In The Golem, there are no borders between the material and spiritual and one can notice recurrent images and similes that blur the distinction between things dead and alive. The ghetto is a cemetery inhabited by corpses but at the same time the houses are alive. When it comes to rituals, The Golem is more questionable but Shemaiah Hillel and the strange somnambulist Amadeus Laponder definitely play parts as intermediary spirits who, in addition to symbols and images, help Pernath to develop gnosis and a knowledge of self, world and myth. And no doubt the »accent is placed on vision and certainty, rather than belief and faith.« Lastly, the
experience of transmutation, a »passage from one plane to another« and a modification »of the subject in its very nature,« is essential, not to say the very core of the whole book – something the ending clearly demonstrates.

On the other hand, you can hardly call it an occult novel if you, like Faivre, connect the occult with practice. The novel is not about occult actions and it will not work as a guidebook with instructions or substantial advice for anyone yearning for a transmutation of the self.\(^7\) It merely says that the possibility exists and that it is something to strive for – at least for those yearning for eternal life and striving to escape from the sport of Fortune and from forces beyond our control, whether inside or outside ourselves. But each individual must find his own path to take. It is a question of self-knowledge.

You have to be open-minded and dare to risk your life in order to be resurrected. To live is actually to be dead and to die is to be born. But there is no single doctrine to follow. As Hillel says, talking about the tarot, »each person is dealt a different hand, but it is the one who knows how to use the trumps aright who wins the game« (120–121). As a contrast to Pernath’s katabasis, the revolting pedophile Karl Zottman is cheated to the underground by Rosina, locked in and left to die. He was drawn to the lump of fat, »life,« and met his destiny in the form of death – and with the sardonic irony typical of Meyrink we are informed that he was »the managing director of the Life Assurance Company« (116).

Identifying what you might call the esoteric schemata underlying The Golem is not foremost a question of classifying the novel. But it has implications for what kinds of questions it is relevant to ask. For example, it is not relevant to ask if the golem exists, if the Juggler really is staring at Pernath from the corner in the secret room and if it is true that Hillel and Miriam are sitting in that same secret room in the burning house or if these strange things are only imaginations in the mind of Pernath. From the esoteric point of view, these questions presume a dichotomy that does not exist and represent a narrow-minded scientific outlook unable to understand reality in its totality. There are no borders between physical appearance and imagination. This means that resurrection and rebirth are not only spiritual matters but also a question of transmutation, a »transformation of the blood.«

All this said, it is important to remember that The Golem is a novel, a work of fiction with the ambition to deliver a good story. The tarot cards, the Hermaphrodite, Osiris, the golem, and so on function as structuring elements, Leitmotivs, which produce a kind of coherence to a forking narrative and sometimes they are quite subtle. For example, the description of Laponder as »closely shaved« and looking »almost like a Chinese statue of the Buddha« with a permanent »automaton«
Sten Wistrand, “Gustav Meyrink’s The Golem. A Sensationalist Shlock Novel or an Esoteric Vision of the World?”

“Mandarin-like” smile (225–227) hints at the smooth-faced and Asian-like golem figure – and yes, Laponder is a kind of double to Pernath. You might add that Pernath meets this Laponder during his time in the hell-like prison, which is his second katabasis and where he finally realizes that Miriam is his choice; in other words, like the golem, Laponder functions as the Pilot. But you should not expect every appearance of a motif to have a clear meaning; sometimes it seems as if Meyrink just reminds us of them. For example, we have the story of the murderer Babinski, who is condemned to death by hanging, but when the rope breaks his sentence is commuted to life imprisonment (182). It reminds us of the Hanged Man and Osiris but I think it would be misguided to elaborate it further. And yet it would also be wrong to regard this strategy solely as a question of keeping things together or, if you are more critical, as a way of making the whole thing seem to hold together. You can just as well maintain that this strategy is congenial with the esoteric Weltanschauung presented: the world is a world of correspondences, it is a world of signs and symbols to be interpreted, things are interconnected on mystical grounds in accordance with a logic that is not the logic of science but actually resembles a poetical logic and the logic of fiction.

Whether The Golem is a shlock novel or a work of art is of course for each individual reader to decide. Amanda Boyd describes Meyrink’s first three novels as “a mixture of spiritual and popular content.” The division between high literature and Trivialliteratur might in these post-modernist times also be of less importance. Boyd concludes that: “While Meyrink may have utilized popular images from the increasingly trendy occult movement to attract readers, there is underlying substance in his work which differentiates him from many other fantasists, namely a sincere wish to impart his readers with esoteric knowledge.” According to Lee B. Jennings, “even a casual reading should bear out the author’s serious endeavour to provide a fictionalized account of the mythical struggle toward the higher self.” I am inclined to agree.

The mixing of different religions, legends, and traditions in the novel could be seen as an expression of the old idea of a philosophia, or sophia, perennis, where all religious traditions are seen as manifestations of a single and universal truth beyond the doctrines that separate them; the Theosophical Society talked of this as the “Ancient Wisdom.” But what is important in this case is that Meyrink manages to keep the different elements and features and images in order and to give them a functional form, building a coherent symbolic pattern out of ideas, conceptions, and traditions of different kinds. He is a syncretist mixing Buddhism and Gnosticism, Kabbala and alchemy, occult tarot and whatever came his way in his search for esoteric wisdom. But it is misleading to accuse him for...
not referring to these different outlooks in a proper way and not doing them »justices« in their own right and as complete systems. He is, after all, not writing a treatise or an essay but a novel, a work of fiction, a kind of esoteric Bildungsroman presenting an evocative vision of the world. And in this respect I think he succeeded.

Meyrink was obviously fully aware of the risk that readers would find the book confusing. When X in the frame eventually reaches »the wall by the last lamp« on the Street of the Alchemists, he is welcomed by an old servant, with traits of the golem, to whom he returns Athanasius Pernath’s hat and gets his own back. The words of the servant, ending the novel, can easily be read as a meta-comment – and I cannot help but imagine Meyrink smiling teasingly as he wrote the last sentence:

> Herr Athanasius Pernath’s compliments. [...] He thanks you most kindly and begs you not to interpret the fact that he has not invited you into the garden as a lack of hospitality; it is a strict house rule from time immemorial. He has not, I am to tell you, put your hat on; he noticed the mistake immediately. He hopes that his has not given you a headache. (262; Meyrink’s italics).

**ENDNOTES**


3 Quoted from Erik van den Berg: »Chotverdori aschubliv« (The Ritman Library 17/12 2012; http://www.ritmanlibrary.com/2012/12/chotverdori-aschubliv/).

4 »The key to grasping the significance of this eleven-page prophecy is that it was written 107 years ago in 1903, when the development of the automotive industry was in its infancy and all the other uses of petroleum were, in many cases, years from being invented. The English translation with which I am working is a melange of what would have at the time been considered esoteric material. Few would have realized then the pertinence of his story and the reality of his catastrophic prediction until now in 2010, when we witness the unleashing of the Gulf Oil tragedy on the citizens of Planet Earth.« »Petroleum Petroleum,« *Mahalas Astrology: Mundane Astrology – World Events*, 24/6 2010 http://blog.mahalasastrology.com/2010/06/24/petroleum-petroleum/ (1/10/2017)


9 When *The Golem* was reviewed in the Nordic Alrights’s forum Motpol.nu, the article’s very first sentence declares that Evola was influenced by Meyrink and the conclusion is that the novel would be fascinating to anyone interested in traditionalism. See: Joakim Andersson, »Meyrink – Golem,« *Motpol.nu* (24/8 2011; https://motpol.nu/oskorei/2011/08/24/meyrink-golem/).


15 In the short story »J. H. Obereits Besuch bei den Zeitegeln,« a man walking in a churchyard catches sight of this same inscription on a stone and stops to ponder its meaning.

16 In *The Golem*, there is a Rosicrucian hint when a


19 Binder: Gustav Meyrink, 499; see also plates 214, 217, and 218. In German: »spannend wie die sensationellste Detektivgeschichte, dabei aber doch gedankentief und gehaltvoll ist, wie nur ganz wenige Werke der neueren Literatur es sind,« the golem motif »phantastisch umgestaltet und vertieft.« The novel »erhellt geheimnisvolle Gründe und Beziehungen der Seelen und Menschenschicksale« and »durch die Atmosphäre von Mord und ungerechtem Gefängnis tastet sich im magischen Dunst der Dämon der Stadt: Der Golem. Wir sind Gefangene Meyrink’s und seines ethischen Kriminalromans: des visionären Phantastenbuchs der letzten zwanzig Jahre.«


22 Danusha Goska: »Golem as Gentile, Golem as Sabra. An Analysis of the Manipulation of Stereotypes of Self and Other in Literary Treatments of a Legendary Jewish Figure,« in New York Folklore (Vol. 23, Number 1-4, 1997), 39–64.


Jugendliebe (1812), and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, in the poem »Die Golems« (the 1840s), address the golem concept, it is significant that neither of them associates it with Rabbi Loew or Prague.


27 This is also the opinion of Goska: »Golem,« 11.


30 Gelbin: The Golem, 114.

31 Scholem: On Kabbalah, 158–159. But it must be pointed out that Meyrink had already left the Theosophical Society in 1893 (Binder: Gustav Meyrink, 167). Scholem’s characterization of The Golem as imbued with Madame Blavatsky’s theosophy should for that reason be taken with a grain of salt. Meyrink’s disdain for spiritism is also clear in the novel The Green Face and in the satirical short story »My Torments and Delights in the World Beyond« (Meine Qualen und Winnen im Jenseits; written in 1913 and published in 1916), he makes fun of spiritism, saying that he is communicating from the other side with the help of a »spiritualist table-rapping machine.« See The Dedalus Meyrink Reader, ed. and. transl. by Mike Mitchell (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2019), 92. His autobiographical essay »The Transformation of the Blood« also shows him as a sceptic when it comes to prefabricated wisdom (see below).

32 Baer: The Golem, 49.

33 Gelbin: The Golem, 100–102, 112, 114.

34 Mitchell: VIVO, 156–164.

35 Amanda Boyd, Demonizing Esotericism. The Treatment of Spirituality and Popular Culture in the Works of Gustav Meyrink: A Dissertation (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2005), passim.

40 Baer: *Golem*, 39.
41 Baer: *Golem*, 39.
42 Baer: *Golem*, 44. It is possible to be a bit more precise in these matters. One episode in the novel recalls the falling down of the Charles Bridge, which took place in 1890, and when Pernath is released from prison the pulling down of the Jewish quarters, which happened in 1895, had just begun. When it comes to the frame we learn that the stone bridge collapsed 33 years ago. This means that the actions in these parts take place in 1923, that is, eight years after the book was published.
43 The golem figure is said to manifest himself every thirty-third year.
44 Harmsen: *Der magische Schriftsteller*, 195: »Die Erzählperspektiven wechseln ständig. Der träumende Athanasius Pernath und die Hauptfigur des Romans, der (oft intensiv träumende) Ich-Erzähler, wechseln, verschmelzen in einer Rahmen- und Binnenerzählung zu einem neuen »Ich«. Die Handlung des Romans, in Wirklichkeit oder im Traum (das ist nicht immer deutlich), wird in eine innere visionäre Landschaft aufgenommen.«
45 Jennings: »Meyrink’s *Der Golem*, 56.
47 »Oft liegt bei mir die Pointe ganz am Anfang einer Erzählung« (Boyd: *Demonizing*, 93).
48 Gustav Meyrink: *The Golem*, transl. Mike Mitchell (Sawtry, 2005), 23. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets. All quotations have been checked against the German original. In case the translation might affect my argumentation I will also give the quotations in German, referring to Gustav Meyrink: *Der Golem: Roman* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011).
49 Binder: *Gustav Meyrink*, 503 and plate 217.
52 Harmsen: *Der magische Schriftsteller*, 84, 287.
54 In the German original Pernath »ging lange, ohne es zu wissen, im Kreise herum« (176) while the cat »mit verletzter Gehirnhälfte im Kreise herumtaumelnd« (51).
German original: »Bis tief in den Morgen hinein hatte ich geschlafen, traumlos, bewuβtlos, wie ein Scheintoter« (188).

56 Gustav Meyrink: »The Transformation of the Blood,« in The Dedalus Meyrink Reader, 121.

57 German original: »aus einem Tiernmenschen ein höher-stehendes Wesen zu werden.« Quoted from Boyd: Demonizing 300. Compare: »It had very quickly become clear to me that yoga, the strange, profound educational system of the Asiatic peoples, and not the philosophical theories of the think- ers and sages, was the sole road to a superhuman existence [»Übermenschentum« in German original/SW].« (Meyrink, »The Transformation,« 125.)


61 Jennings: Meyrink’s, 55.


64 Jung: Psychology and Alchemy, passim.


68 Meyrink has chosen to call the card by the old name der Pagat instead of the, at least today, more common Der Magier.


70 However, according to Hartmut Binder, there is nothing indicating that Meyrink was an expert on either the Kabbala or the tarot (Binder: Gustav, 546–549).
The relation between the tarot and the Hebrew alphabet was launched by Court de Gébelin in *Le Monde Primitif* (1781); see Helen Farley: *A Cultural History of the Tarot. From Entertainment to Esotericism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 104. The connection between the tarot and kabbalism was furthered by the theosophically influenced Papus in *Le Tarot Bohémiens* (1889), which Farley describes as »syncretistic, Hinduism, kabbalah, astrology and most prominently Egyptian motifs, all found a place within his complex system of correspondences« (119) – a description which actually is quite valid also for Meyrink’s handling of the cards.

The description of the card shows that it is identical with the card often labeled the Magician (i.e. Gad, *Tarot*, 27–36), which also is seen as »a keeper of esoteric knowledge« (Farley: *A Cultural*, 51). Gelbin makes this rather strange interpretation of the card: »The Jew in the novel thus remains a Janus-faced figure, and Wassertrum and Hillel embody its diametrically opposed poles that are also symbolized in the aleph in the Tarock card: One arm points downward toward death and the other upward toward the higher spiritual realm.« (Gelbin: *The Golem*, 113).

74 German original: »Hillel, mit dem ich vag den Begriff eines Helfers und Führers verknüpft« (97).
75 The motif returns when Pernath, in his room, feels a scary presence of something, which eventually takes material form, showing itself as a human. Yet where the head should have been there is only a »sphere of pale mist.« However, Pernath can imagine »all kinds of heads on the body« but the one »that retained its shape longest was an Egyptian ibis head.« In other words, the figure has something to do with Thoth, who is often depicted in this way. The man holds out his hand, offering little red seeds with black spots. To reject them means to follow the »Path of Life« and to take them is the same as choosing the »Path of Death.« By knocking the seeds off the hand, Pernath shows that there is a third path. We also learn that when Habal Garmin, your true double, »is crowned, the thread, by which you are bound to the world through your physical senses and your reason, will tear apart« (149–152, 233–238).
78 The German original: »Phantasie- oder Gedankenbild sein, das jener mittelalterliche Rabbiner zuerst lebendig gedacht habe, ehe er mit Materie bekleiden konnte« (49).
79 German original: »unverwandt« (55).
80 Meyrink: »The Pilot,« 115 and Meyrink: »Transformation,« 123.
81 Meyrink: »Transformation,« 184.
82 Meyrink: »Transformation,« 124.
83 Meyrink: »Transformation,« 171.
85 This also means that I cannot agree with Amanda Boyd’s description of the golem as a monster and her conclusion that this is »leading to a demonizing of esotericism by means of monstrous characterization« (Boyd: Demonizing, 227). It is also clear that the golem cannot live up to Noël Carroll’s well-argued claims that a monster is »not only lethal but – and this is of utmost significance – also disgusting.« See Noël Carroll: The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15, 22. Actually, his definition is also hard to make fit for the original clay figure. Nor is Meyrink’s golem really compatible to any of the three monster categories discussed by Yvonne Leffler in Horror as Pleasure. The Aesthetics of Horror Fiction, transl. Sarah Death (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 143–144.
86 As we have seen, Pernath on one occasion associates Hillel with »the idea of help and guidance« (105); in German: »Hillel, mit dem ich vag den Begriff eines Helfers und Führers verknüpfe« (97).
87 I chose to use Faivre’s concept of transmutation. Meyrink himself talks of Verwandlung and his »Die Verwandlung des Blutes« is translated into English as »The Transformation of the Blood.« But the point here is that Meyrink’s use of transformation obviously covers what Faivre calls transmutation.
88 German original for »Mandarin-like«: »pagodenhaftent« (231).
89 In cases like this, there is always a risk for over-interpretation. As mentioned, the junk-dealer Wassertrum is »hare-lipped.« In the context of turning unsympathetic characters into animals, this is not surprising. But in Egyptian mythology, the hare is connected to Osiris, who also is a central symbol in The Golem and connected with the hermaphrodite. The wall and double gate in front of the house of Pernath depicts the cult of Osiris and shows the hermaphrodite: its »golden head is that of a hare with the ears pricked and close together, so that they look like the two pages of an open book« (261). But what on earth, or in heaven, has the repulsive junk-dealer to do with the god of life and death, of transition and resurrection? It might be proposed that he only represents the pole of death, yet I don’t find that convincing but rather as representing a tendency among literary scholars to try to make, at any cost, everything in a text fit. The best thing might be, even though it hurts, to rest one’s case and hold that the »hare-lipped« Wassertrum after all has nothing to do with Osiris.
Boyd: *Demonizing*, 3.
Jennings: *Meyrink’s*, 55.

You might notice how Pernath, trying to escape the underground, finds himself standing on bars forming a cross (Christianity) and from there can mount a staircase and now beholds a paneling in the form of a six-pointed star (Judaism) through which the light comes in (106).

Meyrink’s friends Eduard Frank and Willy Schrödter called him a »Synkretist« and »ein grosser Amalgamist,« respectively. But Frank also maintains that »es ist etwas Zentrales da,« although he is unable to tell what this »etwas« really is (Harmsen: *Der magische*, 85–86.).

The silver buckles on his shoes and his »strangely cut coat« (261).