Manon Hedenborg White, »From Chorazin to Carcosa. Fiction-Based Esotericism in the Black Pilgrimage of Jack Parsons and Cameron«

ABSTRACT
Rocketeer, poet, and polyamorous proto-feminist, Jack Parsons (1914-1952) is one of the earliest and most legendary followers of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and his religion Thelema in America. A precocious only child and avid sci-fi reader, Parsons made vital contributions to the American space programme, and was briefly regarded by Crowley as a potential successor. However, Parsons’ romantic side, keen imagination, and tendency to be seduced by literary fiction was a source of friction between the two men. Parsons drew freely on gothic horror as well as pulp and sci-fi literature in articulating his personal magical universe. In 1946, he undertook the ‘Babalon Working’: a series of magical operations aimed at manifesting the goddess Babalon on earth as a sort of Thelemic messiah. This paper will explore the importance of literature for Parsons’ magical worldview and experimentation, focusing on three key works: Crowley’s Moonchild, Jack Williamson’s Darker Than You Think, and M.R. James’ short story »Count Magnus«.

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In the Book of Genesis, the ministrations of a serpent precipitate the Fall of Man; the severing of the bond between the first man and woman and their divine creator, and the exile of humankind from the peaceful and abundant garden of Eden.¹ Having eaten of the fruit that God has banned them from touching, man and woman find their eyes opened: like the gods themselves, they are aware of good and evil. The acquisition of this forbidden knowledge condemns them to existence in a world of mortality, temporality, and pain. The serpent has been read as the Devil since at least the second century CE, inspiring the pervasive cultural motif of Satan as a provider of forbidden knowledge and power, prominently exemplified by Christopher Marlowe’s (1564–1593) drama Doctor Faustus. The real-world effects of such fictional narratives is evinced by the genre of early-modern magical texts attributed to Doctor Faustus.² In a case of art imitating life, imitating art, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who penned a Faust play inspired by Marlowe, was in possession of one such magic text, and held an interest in Western esotericism more broadly.³

Literary fiction and esotericism have influenced each other since the advent of modernity. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century marked something of a breakthrough for the esoteric novel, spearheaded by authors such as William Blake (1757–1827), Balzac (1799–1850), Victor Hugo (1802–1885), and, later, by August Strindberg (1849–1912), Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940), and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). Several influential twentieth-century esotericists utilised fiction to propagate their ideas, including Aleister Crowley (1875–1947); Dion Fortune (1890–1946); Gerald Gardner (1884–1964); and Kenneth Grant (1924–2011).⁴ As exemplified by the Faust motif, fiction has also inspired esotericists: Romanticism shaped the development of modern occultism and Neopaganism; Robert Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land (1961) inspired the foundation of a Neopagan group, the Church of All Worlds; and Kenneth Grant and chaos magicians alike have drawn inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft’s cosmic horror.⁵

To varying degrees, the above examples are related to what has variously been called »hyper-real«, »invented«, or »fiction-based« religion.⁶ This article is concerned with a specific case
of fiction-based esotericism: a terrifying yet sublime journey called the »black pilgrimage«, described by the rocket scientist Jack Parsons (1914–1952), and his widow, the artist Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995). Parsons and Cameron were adherents of Thelema, the esoteric religion founded by Aleister Crowley; occultist, poet, and self-proclaimed Great Beast 666. Besides the influences from Crowley’s system, I will suggest two literary sources for Parsons’ and Cameron’s respective notions of the black pilgrimage: Gothic horror writer M.R. James' »Count Magnus«, and R.W. Chambers’ short-story collection The King in Yellow. Drawing on research on fiction-based religion, I will argue that Parsons and Cameron derived religious inspiration from these stories not only because of elements in the stories rendering them more likely to be ascribed religious significance in general, but also because some of their thematic elements, which mirror themes in Crowley’s writings, would have made them meaningful to Parsons and Cameron personally.

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**ALEISTER CROWLEY’S THELEMA AND THE CROSSING OF THE ABYSS**

In order to understand Parsons’ and Cameron’s esoteric world-views, a brief digression is necessary to introduce the key influence thereon. In 1904, Crowley penned what he claimed to be a divinely revealed text, which came to be known as Liber AL vel Legis sub figura CCXX (or, colloquially, as The Book of the Law). The text puts forth the maxim: »Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law«, and the word Thelema (Greek for »will«). Liber AL proclaimed the advent of a new aeon in the history of humanity, which Crowley predicted would coincide with »the complete emancipation of the human race«. In Crowley’s view, the sexual liberation of men and women was key to this emancipation, and he viewed the sexual impulse as divine.

In 1907, Crowley co-founded the initiatory order A:.A:. Similar to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, of which Crowley had been an initiate, A:.A:. was structured according to ten numbered degrees correlated with the sephiroth of the kabbalistic Tree of Life. Advancement in the degrees entailed being gradually made privy to magical techniques and secrets of the universe, culminating in the identification of the individual soul with the godhead. One of the penultimate initiatory stages in A:.A:. is the so-called crossing of the Abyss; the terrifying void separating the three highest sephiroth from the lower seven, or the numinous and the manifest. The Abyss is inhabited by the demonic entity Choronzon; a name derived from the »Enochian« magic of John Dee (1527–1609) and Edward Kelley (1555–1597), in which it denotes the Devil.

Crowley crossed the Abyss in 1909 in Algeria, aided by his lover and disciple, the poet Victor B. Neuburg (1883–1940), as
part of his exploration of the 30 Enochian »Aethyrs«; realms of spiritual existence. As he progressed through the Aethyrs, Crowley described experiencing a sense of growing solemnity and sublimity, likening it to »the subtle trembling of a maiden before the bridegroom«.\(^\text{12}\) Entering the 14th Aethyr, Crowley found his progress halted by an imposing angel. Overcome with the impulse to »sacrifice« himself, Crowley and Neuburg erected a stone circle in the desert, and Crowley describes what transpired next thus:

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The fire of the all seeing sun smote down upon the altar, consuming utterly every particle of my personality. [...] I may say that the essence of the matter was that I had hitherto clung to certain conceptions of conduct which, while perfectly proper from the standpoint of my human nature, were impertinent to initiation. I could not cross the Abyss till I had torn them out of my heart.\(^\text{13}\)

More prosaically, Crowley and Neuburg had anal sex on the stone altar, with Crowley in the receptive role. Through this sex act, Crowley felt able to accomplish »the annihilation of the Self in Pan«;\(^\text{14}\) the obliteration of his ego he saw as a prerequisite for crossing the Abyss.

Entering the 12th Enochian Aethyr, Crowley beheld a great goddess, whom he identified as »the Scarlet Woman, Babylon the Mother of Abominations«.\(^\text{15}\) This figure was clearly inspired by the inebriated and lascivious Whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation.\(^\text{16}\) Crowley later altered the spelling of her name to Babalon.\(^\text{17}\) In Crowley’s system, Babalon plays a crucial role in the crossing of the Abyss. She receives all adepts who are willing to sacrifice their egos, metaphorically draining their blood in her »cup«. In order to succeed, the adept must emulate Babalon’s formula by uniting passionately with all of experience. As such, the »supreme anguish of the soul«\(^\text{18}\) that is separate from other things, experiences ecstatic dissolution in union with the divine, via the catastrophic experience of ego destruction. In Crowley’s thought, Babalon and the crossing of the Abyss thus indicate a sacralisation of self-surrender, described in both erotic and deathly terms.\(^\text{19}\) This notion, and that of crossing the Abyss, are key to understanding Jack Parsons’ idea of the black pilgrimage, to which I shall now turn.

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PRIEST OF THE GODDESS: JACK PARSONS AND THE BABALON WORKING

Born in 1914, Jack Parsons grew up in the affluent suburb of Pasadena, California. An avid reader, he was drawn to epic tales and mythology, and developed a lifelong zeal for science fiction. The teenage Parsons began experimenting with primitive rockets, at a time when rocketery and space travel...
were seen as scientifically impossible pipedreams. Parsons and his boyhood friend Ed Forman, together with Frank Malina, a graduate student at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), eventually formed the core of a group that founded the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), which played a key role in the American space programme. Parsons’ discoveries were essential to the technology that enabled the moon landing.\textsuperscript{20}

Parsons was attracted to Crowley’s teachings. On February 15, 1941, he and his wife, Helen (née Northrup, 1930–2003) were formally initiated into Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), the fraternal order Crowley led. Parsons joined A.:A.: the same year.\textsuperscript{21} Parsons threw himself headfirst into the activities of the order, purchasing a house in Pasadena that became the new headquarters for the OTO’s Agape Lodge. He was well-liked by the lodge members, including Jane Wolfe (1875–1958), a Thelemite of over twenty years and a close friend of Crowley’s, who had studied under him in Sicily in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{22} Though Crowley had lofty hopes for his new disciple, Parsons’ penchant for supernatural fiction concerned him. To Wolfe, Crowley wrote: \textit{»Jack’s trouble is his weakness, and his romantic side … He gets a kick from some magazine trash, or an ‘occult novel’ […] and dashes off in wild pursuit.\textsuperscript{23}"

In early 1946, Parsons initiated a series of magical rituals aimed at acquiring an »elemental mate«; a female magical partner, aided by his friend L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), prolific sci-fi writer and future founder of Scientology. Parsons considered his experiments successful when 24-year-old Marjorie Cameron, illustrator and former naval cartographer, arrived on his doorstep. Parsons began practising sexual magic with his new partner, now with a loftier aim: the incarnation of the goddess Babalon as a human woman; a messianic figure who would end religious and sexual tyranny and manifest a new age of love and liberty. On February 28, Parsons heard a voice, announcing itself as Babalon and dictating a text to him. This text, »Liber 49«, announces Babalon’s imminent manifestation, and contains instructions for further preparations.\textsuperscript{24} »Liber 49« also thrice references a »black pilgrimage«. It is said that Parsons »shall take the black pilgrimage«, but that it will not him who returns. The details of the voyage are vague, but ominous:

\textit{Yea, my adept, the Black Pilgrimage. Thou shalt be accursed, and this is the nature of the curse. Thou shalt publish the secret matter of the adepts thou knowest, withholding [sic] no word of it, in an appendix to this my Book. So they shall cry fool, liar, sot, traducer, betrayer. Thou art not glad thou meddled with magick?\textsuperscript{25}"

Over the following weeks, with Hubbard as his medium, Parsons received further communications from Babalon, many
of which were threatening in tone. In »The Book of Babalon« – the record of the entire operation beginning with the elemental invocations – it is repeatedly suggested that Parsons must sacrifice his own life to ensure Babalon’s manifestation, becoming »living flame« before her arrival. Hubbard also described the goddess as: »Beautiful --- Horrible«. Similar to Crowley’s record of his Enochian explorations, Parsons’ notes suggest a sense of mounting pressure and dread.

--- INTO THE SUNSET WITH HER SIGN: PARSONS’ BLACK PILGRIMAGE ---

Following the Babalon Working, Parsons took a step back from Thelema, selling the house in Pasadena along with many of his Crowley books. He and Cameron married in Autumn 1946, but their relationship was turbulent, and they dwelt apart periodically. Nonetheless, despite Cameron’s initial disinterest in magic, he had begun tutoring her in mythology, Thelema, and other forms of esotericism, and Parsons soon renewed his commitment to magic. On October 2, 1948, Parsons initiated a three-day ritual to Babalon. On November 16, the goddess appeared to him in a dream, commanding him to »take the Black Pilgrimage«.

Parsons accordingly embarked on astral voyage, through an evening sky adorned with what he believed to be Babalon’s sign: a triangle within a circle. He saw himself as a boy, invoking Satan and fearfully swearing off magic after successfully conjuring the Devil. Asked if he would similarly fail again, Parsons responded in the negative. He received glimpses of himself as various historical men: Simon Magus, Cagliostro, and Gilles de Rais, all of whom Parsons felt had failed to elevate their female partners to divine status. Finally, he arrived at a great black castle, its battlement decorated with Babalon’s sign. Parsons unsuccessfully attempted to enter. The following day, he returned to the black castle, and was greeted by a robed and hooded figure. The creature told Parsons that he had arrived at Chorazin, the city of the Antichrist, and that he was now partly in the Abyss, and must drain his blood into Babalon’s cup. If he were to survive the ordeal, Parsons was told, he would become the Antichrist; ruler of Chorazin. Parsons was then led into the castle to meet a mysterious »Prince«, after which things were done to him that he was forbidden from disclosing. On November 18, Parsons attempted to return to Chorazin, but was halted, and informed that he must abstain from further magic before the solstice, besides salutations to the sun and Babalon.

A period of chaos and suicidal thoughts ensued, and Parsons’ fragmentary diary notes from the subsequent weeks suggest emotional distress. He asserted that the Abyss, and everything else, was shells, and that nothing could survive but through...
ignorance. Afterwards, Parsons characterised this period as one of »madness and horror«, writing that his conscious decision to cross the Abyss did not ease the dread of the experience. On December 21, the winter solstice, Parsons proclaimed the operation completed, announcing himself as a Master of the Temple – the A.A.: degree of one who has crossed the Abyss – as well as the Antichrist, and declaring his intention to annihilate Christianity, bring about widespread acceptance of Thelema, and prepare for Babalon’s manifestation.30

Parsons identified the crossing of the Abyss, an initiatory concept derived from Crowley’s writings, with a term that was not: the »black pilgrimage«. Through the idea of the pilgrimage, Parsons associated the Abyss ordeal with a specific location: Chorazin. The name refers to a real-world site: a ruined village, remarkable for its stone structures in black basalt, which overlooks the sea of Galilee in present-day Israel. Chorazin is mentioned in the Bible as one of three villages cursed by Jesus for failing to accept his teachings.31 This polemical representation of Chorazin may have inspired a later, non-canonical belief: that the Antichrist would be born there. This belief existed at least as early as the seventh century, attested in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, and was circulated in a number of later sources including the twelfth-century pilgrimage account Pseudo-Beda, and the fourteenth-century travel memoir The Travels of Sir John Mandeville.32 Whether or not Parsons was aware of these sources, his black pilgrimage has a far more recent source of inspiration, which I shall return to shortly.

THROUGH STELLAR WEBS TO DARKER WORLDS:
CAMERON’S BLACK PILGRIMAGE

Parsons died on June 17, 1952, after an explosion in his home laboratory. Cameron’s esoteric leanings intensified after her husband’s death: she returned briefly to Mexico, engaging in ritual with a pair of English Spiritualists,33 later settling in an abandoned ranch in Beaumont, CA, where she experimented with mind-altering substances and sought the wisdom of her Holy Guardian Angel. In her letters to Jane Wolfe, whom it appears became Cameron’s confidante and magical mentor during this period, Cameron ruminated on the significance of the Babalon Working, and her own role therein.34 Like Parsons, Cameron hoped to alter the destiny of humankind by magical means. With her lover, the black jazz musician LeRoy Booth, Cameron orchestrated a series of sex magical rites, pairing white women with black and Latino men to produce a magical child.35 Cameron’s utopian aspirations coincided with an interest in UFOs, and she claimed to have seen an alien vehicle in 1946.36

Cameron’s writings from the years after Parsons’ death suggest conflicting emotions: shock and grief at losing her lover...
and magical partner, mingled with exhilaration for her magical work. In December 1952, Cameron wrote to Wolfe: »This is the fateful hour in which I drink the cup of poison its dregs [...] I shall plunge down into the abysmal horror of madness and death – or I shall walk upon the dawn.« In January, 1953, she believed herself to be approaching a »glorious day«, and »joy [...] so great that the joy of the world shall be only a shadowed reflection.« In June that year, Cameron claimed to be experiencing something »terrible – magnificent – intolerable«, writing: »all of my being quivers in a painless pain that is both ecstasy and revulsion.« A few weeks later, she described undergoing a nightmarish trial, surrendering all hope, and subsequently having a dream she interpreted as symbolising »the death of ego«. This may have been a reference to the Abyss ordeal, though the obscure phrasing of some of Cameron’s letters render their meaning unclear.

Over the following years, Cameron’s surreal art and charisma earned her iconic status in LA’s underground art scene. She starred as the Scarlet Woman in Kenneth Anger’s *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), and her art was celebrated in Curtis Harrington’s short-film *Wormwood Star* (1955). 1964 witnessed the publication of Cameron’s *The Black Pilgrimage*, a small book comprising a single, illustrated poem (possibly written earlier). The book was issued by Baza Press, managed by Cameron’s friend Bob »Baza« Alexander, poet and founder of a non-denominational ministry called the Temple of Man.

In Cameron’s poem, a scarred and weary traveller in rusted garments journeys, with a fellowship of dead priests, through »stellar webs to darker worlds within the Lunar mirrors of Suicide«, to the frozen shores of a wintery, Northern sea, scattered with petrified serpents’ eggs that are marked with hieroglyphs. She arrives at a white tomb; the burial place of daughters and kings, and black glass palaces, where she »entice[s] the mad one from his throne«, adorning him with a glass crown. The narrator cries out, desolately, for a »Black stared[sic] love«, whose name reverberates and echoes. The poem concludes with the lines: »Godhood walks on Burning Snow Inflamed with fatale[sic] perfumes of a flower’s frozen fire.« The accompanying ink drawings are, at a glance, deceptively simple, though closer scrutiny reveals layers of symbols within the drawings. Many indicate winged or crowned humanoid figures in sweeping robes. The gender of these angelic or demonic figures is unclear. In several of the drawings, large, black eyes are partly concealed within Cameron’s layered pen strokes. One illustration appears to show a severed female head within a circle, and others show twisting, vertically stretching silhouettes that may represent either trees or towers. The pages of the original manuscript are spattered with droplets of red ink, suggesting blood.
An Ancient tribunal of an custom order decreed my doom eternal hunting for your soul

Fragment notes: blowing recess from your grooves evoke deceives
diminishing bit or future fire second evening of the great return.

From »The Black Pilgrimage«, illustrated poem by Cameron. Used with permission from the Cameron Parsons Foundation.
It is unclear whether Cameron’s poem is meant to describe a singular magical ordeal: neither Chorazin nor the Anti-christ are mentioned, and there are no allusions to ritual preparations. The poem may represent a condensed account of experiences undergone over a longer period. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that Cameron’s usage of the highly specific term black pilgrimage in the title was deliberate. While there are significant stylistic differences between Parsons’ terse diary records and Cameron’s abstract poem, however, the poem’s imagery and emphasis on mingled awe and horror has parallels both to Cameron’s letters to Wolfe, and Parsons’ pilgrimage description. It is possible to interpret Cameron’s poem as a lyrical account of her search for transcendence in the face of loss and suffering. Like Parsons’ pilgrimage records, Cameron’s poem can be read as the chronicle of an initiatory journey to a black palace or castle, in which a mysterious being dwells: in Parsons’ record a prince; in Cameron’s poem a »mad one«, though its being seated on a throne suggests regal status. In both cases, the journeys appear to culminate in a transformation of the traveller; the final lines of Cameron’s poem appear to indicate a sort of deified rebirth.

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THE COUNT, CHORAZIN, AND CARCOSA: THE LITERARY ORIGINS OF THE BLACK PILGRIMAGE

Having described Parsons’ and Cameron’s respective black pilgrimage narratives, I shall proceed to tracing what I propose are two important literary influences on this idea. Though Chorazin, as noted above, is mentioned in the Bible, the parallels between Parsons’ black pilgrimage account and the English horror writer and medievalist scholar Montague Rhodes James’ short story »Count Magnus«, published in Ghost Stories of an Antiquary (1904), render it more-or-less certain that Parsons derived the term from the latter. James’ considerable influence on the horror genre, and Parsons’ well-documented love of fantasy and science fiction, renders it unsurprising that he would have been aware of the work. The protagonist of »Count Magnus« is a scholar named Mr Wraxall, whose notes were discovered under the floorboards of an unnamed narrator. Wraxall is to have journeyed to Sweden in 1863, becoming fascinated by the history of a noble family by the name de la Gardie, and particularly its seventeenth-century scion, Count Magnus de la Gardie. Staying in the village adjacent to the de la Gardie estate, Wraxall learns from the locals that Magnus de la Gardie was a cruel man, as well as an alchemist and magician, who had »been on the Black Pilgrimage, and […] brought something or someone back with him.«

In the library, Wraxall finds a manuscript in the count’s hand entitled »Liber nigrae peregrinationis«, which instructs that
anyone who »desires to obtain a long life«, or to »obtain a faithful messenger and see the blood of his enemies« should travel to »the city of Chorazin, and there salute the prince«. Wraxall finds the subsequent word has been erased, but is convinced it should be read as »aeris ('of the air')«. The prince of the air is likely a reference to the Devil, referred to in the Bible as »the prince of the power of the air«. This implies that the black pilgrimage is a sort of Faustian pact. Intrigued by his findings, Wraxall inquires the parish deacon about Chorazin. The deacon reminds Wraxall of the Biblical account of the site, and of the old belief that it may be the birthplace of the Antichrist.

According to village lore, the count and this »someone« have haunted the area for centuries, and Wraxall learns the gruesome faith of some poachers who entered the count’s woods; one driven insane by nameless horror, the other dead, his face sucked clean off the bone. Wraxall is sceptical, suspecting that the stories were inspired by a sinister engraving on the count’s sarcophagus, depicting a man fleeing in terror from a hooded figure with an outstretched tentacle, while a tall, robed figure watches from afar. Nonetheless, Wraxall visits the mausoleum on three occasions, two of them seemingly in a trancelike state. On his final visit, Wraxall sees the sarcophagus opening, and flees in horror. He returns to England a broken man, tailed by a tall, cloaked man in a broad-leafed hat, accompanied by a short, hooded figure. In the story’s conclusion, the unnamed narrator states that Wraxall was later discovered dead and mutilated, presumably slain by Magnus and his »faithful messenger«.

Though Parsons borrowed the term »black pilgrimage«, as well as its connection to Chorazin and a mysterious prince for his own journey, Parsons reframed the concept from a (presumably) literal voyage to an initiatory, astral ditto. Parsons, like Magnus, seeks vengeance of a sort, though he undertakes the journey at Babalon’s behest, articulating a Nietzschean vision of the destruction of Christianity. It is reasonable to assume Parsons would have recognised the reference to a prince of the air as implying one of the Devil’s Biblical monikers. Parsons’ pilgrimage, similar to that of Magnus, thus appears to indicate a pact with the Devil; this impression is heightened by Parsons’ reliving of his childhood memory of invoking Satan and being asked whether he will fail similarly again. While James’ hooded messenger is a flesh-sucking fiend, however, the hooded figure in Parsons’ vision is an initiatory guide, officiating his transformation into the Antichrist. Crucially, Parsons – unlike Wraxall – seeks out (mystical) death willingly, sacrificing his blood to the cup of the goddess.

In Parsons’ writings, Chorazin and the black pilgrimage are mingled with the Thelemic doctrine of crossing the Abyss and draining one’s blood into Babalon’s cup. A possible, albeit simplistic, explanation for why Parsons made the
narrative connection between these concepts is the phonetic similarity of Chorazin and Choronzon, the ruler of the Abyss in Crowley’s writings. More generally, the idea of gaining hidden knowledge and power through a pact with the Devil would likely have appealed to Parsons’ iconoclastic and romantic leanings. Similar to Crowley, Parsons interpreted many of the antagonists of Judaeo-Christian mythology in a positive light, viewing the Whore of Babylon, Lucifer, and the Antichrist as emblems of freedom and enlightenment. Parsons’ alliance with the prince of Chorazin thus becomes the prerequisite for initiatory and social transformation.

Cameron’s poem does not mention either Chorazin or the Antichrist, indicating further removal from James’ story, of which she may or may not have been aware. However, her illustrated poem – whose title suggests she and Parsons may have discussed the concept – hints at an additional literary source that may have influenced both Cameron and Parsons. Before suggesting this possible influence, I shall make a brief digression to indicate some relevant passages from Songs for the Witch Woman, a collection of poems written by Parsons mostly between 1946 and 1952, for which Cameron provided illustrations. The poems rely heavily on Romantic motifs of rolling heaths, Merlin, Stonehenge, the god Pan, and the witches’ Sabbath, suggesting an influence from writers such as Charles Leland, Jules Michelet, and Margaret Murray. However, the poems also show Gothic influences. In “Night”, the narrator seeks “forbidden things on a black star / While throatily Lamia sings.” The poem “The Witch House” mentions “the Sylvan’s home / Where angels and shadows foregather / In black star foam”, as well as witchfires, demons, “castsles of glass”, and “death, like the tick of a clock in a boarded up room”. “Danse” describes a sinister gathering attended by a vampire and a werewolf, who sings “of the moon as a bloody promise in the sky, and of a sunken jelled sea / Where black stars and wicked women / reel in infamy”. One of the poems, titled “Bierce”, clearly alludes to the work of the horror writer Ambrose Bierce.

There are several overlaps in motifs and vocabulary between Parsons’ poetry and Cameron’s The Black Pilgrimage, with recurring references to glass palaces, sacred groves, and altar fires. These motifs did not necessarily have the same meaning for the two authors, but the concurrences indicate overlapping conceptual universes, in which Gothic and Romantic themes were ascribed magical significance. A suggestive, explicit parallel, is the phrase “black stars”, recurring thrice in Songs for the Witch Woman, and once in Cameron’s poem. It also appears, along with another illustrative term, in a 1950 letter, in which Parsons discusses what he believes to be Cameron’s magical destiny:
The gods themselves bend and whisper at your doorway, and your windows are portentous with the possible hour. I have heard Aldeberan [sic] speak to you of Rigel, and the Pleiades whisper your name that is to be. ... And now you come to the last unspeakable barrier, the ultimate thule, that you may labour long and painfully to kindle a small spark that will consume all you have -- that will burn down the heavens as a torch until even the black stars burn with furious joy [italics mine].

In my view, the darkly strange imagery in the couple’s lyrical work; Parsons’ penchant for fantastical stories; the repeated recurrence of the phrase »black stars«; and the appearance of the term »Aldebaran«, suggest that Parsons and Cameron were inspired by the American artist and author R.W. Chambers’ short-story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895). The first four stories in the collection, which have greatly influenced the genre of weird fiction, are loosely connected through a fictitious play, »The King in Yellow«. The play’s first act is described as relatively innocent, but anyone who proceeds to reading the second act is exposed to »'truths' which send men frantic and blast their lives«; a hidden knowledge eliciting a euphoric terror so haunting and sublimely twisted that the reader is driven insane. Fragments of the play are included in Chambers’ stories, whose characters hint repeatedly at a lost city, called Carcosa, where it is repeatedly said that »black stars hang in the heavens« and »the shadows of men’s thoughts lengthen in the afternoon«. Chambers borrowed the name »Carcosa« from Ambrose Bierce, with whose work Parsons was clearly familiar; specifically, it is derived from the short story »An Inhabitant of Carcosa« (1886), where it denotes a ruined city. It is hinted in Chambers’ stories that Carcosa is located in space, its towers stretching skyward behind the moon. A set of other concepts, whose significance is not explained, recur as part of the mythos around it: black stars; the Hyades; Hali, a lake; Hastur; Aldebaran (see above); and a terrifying entity in tattered robes, known as the »King in Yellow«.

Arguably, the stories surrounding the fictitious play have Satanic undertones; the yellow king appears as a sort of Devil figure, an emblem of corruption and debauchery, capable of transmitting knowledge and power. It is said that the play’s script is bound in serpent skin, likely an homage to the Edenic serpent, who provides the forbidden knowledge that simultaneously makes woman and man godlike, and condemns them to exile. Two of Chambers’ stories mention a symbol – the »Yellow Sign« – worn by those who serve, or are marked for, the king. There are clear parallels to the »mark« of the Beast, described in Revelation. In one story, the protagonist listens to an organist playing skilful yet »sinister music« during an evening
service at a Parisian church. The narrator wonders whether something not usually supposed to be at home in a Christian church might have entered undetected and taken possession of the west gallery, speculating that the church may not have been thoroughly consecrated, seemingly indicating a historical belief that consecrating a church expelled the Devil. The organist, who subsequently pursues the narrator through the dusky streets of Paris, finally catches up to his prey in the Court of the Dragon (also the title of the story), which appears to be inspired by a real place in Paris. Pertinently, the Dragon is equated with the Devil in the Book of Revelation.

James’ and Chambers’ stories both indicate the dangerous consequences of undue curiosity, and the simultaneous lure and repulsion of hidden secrets one may be better off not knowing. In both cases, forbidden knowledge (and, potentially, power) is facilitated by elusive, Satanic figures, and this knowledge is presented as dangerous, potentially catastrophic, to those who acquire it. However, Chambers’ story goes further in elaborating the psychological (or perhaps spiritual) effects of this discovery, and how it is connected to both horror and euphoria, and an altered perception of the world and oneself. Overlaps in imagery and phrasing notwithstanding, a more interesting parallel between Parsons’ and Cameron’s pilgrimage records and Chambers’ stories is thus the idea of forbidden knowledge prompting a transformative experience of sublime terror and joy.

--- A (FICTION-BASED) FEELING OF POIGNANT TERROR: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION ---

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to indicate the indebtedness of a particular esoteric concept to fiction, and specifically, to horror literature. Cameron’s and Parsons’ respective pilgrimage records are not fully-fledged examples of fiction-based religion. Nonetheless, previous research on the latter may be helpful in understanding why the two esotericists drew on fiction in constructing their magical universes. Carole M. Cusack notes that fantasy and science fiction narratives are especially likely to be accorded religious significance. Among the elements that render a fictional narrative more likely to be read thus, Anders Klostergaard Petersen emphasises the presence of »p–s–t coordinates«, that is, the inventory of persons, space, and time that are recognisable as relating to the real world; and of persons with counter-intuitive abilities, through which they can affect the characters in the story in positive or negative ways. All of this clearly applies to both »Count Magnus« and the weird tales of The King in Yellow.

Markus Altena Davidsen, who has analysed fiction-based religions such as Jediism and the Tolkien-based religions
inspired by *Lord of the Rings*, proposes that supernatural fiction with a greater preponderance of what he calls »veracity mechanisms« is more likely to inspire religious hermeneutics, by making a story appear relevant outside of its own universe. Davidsen distinguishes between »evidence mechanisms«, which give greater credibility to the supernatural elements of the story, and »anchoring mechanisms«, which make the story universe seem more relevant to the actual world. Among evidence mechanisms, Davidsen mentions an omniscient narrator or reliable »teacher« who presents the supernatural forces or events as »straightforwardly real« within the story, or »justification«; when the narrator of the story claims to have inherited the tale from a (usually more reliable) source. Among anchoring mechanisms, Davidsen mentions »author-narrator identification«, meaning that the narrator of the story is identified, implicitly or explicitly, with the story’s real-world author, opening up for a reading of the text as factual description; »reader inscription«, where the reader is inserted in the story-world either through direct address, or a connection of the story-world’s future to the reader’s present; and onomastic anchoring, that is, the use of names of real-world persons, places, and historical events.53

Neither »Count Magnus« nor *The King in Yellow* check all the boxes for veracity mechanisms. Both lack an omniscient narrator; in fact, there is a significant possibility of unreliable narration within the stories. Though some of the occurrences in Chambers’ short stories are discussed by more than one character, their reliability is called into question by the central plot element of a play driving anyone who reads it mad, prompting the question what can be known about it, at all. To some extent, »Count Magnus« utilises the mechanism of justification, as the framing narrative introducing and concluding the short story references Wraxall’s story as received, rather than experienced. Similarly, the titular character of James’ short-story »The Repairer of Reputations«, in the collection, predicts events that occur in the story-world, and which are referenced by characters who do not share the world-perception of the (presumably insane) narrator, who has read »The King in Yellow«. »Count Magnus« uses a degree of author-narrator identification, presenting Wraxall – like James – as a scholarly figure, as well as by positing a narrator external to Wraxall’s tale who has discovered his papers. Finally, »Count Magnus« also repeatedly relies on reader inscription by directly addressing the reader as a generic »you«. Both James’ and Chambers’ stories use onomastic anchoring: Chambers’ weird tales take place in New York and Paris, referring to actual locations there, such as the Court of the Dragon and Washington Square. Although Carcosa is not a real-world place, the Hyades and Aldebaran are names of stellar bodies, though it is not clear whether
this is their function in Chambers’ stories. James refers to several real-world locations in Sweden, and de la Gardie is the name of a real, Swedish noble family, one of whose members was, indeed, a Count Magnus. Moreover, as mentioned above, Chorazin is a real-world site, long believed to be the birthplace of the Antichrist.

Following Davidsen’s model, it is reasonable to assume that the veracity factors in James’ and Chambers’ stories may have rendered them more credible as sources of religious inspiration for Parsons and Cameron. Crucially, however, the black pilgrimage does not constitute an example of a fully-fledged fiction-based religion; on the contrary, Parsons and Cameron inserted its narrative components into the existing, non-fiction-based, religious structure of Thelema. Notably, Parsons and Cameron seemingly drew religious inspiration from horror stories, whose protagonists fare badly. Thus, we should also ask whether aspects of Thelema, or Crowley’s teachings, rendered the fictional sources discussed in this article more likely as sources of religious inspiration.

According to literature scholar Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, M.R. James’ protagonists – such as Wraxall – represent the modern notion of the bounded, autonomous (and usually masculine) self, who regards the world detachedly, remaining intact regardless of what happens to it. Lehmann contrasts this modern idea of the self with pre-modern notions of selfhood as porous, malleable, and contingent. James’ protagonists are at a loss when faced with that which challenges dichotomies such as subject and object; self and not-self; living and dead. Therefore, Imfeld argues, James’ monsters represent the incursion of a pre-modern, porous self, which cannot remain apart from that which happens to it. Following this interpretation, Count Magnus’ hooded tentacle monster symbolises a perceived threat to modern subjectivity, embodying the liminal space between human and animal; living and dead; even masculine and feminine. Its potential to destroy the bounded self is illustrated by its ability to reduce its victims to recognisability, literally, by sucking their faces off.

Although »Count Magnus« renders the threat to modern selfhood in horrifying form, Imfeld notes that the bounded self is inherently melancholy and haunted. The construction of autonomous selfhood entails a loss of immanence and connection, as the construction of the self is dependent on the rejection of the other. Thus, the monstrous can also, morbidly, signal the longing for undoing, and the dissolution of the stable self; this also appears to be its function in Parsons’ reading of »Count Magnus«. Like Crowley, Parsons embraced the porosity of the self, deliberately seeking out mystical ego death; his flesh and blood are not drained by a fishy tentacle, but willingly deposited into Babalon’s grail. Similar
to Crowley’s own crossing of the Abyss and emulation of the formula of Babalon, Parsons’ black pilgrimage can thus be read as a turn away from the stable, rational selfhood of a Jamesian protagonist, towards an ecstatic and relational mode of existence.

Parsons records his Abyss ordeal as one of madness, terror, and unspeakable things being done to him. Cameron’s *The Black Pilgrimage*, mirroring themes in her correspondence with Wolfe in the years after Parsons’ death, indicates a similar engagement over a longer period with destabilisation of the bounded self. The black pilgrimage appears as part of her new search for esoteric meaning and transcendence in the face of grief, possibly indicating how she felt that her suffering revealed planes of existence simultaneously horrifying and beautiful. While Cameron’s mental state was predicated by the loss of her lover, I nonetheless propose that she also, deliberately, pursued liminality and undoing as wellsprings of spiritual and artistic creativity.

It is possible to interpret the narrative of Parsons – and, indirectly, Cameron – as a subversion of a historically and culturally situated anxiety surrounding the destabilisation of the bounded self. However, both Parsons’ and Cameron’s texts can also be read as renderings of a more fundamental, and less time-bound, aspect of religious experience. Many of their writings, from Parsons’ *The Book of Babalon* with Hubbard’s stammering description of the goddess as beautiful and horrible, to Cameron’s frazzled diaries and letters from Beaumont, and epitomised by their pilgrimage accounts, engage with the idea of simultaneous horror and awe in the face of the divine. Parallels can be drawn to what Rudolf Otto refers to as *mysterium tremendum*: "a feeling of peculiar dread [...] an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil." Otto argues that this horrifying aspect of that which humans perceive as sacred is inherent to its ability to be perceived as such: the divine is seen as divine precisely because it is experienced as utterly other, and thus it provokes poignant terror and awe.

In Chambers’ stories, a fictitious play torments its readers with the poignant and euphoric horror of its maddening revelations. The insanity experienced by the play’s readers may, tentatively, be interpreted as a sort of negatively rendered *mysterium tremendum*. While Otto views *mysterium tremendum* as fundamental to all religion, divine terror arguably plays a particularly significant role in Crowley’s writings on the subject of the Abyss. This is possibly why Parsons and Cameron turned towards horror to construct their spiritual universes. In their respective readings, the horror elicited by the potential undoing of the bounded, rational self acquires meaning; in fact, the painful and terrifying nature of
these experiences appear precisely to prove their existential validity, even their sacredness. If it is indeed the case that Parsons, Cameron, or both read and enjoyed *The King in Yellow*, in addition to “Count Magnus”, they may have recognised in the madness felt by the bearers of the yellow sign something of their own religious experiences; the play itself reading as a repository of forbidden knowledge as transformational as any encounter with the numinous.

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— ENDNOTES —

1 Gen. 3 [KJV].


3 In congruence with Wouter J. Hanegraaff, I view Western esotericism as an umbrella term for a set of religious and philosophical currents, with their roots in late antiquity, which, beginning in early modernity, have been polemically rejected as the “other” of true faith and sound science. Constituting a “wastebasket of modernity”, the category of Western esotericism includes, but is not limited to, Renaissance Hermeticism; the “occult sciences” of magic, astrology, and alchemy; *Naturphilosophie*, and Theosophy. Whereas adherents of these various currents did not initially perceive themselves as part of a shared religious subculture, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a self-conscious esoteric milieu, frequently associated with the term “occultism.” Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Following Hanegraaff, I view occultism as the product of the meeting between esotericism and modernity, encompassing esotericists’ attempts to come to terms with an increasingly secularised and mechanised world. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

4 The connection between esotericism and literary fiction is explored in e.g., Per Faxneld and Mattias Fyhr, eds., *Förborgade tecken: esoterism i västerländsk litteratur* (Umeå: H:ström – Text & Kultur, 2010); Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, eds., *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Aren Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative: The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams* (Leiden: Brill,

5 See e.g. Kenneth Grant, Hecate’s Fountain (London: Skoob Books Pub., 1992); Phil Hine, The Pseudonomicon (Original Falcon Press, 2009 [2004]).


7 See Aleister Crowley, The Book of the Law: Liber AL vel Legis: With a Facsimile of the Manuscript as Received by Aleister and Rose Edith Crowley on April 8, 9, 10, 1904 e.v. Centennial Edition (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004); esp. AL I:40.


10 See »One Star in Sight«, included in Aleister Crowley, Magick: Liber ABA (York Beach, ME: S. Weiser, 1994), 479–489.


13 Crowley, Confessions, 621.

14 Aleister Crowley, »The Soul of the Desert«, The Occult Review 20:1 (1914).


16 See Rev. 17 [KJV].

17 See »The Cry of the 10th Aethyr, that is called ZAX«, in Aleister Crowley and Victor Neuburg, »The Vision and the Voice, Being the Cries of the Thirty Aethyrs«, 1909, Aleister Crowley Collection, s. 1, b. 5, f. 1–3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. See also Crowley, The Vision and the Voice, 170.
18 Crowley, »The Soul of the Desert«.
19 The role of Babalon in Crowley’s system, as well as the notion of crossing the Abyss, are analysed in detail in Manon Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
20 Parsons’ life and contribution to the space programme are treated in George Pendle, *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005).
21 The development of the Agape Lodge from its establishment in the 1930s is provided in Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites* (Bolingbrook, Ill.: Teitan Press, 2003).
23 Aleister Crowley to Jane Wolfe, December 1943, archive of Ordo Templi Orientis.
24 John W. Parsons, »The Book of Babalon«, typescript, Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.
25 Parsons, »The Book of Babalon«.
27 Parsons describes his black pilgrimage in two documents: firstly, a five-page diary record entitled »The Black Pilgrimage«; secondly, a document entitled »The Book of the Antichrist«. John W. Parsons, »The Black Pilgrimage«, n.d. [1948], copy of holograph MS., archive of Ordo Templi Orientis; John W. Parsons, »The Book of the Antichrist«, n.d. [ca 1948], Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute. Although the contents of these works are roughly the same, »The Book of the Antichrist« was seemingly written after the completion of the ordeal, and slight differences between the manuscripts suggest that Parsons was, in the latter text, attempting to systematise his experiences.
28 Parsons, »The Black Pilgrimage«; Parsons, »The Book of the Antichrist«.
29 Parsons, »The Black Pilgrimage«.
30 Parsons, »The Black Pilgrimage«; Parsons, »The Book of the Antichrist«.
31 Matt. 11:21; Luk. 10:13 [KJV].
32 Paul Julius Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic*


34 Cameron–Wolfe correspondence, 1952–1954, holograph MSS. and typescripts, Cameron Parsons Foundation.

35 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, Dec 26, 1952, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

36 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, Jan 22, 1953, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

37 See letters from Cameron to Jane Wolfe on Dec 26, 1952; Jan 8, 1953; Jan 22, 1953; June 3, 1953; July 12, 1953, holograph MSS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

38 Kansa, Wormwood Star, 204, 283–284.

39 Marjorie Cameron, »The Black Pilgrimage«, holograph MS. [n.d.], Cameron Parsons Foundation.

40 The origins of Parsons’ black pilgrimage in M.R. James’ fiction appears first to have been proposed by James scholars Rosemary Pardoe and Jane Nicholls, see Rosemary Pardoe and Jane Nicholls, »The Black Pilgrimage« Ghosts and Scholars 26 (1998).

41 M.R. James, »Count Magnus«, in Ghost Stories of an Antiquary (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), 149–160. James may have drawn some inspiration from Scandinavian folklore, which is replete with stories of pacts with the Devil, partly inspired by the Faust literature. The name »black pilgrimage« may have been inspired by the legend of the Black School of Wittenberg, a recurring concept in migratory legends denoting a sinister academy of the black arts taught by the Devil. Wittenberg was associated with Faust. See Davies, Grimoires, 118–119.

42 James, »Count Magnus«, 162.

43 Eph. 2:2 [KJV].

44 James, »Count Magnus«, 163–179.


46 For Parsons’ positive view of Lucifer, see John W. Parsons, »The Witchcraft«, in John W. Parsons, Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword and Other Essays, ed. Hymenaeus Beta and Cameron (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 2001), 71–74.

47 There are considerable overlaps between the depiction of witchcraft in Michelet’s, Leland’s, and Murray’s work, and the witchcraft religion Parsons began to sketch in the early 1950s. See Manon Hedenborg White, »The Eyes of Goats and of Women‘: Femininity and the Post-Thelemic Witchcraft of Jack Parsons and Kenneth Grant«, in Magic and Witchery in the Modern West – Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of »The


49 Parsons and Cameron, Songs for the Witch Woman, 71.

50 Parsons and Cameron, Songs for the Witch Woman, 39.

51 Parsons and Cameron, Songs for the Witch Woman, 65.

52 John W. Parsons to Marjorie Cameron, Feb 9, 1950.

Cameron Parsons Foundation.

53 The four Weird stories in Chamber’s The King in Yellow have been influential to later horror fiction, including that of H.P. Lovecraft, who was an admirer of Chambers’ work. See e.g. H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters, vol. 2, ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City, Wis.: Arkham House, 1968), 148.


55 Chambers, The King in Yellow, 23.

56 See e.g. Chambers, The King in Yellow, 1, 31, 76–77.

57 During the fin-de-siècle, yellow was associated with the Decadent movement, as epitomized by The Yellow Book, a Decadent journal that emerged in the 1890s, and which featured – among other things – illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley.

58 Rev. 13:16–17 [KJV].


60 Rev. 20:2 [KJV].


64 Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology: From Le Fanu to James (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).