

Making Occult Meaning: Aleister Crowley and Weird Fiction

by James Machin

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) remains a controversial and divisive figure. Although his peerless contribution to the development of occult theory and practice during his own lifetime and after is unarguable, various aspects of his lifestyle made him notorious. However, he was also a prolific writer and critic, and began his adult life as a poet. This essay explores this side of his output, and specifically his engagement with contemporary writers of weird fiction, such as Arthur Machen and Lord Dunsany. The argument is also made that Crowley's occult practice shapes and informs his responses to fiction, and that examining his approach to the question of authorial intentionality can cast light on wider critical practice today.

Weird fiction is a mode closely associated with the Gothic tradition from which it emerged. The period 1880 to 1940 is regarded by some commentators to have been its formative stage, an era designated '*haute* Weird' by China Miéville, for example.¹ It was during this period that writers such as Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Lord Dunsany, and Algernon Blackwood, dispensed with the staples of the Gothic genre (haunted castles, ghosts, rattling chains, and so on) and through their fiction engaged with contemporary discourses including those on evolution, degeneration, and psychic phenomena. In the 1920s and 1930s, their innovations were built upon in the U.S. by, most famously, H. P. Lovecraft, as well as other writers for *Weird Tales* magazine, and therefore shaped much ensuing Gothic and horror media, an influence which shows no signs of abating to this day.

Regarding the British *haute* Weird, one of its defining characteristics is its engagement with contemporaneous occulture. This essay will explore this specific context in more detail, drawing upon the critical writing and fiction of Aleister Crowley; one of the crucial figures—if not *the* crucial figure—in the occult discourses of the period. I will argue that Crowley's reactions to contemporaneous weird fiction reveal that, although Machen et al certainly used occult ideas and tropes in their writing, the use of these ideas was *ad hoc* and largely aesthetic, rather than didactic and organised. Although contemporaneous occult practice was a clear influence on the weird fiction of the period, attempts to glean 'truths' about that occult practice from the tales of, for example, Blackwood or Lovecraft, under the aegis of the contemporary academic practice of textual analysis, are in practice little different from Crowley's insistence that such texts contain occult 'truths' that can only be discovered by select initiates. The wider context of this essay is, therefore, the possible elisions between hermeticism and hermeneutics, beyond their shared etymological provenance.

Lovecraft, especially, has been singled out for febrile claims about the alleged occult truths secreted in his fiction, despite his professed atheism and blithe scepticism regarding all things supernatural. The authors of pop-occult crypto-history *The Dark Gods* (1985), for example, get round the problem presented by Lovecraft's atheism by arguing breathlessly that Lovecraft was an

involuntary or subconscious conduit for supernatural forces: ‘Lovecraft was a classic victim or unconscious medium for the extracosmic “sendings” of the Dark Gods’.² The trope that Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos is to a greater or lesser extent founded on a ‘reality’ had by then already precipitated something of an occult cottage industry, the productions of which included various ‘authentic’ editions of Lovecraft’s infamous occult tome the *Necronomicon*—for example, the ‘Simon’ *Necronomicon* published by Avon in 1977, or the version published by Skoob Esoterica in 1992—that occupy an obscure space between high-concept hoax and pot-boiling deception. Similarly obscure, though rather more ambiguous in terms of intentionality, is the exact nature of the co-option of Lovecraft’s fiction by practicing occultists. In books like *Cults of the Shadow* (1975), for example, Kenneth Grant (1924–2011)—certainly one of the most significant figures in British twentieth-century occulture after Crowley—regularly incorporated the Cthulhu Mythos into his work with little apparent regard for ontological distinctions between fiction and reality. Passages like the following give a flavour of Grant’s comingling of recondite lore and Lovecraftian fiction:

The Lovecraftian Coven is assumed to the seventh ray of [the contemporary occult order] *The Monastery of Seven Rays*. This is the ray of ceremonial magic and it forms a space-time corridor between [Lovecraft’s] Yuggoth (Pluto) and the ultimate trans-Neptune planets represented on the [Kabbalistic] Tree of Life by Kether and Chokmah respectively.³

The symbolist roots of contemporary occulture are perhaps evident here; the ‘authenticity’ of the system is of negligible importance compared to its symbolic value to the practitioner. In the late 1970s, the emergence of ‘Chaos magic’ as a new school of occult practice made this disregard for the authenticity of particular mythological traditions explicit. In this, it was influenced by the countercultural occult of the 1960s and 70s, and the ludic ‘Discordianism’ of, for example, Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea’s *Illuminatus!* trilogy (1975), which tangled Lovecraft and Crowley into byzantine historical and pseudohistorical conspiracy theories in an act of self-described ‘guerrilla ontology’, in which the intention was to force the reader to decide, ‘How much of this is real and how much is a put-on?’⁴

In books such as Phil Hine’s *Condensed Chaos: an Introduction to Chaos Magic* (1995), it is argued that *any* symbolic or mythological system or tradition should be up for grabs by occult practitioners based on functionality, with a happy disregard for ontological status. In advocating this postmodern approach to ritual magic, Hine argues that since ‘more people are familiar with the universe of Star Trek than any of the mystery religions’, rituals that involve evocation of, for example, Mr Spock, are more likely to succeed than those that depend on knowledge of, and belief in, forgotten Babylonian deities or antique Eleusinian rites. Hine then describes his own successes using the symbolic framework of the Cthulhu Mythos in his practice, despite—and to the possible reassurance of readers—denying any actual belief in the Mythos in reality. There has been a shift in occult discourse, therefore, away from sincere (or disingenuous) claims that the weird fiction of Machen and Lovecraft etc. is freighted with ‘genuine’ hermetic lore, to a more playful and sophisticated exploration of such conceits. This explicitly

ludic and relativist discourse is very different, for example, from that undertaken by Louis Pauwels and Jaques Bergier in their treatment of Machen and the Golden Dawn in their incredibly popular *The Morning of the Magicians* (1963). Pauwels and Bergier were responsible for at least propagating, if not inventing, several enduring canards about both the author and the order. They inaccurately claim, for example, that Bram Stoker and Sax Rohmer were members of the Golden Dawn, and that the influence of the society on Machen was a profound and transformative one, which—according to Machen at least—was far from the case, as I will discuss.⁵

It is hardly surprising that the weird fiction of the era under discussion—engaged as it is with the supernatural and hidden, nebulous agencies—should be closely linked with the occult. In fact, it is not only linked, but inextricably so; many of the writers pre-eminently associated with the *haute* Weird were also fascinated with various occult and esoteric traditions, and frequently actual practitioners. My argument here should not be misunderstood as an attempt to question this very evident fact. Figures as diverse as Machen, Blackwood, Vernon Lee, John Buchan, and Count Stenbock, were all variously involved in the occult renaissance of the late-Victorian period, from engagement with neo-Paganism to actual membership of occult societies. A clear ‘John the Baptist’ figure is Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873). Lord Lytton, an immensely successful novelist and playwright, wrote several works that would now fall within the ambit of genre writing. For example, his novels *Zanoni* (1843), *A Strange Story* (1862), *The Coming Race* (1871), and the novella ‘The Haunted and the Haunters or The House and the Brain’ (1859), all deal with various occult and theosophical themes such as hidden races, hollow-earth theory, mesmerism, psychic phenomena, ghosts, and ritual magic. Lovecraft praised Lytton’s writing for its ‘weird images and moods’, and regarded ‘The Haunted and the Haunters’ as ‘one of the best short haunted-house tales ever written’.⁶ This line of influence aside, Lytton’s occult interests also imbricated with and influenced later weird fiction, and the comparable interests of its authors. One specific example of this is the clear influence of Lytton’s fiction on the emergence of the actual Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn from the only allegedly-extant mystical ‘Rosicrucian’ sect, which Lytton discusses in his introduction to *Zanoni*.

The alleged existence and provenance of the ‘Rosicrucian Brotherhood’ was first espoused in several anonymous pamphlets in the early seventeenth century.⁷ The Brotherhood was framed as a benevolent, secret Neoplatonist and Christian society, possessed of ancient mystical wisdom and healing powers. The surname of the putative founder of the Brotherhood, Christian Rosenkreuz, comprised the yonic and phallic symbols of the Rose and the Cross, occult imagery familiar to anyone with a working knowledge of the hermetic tradition.⁸ By the time Lytton was writing *Zanoni* in the 1840s, the origins and putative reality of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood were both obscure and wilfully mythologized. *Zanoni*, a ‘Rosicrucian’ novel from such a prominent literary and political figure of the period, therefore attracted the attention of seekers after occult wisdom, and subsequent to *Zanoni*’s publication, Lytton became a figurehead, voluntary or

otherwise, for occult interests in both Britain and the Continent. Nineteenth century occulture (to use a contemporary term retroactively) developed as a complex and convoluted set of international connections, involving individuals such as Lytton, Eliphas Lévi, Mary Ann Atwood, ‘Madame’ Helena Blavatsky, and involved myriad fraternities, sororities, associations, and ‘fringe’ Masonic societies, both formal and informal. Negotiating this history has always been made significantly more difficult by the enthusiasm of many of the participants for inventing traditions (such as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, for example) in order to give added authenticity to their claims of being the recipients of ancient hermetic wisdom.⁹

Lytton’s fictional exposition of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood seems to have directly influenced the establishment in 1887 of the occult society called The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.¹⁰ The predecessor of this organisation was the Societas Rosicrucias In Anglia (S.R.I.A.), and occasional claims were made by those involved that Lord Lytton was ‘himself a member of the Society of Rosicrucians and Grand Patron of the Order’.¹¹ Although there is (at very least) a question mark over the veracity of this claim, it is still indicative of Lytton’s status in contemporaneous occulture that the claim was made at all.¹² The Golden Dawn emerged from what is sometimes called ‘fringe’ Masonry—the attempt by some Masons to steer Freemasonry away from its ostensibly secular post-Enlightenment orthodoxy into areas thick with occult significance and ritual. Susan Johnston Graf describes the Golden Dawn as ‘arguably the most important and influential Western organization of its kind’, going on to say that ‘its materials serve as the basis for many twentieth-century magico-religious groups and for many so-called New Age beliefs’.¹³ According to Francis King, ‘at first the Golden Dawn was little more than another pseudo-masonic order whose members studied occult theory’, distinguishing itself ‘only by the fact that it admitted women as well as men into its ranks’.¹⁴ However, in 1892, one of the founders of the order, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), claimed to have made contact with ‘certain super-human, immortal teachers’ who entrusted him with unique teachings and instructed him in uniquely potent magical rituals.¹⁵

Disregarding the veracity of Mathers’ claims in this regard (as many do), what he in effect achieved was a synthesis between the existing Rosicrucian and Masonic provenance of the Golden Dawn as was, and the Theosophist system of Madame Blavatsky; Mathers essentially co-opting the immortal ‘Mahatmas’ or ‘Masters of the Ancient Wisdom’ of Blavatsky’s Theosophy for his own organization, re-casting them as the ‘Secret Chiefs’ of the Golden Dawn. For Mathers, a happy by-product of his encounter with the Secret Chiefs was that he could consolidate his position as the society’s ultimate and central authority, by being the sole conduit of communication between the society and the Secret Chiefs. Although Mathers’ assumption of power in this way eventually led to the first of many fractious schisms, in 1900 the Golden Dawn attracted the membership of numerous notable fin-de-siècle figures including W. B. Yeats, Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, Arnold Bennett, and Evelyn Underhill. Two members of specific relevance

to this essay are Arthur Machen and, to a far lesser degree, Algernon Blackwood, two of Lovecraft's 'Modern Masters' of the weird tale.

The specific influence of the Golden Dawn (rather than occult discourse in general) on the literary output of both writers is difficult to ascertain, given its status as a *secret* society, but—as I will argue below—any such influence tends to be overstated rather than understated. Relevant scholarly examinations have been accordingly speculative. Graf, in her monograph on this specific question, *Talking to the Gods* (2015), does a fine job in corralling the available information, but nevertheless has to fill in many of the gaps with what amounts to conjecture based on the limited, and circumstantial, evidence available. There is a perceivable frustration that Machen failed to ever disclose 'some of his questionable experiences during the halcyon days of his youth during the Decadent decade of the 1890s',¹⁶ yet the most obvious explanation for this autobiographical lacuna—that he did not have any—is never entertained by Graf.¹⁷ Similarly, in Deborah Bridle's fascinating and productive discussion of the resonances of the Golden Dawn system and Rosicrucianism in Machen's novel *The Hill of Dreams*, the argument remains necessarily speculative and associative: the resonances with Golden Dawn ritual are identified purely by close reading of the text.¹⁸

In his autobiographical work *Things Near and Far* (1923), Machen sketches his involvement with the Golden Dawn (which he euphemistically calls the 'Order of the Twilight Star') in an episode he describes as 'the affair of the secret society'.¹⁹ In it, he is unequivocally disparaging about the society, its alleged provenance, and the credulity of its members:

[...] as for anything vital in the secret order, for anything that mattered two straws to any reasonable being, there was nothing of it, and less than nothing. Among the members there were, indeed, persons of very high attainments, who, in my opinion, ought to have known better after a year's membership or less; but the society as a society was pure foolishness concerned with impotent and imbecile Abracadabras.²⁰

Machen adds a qualifier that 'it had and has an interest of a kind', but goes on to assert that as to the story of the society's vaunted roots in medieval Rosicrucianism and cipher manuscripts made manifest by secret chiefs, 'there was not one atom of truth in it'.²¹ Machen specifically identifies the Golden Dawn's distinctively contemporary syncretism as evidence of its recent invention: 'That was not the ancient frame of mind; it was not even the 1809 frame of mind. But it was very much the eighteen-eighty and later frame of mind.'²² A historian of the Golden Dawn, Ellic Howe, also provides some additional circumstantial evidence that supports Machen's claim that the Golden Dawn 'shed no ray of any kind on [his] path':²³

Neither Arthur Machen ('Avallaunius', I.-U. [Isis Urania] 21 November 1899) nor Algernon Blackwood ('Umbram Fugate Veritas', I.-U., 30 October 1900) was ever very prominent in the G.D. and both joined when the Order's most interesting period belonged to the past.²⁴

Elsewhere, Howe writes: ‘I have discovered only two references to Machen (Frater Avallaunius) in the available documents. He was 3° = 8° and hence a relatively unimportant member of the Outer Order in 1900.’²⁵ Howe also observes that although Maud Gonne opined that Algernon Blackwood ‘lent the G.D. a certain literary distinction’, Blackwood was not in fact in the Golden Dawn at the same time as Gonne. Howe then quotes from 1909 correspondence between G.D. members Dr R. W. Felkin and J. W. Brodie Innes:²⁶ “‘With regard to Blackwood I have not seen him for years but he still works with S[acramentum] R[egis] & Co.’”, meaning with A. E. Waite.’²⁷

Once again, the tautological occult tendency to obfuscation confuses matters, especially when combined with knowingly ludic conceits such as Machen and Waite’s *The House of the Hidden Light* (1904), which despite presenting itself as a recondite esoteric treatise, has been demonstrated by R. A. Gilbert to be more a coded account of Waite and Machen’s nocturnal, alcohol-fueled adventures in Bohemian London.²⁸ Although Machen made his own comparison between the cast of characters in *The Three Impostors*, and various parties involved in the ‘magical war’ between Aleister Crowley and Yeats, Machen’s comments were retroactive—he was rather remarking on a disconcerting synchronicity between events in the novel and the Golden Dawn intrigue, which happened years after its publication.²⁹ What is undeniable, however, is that one of the preeminent (and notorious) occultists associated with the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), valorized the work of Machen, and also Lord Dunsany (not a member of the Golden Dawn), for what he claimed to be occult insights presented as fiction.

Crowley’s life and legacy has become overshadowed by his predilection for courting scandal and shocking contemporary mores, and his occasional weakness for self-publicity. It should be recognized, however, that he was also very much a victim of the ambient, institutional homophobia of his age. In 1900 it was a contributory factor, together with his loyalty to an increasingly isolated Mathers (by then resident in Paris), to his ostracisation by most of the London membership of the Golden Dawn. Francis King maybe overstating the case when he writes that ‘the London adepts had heard that Crowley was a practicing homosexual and decided that, in the words of Yeats, a mystical society was not a moral reformatory’, but Crowley’s bisexuality was certainly an issue.³⁰ Writing in 1923, and despite his antipathy to Crowley, Machen fully acknowledges the likelihood that Crowley’s reputation as a ‘fiend in human form’ was the result of malicious gossip: ‘I can by no means go bail for the actuality of any of the misdeeds charged against him’.³¹ Regardless, Crowley’s bisexuality and his ‘reputation of being a sodomite’ made it impossible to seek legal protection from even quite clear cases of slander.³² In 1910, for example, legal proceedings resulting from an attack on Crowley in the tabloid *The Looking Glass* foundered on Crowley’s reputation for ‘unnatural vice’:

Why did Crowley not himself sue, or testify for Jones [George Cecil, the litigant against *The Looking Glass*]? Crowley gives his own explanation in his *Confessions*, but even this necessarily sidestepped the truth: Crowley was a

bisexual in Edwardian England [...and...] homosexuality was a felony. Oscar Wilde had suffered his not-so-rosy crucifixion only a few years earlier; unless willing to lie under oath, Crowley did not dare take the stand.³³

His subsequent reputation and his branding by the popular magazine *John Bull* as the ‘Wickedest Man in the World’, the ‘King of Depravity’, and a ‘Wizard of Wickedness’ has inevitably led to intense and lurid posthumous mythologization.³⁴ However, unlike Wilde, who endured similar treatment at the hands of the popular press, Crowley has subsequently rarely been taken seriously as a writer beyond recondite occult circles. Ever since Yeats’s initial disparagement of his poetry and their subsequent feud (or magical battle, if the participants’ accounts are to be taken at face value), Crowley has been usually regarded as a poetaster and charlatan, when not incorrectly lambasted as a ‘Satanist’. There are at least signs that a rehabilitation may be in process: Richard Kaczynski’s [add date] biography has presented Crowley in a refreshingly sympathetic light, and Kaczynski also details Crowley’s initial critical successes as a fin-de-siècle poet.³⁵ Indeed, before his notoriety, Crowley was often treated warmly by contemporary critics; the *Outlook*, for example, described him as ‘evidently a poet of fine taste and accomplishment’, while the *Bookman* thought he had potential to be ‘a very considerable poet indeed’.³⁶ Today, comprehensive editions of his short fiction are newly available in mass-market trade paperbacks published by Wordsworth.³⁷ Despite David Tibet noting in his foreword to one of these, *The Drug and Other Stories*, that Crowley ‘admired the writing of Arthur Machen’, that admiration does not very recognizably manifest itself in Crowley’s own fiction, which—as discussed below—tends towards fictionalized accounts of ‘authentic’ occult experiences or complicated allegory of occult theory and practice, impenetrable to the layperson.³⁸

One anomalous story that Crowley did write in the weird mode is ‘The Testament of Magdalen Blair’ (1913), in which the eponymous narrator gives an account of a terrifying psychic link between her and her dying husband, through which she vicariously experiences the residual consciousness of his posthumous brain cells. The experience of the subjective processes of disease, death, and decay, traumatizes her to the point of suicidal insanity. The language used by Crowley certainly seems informed by his enthusiasm for contemporaneous weird fiction, and in passages such as the following is striking in its anticipation of Lovecraft:

Crawling rivers of blood spread over the heaven, of blood purulent with nameless forms—mangy dogs with their bowels dragging behind them; creatures half elephant, half beetle; things that were but a ghastly bloodshot eye, set about with leathery tentacles; women whose skins heaved and bubbled like boiling sulphur, giving off clouds that condensed into a thousand other shapes, more hideous than their mother; these were the least of the denizens of these hateful rivers. The most were things impossible to name or to describe.³⁹

This febrile mixture of precise delineation of monstrous hybrid zoology terminating in a claim of exhaustion of the descriptive powers of language will be familiar to readers of Lovecraft, and fits very closely with China Miéville's delineation of the *haute* Weird as positing entities that are 'indescribable and formless *as well as being and/or although they are and/or in so far as they are* described with an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision'.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, 'The Testament of Magdalen Blair' is far from typical of Crowley's fictional output, much of which—as previously discussed—is written in the interests of occult instruction, when not thinly-veiled autobiography, or satirical, score-settling roman-à-clef (his 1923 novel *The Moon Child* being a good example of the latter).

Crowley also turned his hand to more straightforward detective fiction (the 'Simon Iff' series), sardonic humour (e.g. 'The Ideal Idol', 1918), and stories that really serve as ingenious mathematical, logical, or lexical puzzles (e.g. 'The Murder in X. Street', 1908). As with his posthumous reputation as a poetaster, the enduring hyperbole surrounding the 'wickedest man in the world' tends to obscure his real achievements as a writer. A good indication of his actual status at the time he was writing was that he had several pieces included in the *English Review*, a title started by Ford Madox Ford, which had published work by Thomas Hardy, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Joseph Conrad among other prominent authors of the time. Crowley claims that Conrad thought very highly indeed of one of Crowley's short stories published in the title, 'The Stratagem' (1914): "I was told—nothing in my life ever made my prouder—that Joseph Conrad said it was the best short story he had read in ten years."⁴¹ However sceptical one might be regarding Crowley's name dropping here, 'The Stratagem' is an incredibly accomplished piece of literary sleight-of-hand, and has credibly been compared to Borges.⁴²

However, Crowley's responses to the weird fiction of his contemporaries is certainly indicative of the enmeshment of fictional and non-fictional iterations of occult discourse at the time. He held Machen's writing in especially high esteem: 'I have always maintained that Arthur Machen was one of the most original and excellent minds of England. The distinction of his thought and style is one of the most unmistakable of contemporary literary phenomena.'⁴³ Writing in *Vanity Fair* in 1916, Crowley described Machen as 'certainly among the first half-dozen living English authors'.⁴⁴ In the review sections of the journal Crowley edited and largely wrote, *The Equinox*, the books under consideration were predominantly non-fictional works dealing with occult, esoteric, and spiritualist matters. However, Crowley and his colleagues' regard for Machen can be gleaned from the regularity with which Machen's name was used as a touchstone when criticizing other fiction. For example, Crowley's complete review of Edgar Jepson's occult thriller *No. 19* (1910), is as follows: 'Arthur Machen wrote fine stories, "The Great God Pan," "The White People," etc. Edgar Jepson would have done better to cook them alone; it was a mistake to add the dash of Algernon Blackwood'.⁴⁵ Crowley's then acolyte, the poet Victor Neuberg, criticizes J. W. Brodie-Innes's novel *Old as the World*

(1909) because ‘the magic of style that renders Arthur Machen so marvellous is lacking’.⁴⁶ Once again critical of Blackwood, in Crowley’s negative review of Blackwood’s *The Education of Uncle Paul* (1909) he claims that unlike Blackwood’s novel, Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) ‘has blood’ in it.⁴⁷ It is indicative of Machen’s standing within the occult community that Machen is lauded as an exemplary author three times in the review section of a single edition of *The Equinox*.

Crowley was of the opinion that Machen’s fiction contained useful occult information for the informed and careful reader, and included ‘The Works of Arthur Machen’ (referring to a corpus rather than a specific volume) in one of the reading lists he compiled for aspirant magicians, commenting that ‘most of these stories are of great magical interest’.⁴⁸ Crowley’s failure to expand upon the specifics of this ‘magical interest’ is typical of his writing on fiction, however, with the suggestion being that Machen’s, and others’, fiction contains occulted information that can only be gleaned by assiduous and astute reading by someone educated to a sufficient level in esoteric lore. Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, for example, is ‘valuable for those who have wit to understand it’, and he argues that Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark* are ‘valuable to those who understand the Qabalah’.⁴⁹ Even when Crowley is more specific about the relationship between a work of fiction and occult information, it can feel more like the throwing down of a gauntlet rather than actual explication:

741. אמת, the four letters of the elements. און, counting the ך as 700, the supreme Name of the Concealed One. The dogma is that the Highest is but the Four Elements; that there is nothing beyond these, beyond Tetragrammaton. This dogma is most admirably portrayed by Lord Dunsany in a tale called ‘The Wanderings of Shaun’.⁵⁰

Although Dunsany would likely have been surprised to learn that his story (actually titled ‘The Sorrow of Search’, 1906) was a portrayal of any such thing, Crowley may well have rejected the claim that authorial intentionality had any bearing on the truth of his claim.

Crowley’s approach to literature was entrenched in the occult and Kabbalistic worldview that an archive of hidden spiritual knowledge is secreted in certain texts, accessible only to initiates. Wilful mystagoguery aside, writing in *Vanity Fair* about Lord Dunsany, Crowley appears sincere in his belief that such readings are possible, and candid about the difficulties involved in fully parsing the texts. Crowley says of Dunsany that an ‘unsuspected profound of philosophy lies beneath his smooth, subtle, imaginative sentences’, but confesses that he (Crowley) ‘cannot pretend to have assimilated or unified this philosophy, to have known the God that is shadowed forth in all [Dunsany’s] gracious images; to have apprehended the ultimate purport of his message’.⁵¹ There seems no doubt in Crowley’s mind, of course, that there *is* an ‘ultimate purport’ discoverable in the text—as he writes in the *Equinox* of one Dunsany story: ‘And what shall I say of “The Sword and the Idol” [1909]? Only this; that it is true.’⁵² However, Crowley

then concedes that the worth of Dunsany's writing does not completely rely on any putative symbolic purpose or intent: 'Even were it but to wander among the images that Lord Dunsany has thrown off from his soul, the pilgrimage were pleasant'.⁵³ As presented in his *Vanity Fair* article, Crowley's enthusiasm for Dunsany seems rooted in an animus against modernity, and the debasement of 'the true and the beautiful' in 'these days of industrialism'.⁵⁴ It also may have been a sympathetic response by Crowley to Dunsany's debt to the English style of the King James Bible. As a child, Crowley had been captivated and fascinated by the daily Bible readings, and stylistically, this resulted in a clear and consistent Biblical influence on his own occult writings.⁵⁵ Similarly, Dunsany 'regarded his early immersion in the King James Bible as the greatest influence on his prose style'.⁵⁶ .

The seriousness with which Crowley took what he perceived to be fictional expressions of occult gnosis (an ongoing expression of fin-de-siècle symbolism) is indicated by the fact that he not only referred regularly to the Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany in his writing, but that he published the latter *The Equinox*. Crowley also corresponded with Dunsany, and based on Dunsany's responses, the resulting dynamic was that of a fan interrogating the object of their enthusiasm. Dunsany's letters to Crowley are a series of friendly but forthright responses to Crowley's questions, for instance: 'No, I never tried hashish, my strongest drug is tea' (1911).⁵⁷ The question put to Dunsany in this instance is not a casual one: Dunsany's 'The Hashish Man' (1910) was described by Crowley as containing writing that was 'the perfection of the sublime in its simplicity'.⁵⁸ Following on from a previous story ('Bethmoora') in the same collection, *A Dreamer's Tales* (1911), it concerns the visionary experiences of an insurance salesman, who in his evenings imbibes a particularly powerful type of hashish: 'It takes one literally out of oneself. It is like wings. You swoop over distant countries and into other worlds.'⁵⁹ There are marked similarities between Dunsany's description of the hashish eater's experience with the technique known as 'astral projection', foundational to Crowley's occult practice and that of other members of the Golden Dawn, such as Yeats. Astral projection 'resembles a controlled out-of-body experience, where one's consciousness leaves its physical confines and travels in the imagination.'⁶⁰ One of Crowley's mentors in the order, Allan Bennet (1872–1923) introduced Crowley to the 'controlled use of drugs for mystical purposes', among them being drug-enhanced astral projection.⁶¹ It is little wonder, then, that 'The Hashish Eater' led Crowley to speculation as to whether Dunsany might be an occult practitioner, disguising accounts of his practice in his fiction (as mentioned below, much of Crowley's fiction amounted to exactly this).

There are certainly precedents in this regard, which indicate that Crowley was interested in authorial intentionalism, and not simply projecting occult meaning onto the texts he valorized. As a Cambridge undergraduate, Victor Neuberg (1883–1940) first came to Crowley's attention in 1905 through his poetry published in the *Agnostic Journal*. This included poems such as 'Between the Spheres' (1905), in which the speaker 'slips out of his body and although still warm from the habitation he has left, feels his ghostly self expand in the aether as he

floats through it.’⁶² A similar trope appears in a 1906 poem, ‘The Dream’, summarised as follows:

While lying down [the speaker] feels himself rise out of his body and go walking, a—now familiar—companion beside him; it is only as they talk that he realizes, with a start, that this is something which happens only after one is dead. Wide-eyed, he asserts, ‘I am not dead!’ Instantly, he is jerked back to his body, and wakes.⁶³

These, and other poems of Neuberger’s in the *Agnostic Journal* so impressed Crowley that he sought out their author:

As Victor related it to a number of people, Crowley just walked into his room in college one day and introduced himself. As Crowley was a former student of Trinity it was perfectly in order for him to visit his old college and to walk up any of the staircases. He explained his call on Victor, saying that he had read some of his poems in the *Agnostic Journal* and that they interested him because they showed experience of astral travel.⁶⁴

As it proved, Neuberger was to disappoint Crowley on this assumption: Neuberger’s flights were (at that stage at least) imaginative rather than astral. Similarly, Dunsany’s response to Crowley’s questions may have frustrated Crowley, but further demonstrate that fiction involving the tropes of the occult can quite often be just that, rather than evidence of the author’s deeper engagement with contemporaneous occulture.

There is a difference between weird fiction, therefore, and ‘occult fiction’: in the latter, the fiction is an instrument to convey a schema of occult information, whereas, in the former, the occult information might be called upon in the general bricolage of the literary construction. As well as Crowley, another distinct exponent of occult fiction was Dion Fortune (Violet Mary Firth, 1890–1946), also a Golden Dawn initiate, whose ‘body of fictional work presents the development of her occult ideas and practices’.⁶⁵ Moreover, Fortune ‘thought that by reading [her novels] her audience would achieve a kind of initiation’ into the occult knowledge she was setting out to convey.⁶⁶ It is impossible to claim that any similar intentional or organized occult didacticism exists in the fiction of Machen. This is demonstrated by the fact that viable, credible, and productive readings of Machen’s work have argued variously that they are an expression of Golden Dawn symbolism, Thomist theology, Anglo-Catholicism, and so on.

Machen’s occult knowledge was merely one component of a smorgasbord of tropes—selected from as and when each component could be pressed to the service of the narrative and overall aesthetic conceit—rather than given pre-eminence through any desire to impart occult wisdom. Indeed, Machen’s insistence on the supremacy and immutability of numinous mystery over all else explicitly decries any claim to revelatory secret knowledge. (This is of course not to argue that Machen was not interested in or extremely knowledgeable about the occult tradition.) In

contrast, Crowley's own short fiction, and indeed his novels, can be classed in many instances as occult fiction in the stricter sense discussed above. 'The Wake World' (1907) for example, is a visionary/symbolic tale presumably thick with allegorical significance. It comes with heavy annotations in Hebrew and Latin, detailing Kabbalistic correspondences and so on, and was included by Crowley on his teaching curriculum for one of his magickal orders, the 'A.:A.:'.⁶⁷

Crowley's contributions to and interactions with the weird fiction of his contemporaries are not reducible, therefore, to a straightforward, shared interest in occult practice, and presenting occult theory in fictional form. Crowley's responses to writers such as Machen and Dunsany in fact anticipate subsequent discourse in wider literary criticism. Despite this, Crowley's approach to literature was consistently predicated on the notion of occult gnosis, and the assumption that inner truths were discoverable in fiction through informed hermeneutics. However, as willing as he was to ignore more general interpretations of texts to co-opt a wide variety of material for his magickal syllabi, this did not stop him from also making fallacious presumptions of authorial intentionality when it came to the occult. Crowley, in common with many literary critics, was convinced that texts contained hidden meanings that could be teased out through careful analysis. We can treat his specific beliefs with as much scepticism as we like, but Crowley's attempts at a hermetic hermeneutics of literature, in which a wide variety of fictional texts are co-opted into the occult canon, and the problems he encountered precipitated by the question of intentionalism, anticipate wider conundrums in subsequent literary criticism generally. The scepticism with which we react to Crowley's determination to make occult meaning in various fictional texts may be legitimate, but if we *are* to be sceptical, there is a corollary demand to be sceptical about the convenient good fortune with which any scholar produces the meanings they are looking for in any given text.

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⁹ I explore some of this complicated history in my article 'Towards a Golden Dawn: Esoteric Christianity and the Development of Nineteenth-Century British Occultism' (Machin 2013).

¹⁰ I will hereon use the term 'Golden Dawn' as shorthand for an organisation that was frequently prone to internecine schism, and branching off into affiliate and competing societies, often with varying or different names. For further detail see Francis King's *Modern Ritual Magic: The Rise of Western Occultism* (Bridport: Prism, 1989).

¹¹ Victor Alexander George Robert Bulwer-Lytton Lytton, Earl of, *The Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 41.

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¹⁴ Francis King, *Megatherion: The Magical World of Aleister Crowley* (London: Creation Books, 2004), p. 22.

¹⁵ King, pp. 22–23.

¹⁶ Graf, p. 63.

¹⁷ I discuss such posthumous mythologization of Machen, and the blurring of his fiction and biography, in my *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939*, Palgrave Gothic (London: Palgrave, 2018).

¹⁸ Deborah Bridle, 'Symbolism and Dissidence: Social Criticism through the Prism of the Golden Dawn in Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*', *Faunus: The Journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen*, 2016, 2–18.

¹⁹ Arthur Machen, *Things Near and Far* (London: Secker, 1923), pp. 151–54.

²⁰ Machen, pp. 151–52.

²¹ Machen, pp. 152–53.

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