
ON THE ESOTERIC LITERATURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES, AND ON THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF THEURGIC ART AND PRACTICE IN WESTERN CHRISTENDOM.

— BY ARTHUR EDWARD WAITE

PUBLISHED 1888 AS AN INTRODUCTION TO 'THE MAGICAL WRITINGS OF THOMAS
VAUGHAN', ANNOTATED BY FRATER ACHER 2015

Part I¹

The magical writings of Thomas Vaughan constitute an explanatory prolegomena not only to the general history of practical transcendentalism, and to the philosophy of transcendental art, from the standpoint of a Christian initiate, but they are specially directed to the interpretation of alchemical symbolism; they claim to provide the intelligent reader with a substantially fresh revelation of that mysterious First Matter of the Magnum Opus which endows those who know it, and can avail themselves of its manifold potencies, with a full and perfect power for the successful conduct of all classes of theurgic experiment. Adopting the terminology of Hermetic adepts Thomas Vaughan enlarges the theoretical scope of alchemical processes, and delineates the spiritual evolution of humanity, completely and scornfully rejecting the merely mineral work, and claiming for the true hierophants of mystic science a personal interest and participation in the whole creative opus.

In offering for the first time to the modern student of ancient mysteries a reprint of these curious and really important treatises, it seems needful to attempt a plain statement of the reasons which have led to their reproduction, and of the exact nature of the interest which now attaches to them. The vast literature of ancient occultism has till recently possessed little but an archaeological interest, of a naturally relative kind, as the remains of discredited high thinking in past ages and a certain bibliographical value, on account of the extreme rarity of all esoteric works.

This interest and this value would be an insufficient warrant for their revival in an era of positive science or in the absence of any message of vital import to this veridic age, and, therefore, on philosophical, as well as practical and, I may add, commercial grounds, they would have remained archaeological monuments and book-lovers'

¹ The division of this essay into three parts does not appear in the original publication which can be found [here](#). In this first part, however, Waite is sharing his personal thoughts on the relevance of Thomas Vaughan's works during his time. In the second part Waite is exploring the history of the theurgic art and practice as the heading of this essay suggests. In the third and last part he is portraying his personal and highly psychological interpretation of alchemy as a 'secret doctrine' of Western mysticism.

treasures alone. But the sudden revival of psychic research amongst us, and certain discoveries made in the psychic world, of which many are now well known, and others remain in abscondito, have placed the position of old mystics in an utterly different light, and have created a presumptive probability that prior claimants have also a right to be heard, and that the conductors of early psychic experiments in ages of single purpose may have advanced beyond ourselves, and may be qualified for our teachers and guides. Here are the broad d priori grounds for the revived interest in the entire circle of esoteric literature. But when the whole faculty of an impartial and sympathetic mind, cognisant already of those ascertained facts to which I have just alluded, is brought to the adequate study of the philosophers, as they were collectively termed, this general interest is speedily merged in a far more absorbing feeling, for we find ourselves in the presence of a titanic claim, advanced in a number of cases by intellectual giants and joined to a height of aspiration, a wealth of spiritual suggestiveness, a cosmic breadth of view, and a degree of apparent personal sanctity, which are sufficient to profoundly impress the most unemotional minds, while vistas of vast possibilities unveil to the prepared imagination at the magic word of the hierophants. Here are the more particular pounds for the new interest in ancient esoteric literature, and here once more the accepted facts of modern psychology are presumptive evidence for the truth of these claims, and evidence, moreover, which is, in my opinion, sufficiently strong not only to warrant their exhaustive and practical investigation on the lines of the mystics, but to make investigation imperative with those who, like myself, are unconditionally devoted to the progress of psychic science.

To place within the reach of like-minded students the works of an acknowledged adept, which are otherwise almost introuvable and thereby to set new sympathetic investigators on the track of the grand mysteries, is the *raison d'être* of this reprint. It is due to the work of the modern theosophists to state that they were substantially the first to draw attention to the connecting link between the psychic phenomena of to-day and the ancient thaumaturgy, and the second spring of magic and of magian thought in England is directly owing to their influence.

Having paid this just tribute, it becomes necessary to explain the nature of the psychic facts to which I have several times alluded, as much to prevent misconception as for the use of inquirers at the early stages of their progress.

The ascertained facts which I consider, in common with numerous qualified persons, to be presumptive evidence for the truth of the magical claim, taken broadly in its totality, are quite independent of any mystical theory, are not confined to any special circle of esoteric students, and are wholly unconnected with the results which may or may not have been attained by such colleges of oriental adepts as theosophists proclaim to exist among the politically unapproachable fastnesses of the Thibetan highlands. I speak with all deference of an opinion which is held by several intellectual persons, and with due appreciation of such evidence as exists on the subject; I am personally quite uncommitted to any opinion in the matter, except on the a priori ground of magical possibility.

The psychic facts in question may be verified by any intelligent person who is possessed of sufficient perseverance, and is capable of appreciating the issues which are at stake in such a manner as to conduct his researches with a view to those issues. They are concerned with the higher classes of hypnotic phenomena, with ecstatic and

trance clairvoyance, with thought-transference, the transcorporeal action of mind upon matter, and with such phenomena of modern spiritualism as unbiased inquirers agree to be well substantiated. These facts offer a rational basis for the belief in another form of subsistence than that of the physical life of man on earth, and naturally terminate the age of spiritual faith in the first auroral light of an age of spiritual knowledge, revealing for the first time, openly and to all mankind, that it is possible, even in earthly life, to enter into another form of perception and to establish communication with planes of intelligent existence which are normally beyond our range.²

This communication at present is exceedingly hampered, and the progress, which has at best been slow, seems at the present moment to be almost completely arrested, partly owing to the insincerity of experiment, which is attempted on the lowest planes of physical subsistence, with coarse, degraded, and sometimes diseased instruments, yet is concerned with the spiritual altitudes, while the ignorance of a proper method of procedure — the ‘true process’ of alchemical allegory³ — creates another and apparently insurmountable barrier. In this difficulty, the earnest student who turns for illumination to the sanctuaries of ancient mystic wisdom and for counsel to its grand hierophants, finds himself face to face with the departed but still eloquent representatives of a sacerdotal and royal science which claims to be exclusively acquainted with the One Way of Rectitude and the Unerring Path of Light.⁴ He discovers that the prodigies of the elder world are substantially identical with those modern phenomena with which he is already familiar, of whose actuality he is convinced, and which have prompted him in his further quest. The hypnotic trance, as we know it to-day, is clearly and frequently alluded to in ancient writings; modern clairvoyance is paralleled by the magical vision at a distance; for thought-transference, we have mystical methods of communication with persons however remote and in the absence of any material means; while an exact fundamental correspondence may be easily established between many marvels of American Spiritualism and the ghostly mysteries of necromantic and magical evocation. But whereas our modern phenomena have all the characteristics of a merely initial experience, the thaumaturgic results obtained by the initiates of old are of another and loftier order, the fruit of matured methods and of a long sequence of experimental investigations. There is no doubt or hesitation in the teachings or claims of the hierophants; they are ever positive, unflinching, and practically unanimous, and they

² Here Waite defines the objective of most theurgic magic as the cause for the termination of a so-called age of spiritual faith: ‘spiritual knowledge derived from communication with intelligences normally beyond our range’.

³ This insert is very telling of Waite’s own re-interpretation of the ‘theurgic art’. He obviously considered alchemical allegory as the essence of the procedure of theurgy, instead of actual ritual practice and divine communion. This (mis-)interpretation was very common at his time and would become increasingly dominant with the spread of a psychological worldview in the 20th century; its origins can be traced back to the emergence of sciences during the 15th century.

⁴ The entire paragraph can be read as a manifesto for the departure from the means of spiritualism so prominent during Waite’s time, and for the foundation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the same year, 1888. The attempt was nothing less than to unblock the ancient ‘unerring path of light’.

write under the shadow of a vast and unlimited subject, embracing the depths and the heights, and fortified by the sublime consciousness of eternity.

As at present conducted, our modern experiments are devoid of practical results; the lines of investigation reach a certain point and there leave us, but the old pioneers of mysticism would appear to have discovered some hitherto inscrutable means of passing the barriers which confront us, and in so doing they tell us that they have come into the possession of a tremendous secret, which they declare to be of a divine character, and which they dare not publicly reveal, for incalculable penalties attach to the profanation of the Grand Mysteries. In their books they protected their knowledge from the vulgar by means of allegorical language and the use of symbols, leaving their veritable meaning to be divined by the sincere student with the help of an insight imparted from the spiritual world.⁵ They also perpetuated their secrets by the initiation of tested disciples of undoubted discretion, to whom they seem to have liberally laid open the precious treasures of their knowledge, and in this manner some of the secret colleges of magic⁶, once apparently numerous, came to be formed in the West

Thus, the study of the mystics presents us with obvious difficulties which at the beginning appear insurmountable, but, speaking from personal experience I do not hesitate to say that there is no ground for discouragement in a pure, patient, and active intelligence, for the elementary phenomena are identical, and thus the modern psychologist is already in possession of the outer doors of the sanctuary; but he must carefully bear in mind that a large proportion of Hermetic literature is concerned with a physical process for the conversion of 'base metals' into gold, and that it is equally vicious and fruitless to force upon merely alchemical writings a psychic meaning which is completely at variance with the lives and undoubted aims of their authors.⁷ The literature of esoteric psychology in the past is large enough without the wholesale annexation which has been rashly, though not inexcusably, attempted by several critics.

⁵ In the third part of the present essay Waite himself becomes entangled in pure philosophical speculation. Yet, here he points out a key aspect of ancient and medieval ritual magic he then fails to apply himself: the cryptic texts were to be understood through spiritual assistance, not through intellectual speculation. A spirit guide was needed to be truly initiated into the practical art, not a dictionary of hermetic emblems or alchemical symbolism.

⁶ Modern historic research tells us that these 'secret colleges of magic' - if and where they might have existed at all - were much more likely very loose, local networks of initiates rather than formal institutions. One of their main function was to ensure an active circulation of heretic manuscripts that could only be passed on in secrecy due to the highly oppressive rulership of the Catholic Church in mainland Europe for almost two millennia.

⁷ This statement is very true, yet somewhat at odds with the last part of this essay where Waite begins to articulate a highly generalised and modern 'alchemical doctrine of evolution'.

Part II

The theurgic and mystical literature of Western Christendom, with which I am exclusively concerned in the present essay, is only a branch of universal occultism⁸, but it admits of classification into several distinct divisions, all requiring consideration which will be much simplified by a brief preliminary reference to the history of Christian magic, or rather of magic as it was practised in the Christian countries of Europe.

The philosophical principles which underlie the theory and practice of theurgic art are mainly derived from the Platonic School of Alexandria — the school of Ammonius Saccas, Proclus, and Hypatia, the school of Synesius, the theosophical dream-interpreter, and of the angelical mysticism of pseudo-Dionysius. The neo-platonists were practically the inheritors of the Magian wisdom of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and the mystical works of Hermes Trismegistus, which were the product of this period of Alexandrian illumination, were no mere inventions of a semi-Christianized sage, but probably embodied the traditional secrets and cosmic theories of a very considerable antiquity.⁹ The central doctrine of the high theurgic faith, professed by the grand masters of Alexandrian philosophy, was that by means of certain invocations, performed solemnly by chaste, sober, abstinent, and mentally illuminated men, it was possible to come into direct communication with those invisible powers which fill the measureless distance between man and God. A divine exaltation accompanied this communication with the superior intelligences of the universe, and man entered into a temporal participation of deific qualities, while the power and wisdom thus acquired submitted many hierarchies of spiritual beings to the will of the Magus.¹⁰

The proscription of the old pagan cultus and the bitter and continual persecution of all professors of secret and magical arts, which took place in the reign of the infamous emperor Constantine, and was continued by Valentinian, Theodosius, and other shining lights of imperial Christianity did not eradicate polytheism or destroy the adepts. The old religion and the old theurgic art took refuge in remote places; they were practised in stealth and in silence, and thus were presumably originated many of those mysterious secret societies which perpetuated the traditions of the Magi through

⁸ Waite speaks of a 'universal occultism', yet on the next page denies the idea of a 'religion behind a religion' so popular at his time and as promoted by the Theosophic Society. According to the concept of occultism promoted in this essay we have to understand the 'universal' aspect in a scientific way according to universal laws that underly the occult phenomena; it cannot be understand in the sense of the perennial philosophy.

⁹ Waite proves his deep and balanced understanding of the Hermetic writings. While historically they are not of ancient origins they are likely to embody aspects of a magic and mystery tradition of 'considerable antiquity'.

¹⁰ This 'central doctrine of Alexandrian philosophy' emphasises its neo-platonic origin through the idea of a 'measureless distance' between man and God. In Medieval times God was perceived to be directly present in the world and to intervene according to his own divine plan. In Neo-platonism, however, God is thought of as infinitely remote principle which connects to the created world by use of emanated chains of creation to which Waite is referring to. This difference in ancient and medieval understanding of God's presence in the world - and thus the possible differences in the purpose and practice of magic - remains untouched on by Waite.

the whole period of the Middle Ages, and in numerous magical rituals betray their connection with neo-platonism.¹¹

The proscription of magic and paganism was eventually followed by the proscription and persecution of the Jews, who, in like manner, were reduced to practise their religious rites in secret, and whose oriental vindictiveness was frequently roused to frenzy by their intolerable sufferings and humiliations. Professors of Kabbalistic arts, firm believers in the virtues of invocations and verbal formulae, and addicted from time immemorial to every species of superstitious practice, they directed their mystic machinery to do injury to their enemies, and the infernal magic of the Middle Ages, with its profanation of Christian mysteries, its black masses and impious invocations, is, in part at least, their creation.¹²

Thus, mediaeval occultism was essentially of a composite character. It borrowed, on the one hand, from the rabbinical wisdom of Israel, and, on the other, from pagan sources. The crusades made it subject to Arabic influence, which was definitely increased by the spread of alchemical notions from east to west, while from the debris of every vanished cultus which in barbaric times had ever flourished among the Teutonic and Celtic nations was built up the mythology of nature-spirits, the elfin world, and the strange doctrines concerning elementary intelligences.

Over this many-coloured garment was invariably spread the sacerdotal cope of Christianity, which may have been adopted at first as a disguise, but which in the majority of cases came eventually to be beyond suspicion the official religious belief of most European adepts.¹³ The voice of esoteric literature is positively unanimous on this point. Whatever the secret teachings which entered into the traditional science of the Magi, they were not of a nature to interfere with the sincere profession of

¹¹ Here Waite is pointing to an oral tradition of magic - maintained amongst circles of adepts and organised in secret societies - that allowed to preserve the 'doctrine' and teachings he summarised above through-ought the centuries. Instead of following this over-simplification I'd be inclined to follow Frank Klaassen's suggestion that (a) communities of practicing adepts indeed were critical to maintain the magical tradition during Medieval times, (b) very little is known about the philosophical background of their practices and certainly no evidence is found for it to be of neo-platonic nature rather than genuinely Christian as well as (c) no evidence exists that these communities were organised in secret societies rather than loose networks - according to local regions, languages and customs - that were leverage to secretly circle rare copies of occult manuscripts.

¹² It should not need mentioning that this is a very abstruse theory of Jewish magic and mind. What might save Waite from the suspicion of antisemitic tendencies is his overall positive evaluation of Jewish magic as a foundational aspect of our Western path. E.g. see his comment on 'Jewish genius' later on.

¹³ This is a critical finding and in line with modern historic research on magic in the Middle Ages. The strong divide between Christian, Arabic and even Jewish communities for many centuries in mainland Europe indeed turned Christian monasteries into the only home of 'learned magic'. As much as the Catholic Church instigated and annihilated most strands of a living European pagan magical tradition, they also preserved and evolved vast components of it into a genuinely Christian form of magic.

Christianity among their later initiates, or they were modified into harmony with orthodox Christian teaching. Admitting the claims of magic, it is indeed probable that the secret knowledge which was perpetuated was concerned more with esoteric power than with esoteric doctrine — a view which is wholly consistent with the universal history of magic, for in all ages and nations we find the same claims to the same preternatural powers advanced in the interests of the most various systems of religion.¹⁴

The magical literature of Europe abounds in potent formulae for the evocation and control of all classes of spiritual beings, and these to a large extent are directly taken from the hierarchic liturgies of Christendom, the miraculous powers inherent in the names of Jehovah, Jesus, Mary, and similar sacred names, are explained in the rituals, and the numerical mysticism of Pythagoras is interpreted in the interests of Trinitarian doctrine.

There is therefore no ground for supposing that western initiates had discovered a 'religion behind all religions'; they were simply Christian mystics who never dreamed of looking further than Christianity for light, and what they pretend to have possessed was the key of miracles and not the key of religious symbolism.¹⁵ The professors of goetic magic and the infamous frequenters of the Sabbath may have denied and rejected Christ, but they did not deny his power, and if they served another master it was in search of an immediate recompense, and with a full consciousness of the penalties that they incurred.

The amount of misunderstanding which exists on this point among even sympathetic inquirers calls for a positive statement to check the general tendency to read into the writings of Christian adepts a significance that utterly eliminates all the positive elements of their faith, which generally was held in sincerity, and too often in the midst of persecution at the hands of their fellow-believers.

The sincere profession of Christianity by mediaeval and later adepts is, on a cursory view, unfavourable to the gigantic claim of magian art and science, for, at least in its exoteric presentment, I recognize, in common with the general consensus of modern mystical thinking, that the Christian scheme does not provide us with an intelligible theory of the universe, and we might reasonably expect that illuminated persons, who

¹⁴ Here Waite's position could be read as a contradiction to his earlier point on secret societies maintaining a living neo-platonic heritage throughout centuries in Europe. In fact what might constitute the notion of a 'universal occultism' as he leverages it above is precisely this coherent focus on attraction of power irrespective of the philosophical system or worldview it emerged from.

¹⁵ This section has to be read as a direct denial of the claims of Eliphas Levi - more precisely as raised in his *The Key to the Great Mysteries*, 1861 - as well as of the Theosophical Society under Helena Blavatsky. Here Waite strongly deviates from the occult zeitgeist of the 19th and 20th century and even the syncretistic philosophical foundations of the Golden Dawn.

'enjoy free perspicuity of thought in universal consciousness,' would have entered into possession of a more adequate cosmogonical doctrine.¹⁶

As one who is a partisan of no special opinion, and as one who deplores the extreme intellectual folly of making haste towards unstable and futile convictions on the most important problems by help of premature theories, I have no wish to minimise the importance of difficulties like this, but it is equally easy to overstate their value. Our modern discoveries in psychology have hitherto assisted us towards no definite theory of the universe, and it is impossible in their present condition that they should ever provide us with such. Their possibly indefinite development in the hands of the ancient mystics may have equally failed to enlighten them, for the power of working wonders within the domain of natural law and the exaltation of the intuitive faculties so as to enlarge the sphere of perception within the Cosmos may not place the observer in such a position as to make successful philosophic generalisations. On the other hand, if the Great Secret which is declared to be possessed by the Magi involves a veritably universal science, if it takes the observer without the domain of natural law, he is possibly wrapt beyond the domain of theory, and the temporary enjoyment of a transcendent and deific form of subsistence eliminates for the time from the mind all consciousness of the common forms of thought and normal intellectual limitation.¹⁷

There are three broad divisions of mediaeval esoteric knowledge. The first is described as Natural Magic, the second as Spiritual or Transcendental Magic, and the third, under the comprehensive title of Alchemy, embraces a philosophy and a physical practice which are of the first and consummate importance to the modern

¹⁶ In a single paragraph Waite summarises the essential backdrop of the renewal of magic (and emergence of science) during the Renaissance. It was not a movement against Christian faith or even towards ancient paganism, but essentially in search of a more coherent and intellectually stimulating theory of the universe.

¹⁷ The importance of this entire paragraph for the Western magical tradition since the Renaissance cannot be over-estimated. Magic - according to Waite - is a means to escape 'intellectual limitation' and to assist man in his search towards a 'definite theory of the universe'. Science and psychology thus turn into parallel paths to magic, yet leverage different and possibly less promising tools of traveling. This reconstruction of the purpose of magic is not at all in line with a shamanic understanding of magic. According to the same premise of intellectual progress animal experiments in science have easily been justified. As I have often argued, our actual attitude and actions towards the living spirits we encounter in magic is of significantly higher importance than satisfying our intellectual thirst. However, if these are re-interpreted as abstract intelligences or 'astral forces' rather than living beings, man can drop the need for empathy and an ethical code when it comes to dealing with them. Subsequently, according to Waite magic is a mean to escape natural law and to pierce deeper into the universal machinery only to return with more elaborate theories of mind and matter. In promoting this (mis-)understanding of magic Waite reflects and cements further the loss of shamanic practice and wisdom in the West. This could be of purely theoretic importance if it wasn't for the essential law of behaviour that aggression causes aggression in return.

student.¹⁸ The philosophy of the whole subject is embodied in two priceless collections¹⁹, the so-called works of Hermes Trismegistus and the Jewish Kabbalah, which to all intents and purposes is contained in the Baron de Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata*, a part of which has been recently translated into English. The expositions of these philosophical text-books are numerous, and they vary considerably in value. There is much interesting and important matter to be found in Cornelius Agrippa's 'Three Books of Occult Philosophy,' albeit this author, so exalted by Thomas Vaughan, is not included among adepts of the loftiest order.²⁰ The Hermetic and Kabbalistic writings are both in great part devoted to the mystical history of creation, to which the evolution of humanity is considered rigorously parallel, in virtue of the magical doctrine of correspondence, and thus an esoteric significance is attributed to those portions which deal with the development of the material cosmos out of the chaotic storm of elementary forces.

The Kabbalistic books, in addition to this, treat largely of pneumatology, of the hierarchy and classification of spirits, the circular progression of the soul, its nature, origin, and destiny, the divine progress of the Royal Intellectual Essence from star to star and from sun to sun through the endless chain of existence, and of the highest problems of transcendental psychology. Their philosophical interest at the present stage of exoteric spiritual investigation is scarcely diminished by the uncertainty of their origin, and the occasionally fraudulent manner in which individual treatises have been given to the world, for they undoubtedly embody an antique tradition, and are wholly in harmony with the sombre sublimity of Jewish genius.

An important division of the Kabbalah is devoted to practical magic, and may be described as at once the source and synthesis of all the existing rituals from the days

¹⁸ As we will see, inventing categories of magic has been one of the favourite subject of occult authors since the invention of the letter press at least, i.e. once occult writings left the tightly knit circles of adepts and became accessible to a broader public. Of course there is no practical value in Waite's suggested differentiation.

¹⁹ Remember, Waite's article according to its heading is dealing with the history of theurgic art and practice. Here now he is shifting his focus to the 'philosophy of the whole subject'. It has to be called out that understanding the philosophy of a subject might be satisfying intellectual curiosity but of no practical value at all when it comes to practicing a certain matter. Western magic was prospering and alive for centuries without drawing on the two collections Waite refers to; in fact Agrippa's book that he devaluates in the same paragraph is a much more precise and practical embodiment of the Western occult tradition as it was maintained throughout the Middle Ages.

²⁰ Only original footnote in Waite's essay: "Cornelius Agrippa, who was a seeker all his life, and who attained neither knowledge nor peace, belongs to another category. His books abound in erudition and audacity ; his personal character was fantastic and independent, which obtained him the reputation of an abominable sorcerer and the persecution of priests and princes; he subsequently wrote in condemnation of studies from which he had derived no happiness, and he perished in desolation and misery." — Eliphas Levi, *Histoire de la Magie*, pp. 346, 347.

of the Enchiridion, not excepting those of the Black Art, which are simply infernal perversions of normal and lawful magic.²¹

The nature, processes, and results of Natural Magic have been variously described by its professors, and its scope is frequently extended till it includes a large proportion of the spiritual or transcendental branch, as, for instance, the prediction of future events which are beyond the calculus of probabilities, and therefore can only be ascertained by the ecstatic transference of the intellectual faculties into another form of subsistence. It is properly the manifestation of the arcana of physical nature by means of art. In more common and definite terms, it is the production of apparently thaumaturgic effects by means of physical laws which are not generally known, and it has therefore no connection with psychology. Experimental chemistry produces at the present day innumerable phenomena which to the vulgar mind are distinctly thaumaturgic. 'That most secret and arcane department of physical science, by which the mystical properties of natural substances are developed, we denominate Natural Magic,'²² says Robert Fludd in his 'Compendious Apology for the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross;' he cites the three Magi, who were led by the Star in the East to the cradle of the Grand Christian Initiator, and the mythical King Solomon, among the most illustrious adepts of this elementary branch of esoteric wisdom, which culminates in the celestial science of astrology, for astrology is the calculation of future contingencies, based on the traditional and observed facts of stellar influence on the life of humanity at large. It is impressive in its antiquity, and important by the respect which it has commanded from great minds in the past, but neither this nor any species of Natural Magic are of service to the psychic student.²³

Spiritual or Transcendental Magic comprises in itself several distinct subdivisions of esoteric art and science. Considered in its totality, it is the synthesis of those methods and processes by which the ancient mystics claim to have developed their psychic potencies so as to establish communication with such forms of intelligent finite

²¹ Waite's own bias - as well as the Christian ethics of his time - are reflected in this statement. The words 'normal' and 'lawful' in relation to magical practice hint at an orthodox institution that holds sufficient social power to define these categories. Such an institution of magical orthodoxy of course never existed in the West since the rise of the Catholic church.

²² Robert Fludd (1574 - 1637) was a prominent advocate of the emergence of natural science. Cut out the adjectives used in the quote above and replace the word 'magic' with 'science' at the end and the quote reads like this: 'That department of physical science, by which the properties of natural substances are developed, we denominate Natural Science.' Natural Magic really had turned into a category of practiced science with very little 'magic' in it except for its shared disapproval by the Catholic Church.

²³ Waite's take on the matter is incredibly precise and unapologetic. The category of 'natural magic' was one of the most essential aspects to emerge from the rediscovery of the Greek writings by people such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. Waite, however, dismisses it as of no practical value whatsoever for the practicing student of magic. I could not agree more.

subsistence²⁴ as are without the physical horizon, and therefore normally invisible, to form a correspondence with the underlying principles of nature, and thus develop the possibilities which are secreted like seeds in the heart of all material substances, and so perform on the physical plane what is beyond the scope of common physical science, and, lastly, as the crowning aim and magnum opus of experimental mysticism, to enable the 'highest fact in man' to hold 'immediate intercourse with the highest fact in the universe.'

The wonders of Spiritual Magic are said to be accomplished by means of a certain method of life and a certain sequence of ceremonies, all of symbolical significance, but unanimously considered by the highest adepts to be devoid of inherent virtue, and simply adopted to direct and develop the psychic faculties of will and imagination which are the grand agents in every magical process.²⁵ Eliphas Levi recommends the postulant in the pronaos of the Spiritual Temple to 'rise daily at the same hour, and at an early hour, bathe summer and winter before daybreak in spring water, never wear soiled clothes, to wash them himself if necessary, to exercise himself by voluntary privations that he may be better able to bear involuntary ones; finally, to impose silence on all desires save that of achieving the magnum opus.' But this is simply the preliminary discipline; the preparation of the mystic 'sulphur of the wise' is of another and higher kind; the student of Thomas Vaughan will find it described in various parts of his writings, and especially in the *Anima Magica Abscondita*; it is a process of psychic chemistry of a triadic and absolutely supernatural character, for the diatribes of modern mystics against the use of the term supernatural are founded on a fundamental misapprehension of occultism, and are due to the influence of materialistic philosophy. It is a doctrine of magical science that there is an inherent imperfection in Nature, and that there is an absolute perfection which transcends Nature²⁶; now, the testimony of the visible universe and the unceasing aspiration of man's higher consciousness are in harmony with this doctrine.

²⁴ A wonderful example of where Waite's time and own love for language is not doing him a favour at all. While it could be interpreted as a clumsy attempt to merge the spirit model of magic with the psychological model, it could also be called a lack of courage to leverage more archaic language. 'Forms of intelligent finite subsistence' is just a pretentious and unnecessary term for what he really means: a daemon. Again, large parts of the world around us stop being alive if we negate to perceive them as such.

²⁵ A certain method of life combined with a certain sequence of ceremonies truly is all that theurgy requires to be brought to life. However, Waite again falls prey to an overly-psychological re-interpretation of this matter and refers to a lineage of magical thought that these practices were of symbolical significance only and 'devoid of inherent value' as long as will and imagination are applied with sufficient perseverance only. Such lineage of thought indeed exists, however, only begins with the emergence of scientific thinking in the 15th century. Furthermore, the idea of a 'symbolical significance' outweighing the actual value of real-life encounter of specific experiences is a degenerated attitude towards practice often found amongst academic circles.

²⁶ This false doctrine is amongst the most dangerous and presumptuous ideas in the tradition of Western magic.

The triadic process of which I have spoken is the transmutation of the physical body by the soul within it, the exaltation and transfiguration of the soul by the overshadowing spirit, and the illumination and deification of the spirit by contact with the Universal Consciousness.²⁷ This process accomplishes that regeneration of the whole man, which is the true object of transcendental philosophy and the only safe basis of practical magic.²⁸ All operations attempted by the vulgar and the uninitiated, in other words, by unregenerate persons, are either dangerous or unsuccessful, or, as in the case of Black Magic, of a dark and abominable nature.

Contemplation and quietism are the keys of this mysterious process, which seems to have been carried to its highest point among Oriental nations. It is described by Roger Bacon as the modification of the body by alchemy, which puts much of Hermetic allegory in a new and more intelligible light

When this modification, or New Birth, has been accomplished, the Magus is placed in communication with the creative forces of the universe, and the avenues of spiritual perception, which are narrow, difficult, and full of barriers to the psychologist of to-day, are freely thrown open for unlimited exploration — such, at least, is the claim of the magical text-books — and the initiated epopt²⁹ may proceed to the invocation of the celestial intelligences, the souls of the great departed, and to the assertion of intellectual dominion over the hierarchies of elementary being. The depths and heights of his own immortal nature are also revealed to him, and from the pinnacles of his spiritual life he may soar into ecstatic yet conscious communion with God Himself. On the physical plane he may perform, by the adaptation of natural laws, many prodigies which seem to the uninitiated observer in defiance of all law; he may endue inert substance with the potency of his individual will, and this is the philosophical principle of talismanic magic; he can search all hearts and read all destinies; perceive events happening at a remote distance; and can impart to suitable subjects a portion of his own prerogatives, inducing trance, clairvoyance, prophetic foresight, &c.

Such is the great claim of Spiritual Magic, and it involves at least an aspiration of the highest conceivable kind.³⁰ Its antithesis exists in the counter claim of the Black or Infernal Art, with all its grotesque horrors and barbarous, perverse processes, by which

²⁷ An underlying gnostic or Jewish cosmology of the human body can be found in this thought: the body being of the lowest substance, requiring sublimation by the next higher member in the chain, the soul, etc. all the way up to the remote sphere of 'Universal Consciousness'.

²⁸ Postulating the 'regeneration of the whole man' as the actual object of magic proves Waite's indebtedness to Jewish, Gnostic and Christian thought, rather than pagan tradition. The idea of 'regeneration of man' only assumes meaning if an original state of man can be assumed that we have lost or been expelled from.

²⁹ epopt: a 'beholder'; in Greek Antiquity a person fully initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries

³⁰ Repositioning the previous paragraph as a 'claim' and 'at least an aspiration of the highest conceivable kind' again saves Waite from being perceived as an arm-chair magician of the kind of Eliphas Levi. He keeps a fine balance between summarising the history of theurgic art - with all its fallacies and hubris - and putting it into perspective of the well-grounded magical practitioner.

the initiates of forbidden knowledge employed their developed physical faculties in operations of darkness and destruction.

Part III

The third division of mediaeval esoteric science is, in some respects, the most important of all, for alchemy is not only the foundation of that experimental method which has transformed the face of the earth; it is not only the historical radix of modern physics, including chemistry, it is not only an arcane process for the manufacture of material gold, but it has originated a theory which is of the utmost importance to all present students of psychology.³¹

I have traced the connection between ancient thaumaturgic mysticism and modern mystic action, I have shown that the hierophants of old were familiar with the spiritual phenomena of to-day, and they claim to have made such advances in the paths wherein we are slowly and painfully travelling, that they had entered into the permanent possession of a power and knowledge which it was dangerous or impossible for them to reveal, which they consequently spoke of in veiled language, but which they nevertheless endeavoured to extend to others, in order that it might be perpetuated, and to this end they invented their symbols and allegories in the hope that a divine light would illuminate deserving seekers and enable them to penetrate to their inner significance.

Now, the grand initiates of ancient magic were the princes of alchemy in a large number of cases, and these two branches of esoteric wisdom are intimately and curiously connected both in principle and practice. The doctrines of mystical and magical regeneration were expounded by alchemical philosophers, and the psychic manufacture of gold was taught in return by the magicians. Astrology lent to both the assistance of her traditional observations and the resources of her archaic symbolism. Alchemists and magicians lay claim to the possession of the same tremendous secret, the same indicible power; they worked with the same weapons after rigorously identical methods but in various fields of achievement — the material world was the province of the followers of Geber; to the disciples of the Magi were delivered the realms of mind. The highest inspirations of both schools appear to have been derived from the Hermetic books, and though the practical alchemy of the Christian age originated with the Fabian Geber, its sources must thus be sought in the theosophy of the later Platonists.

Now, whether from hints contained in the Hermetic books or whether from some adaptation of Kabbalism, or from what source soever the seeds came which germinated in the minds of the alchemists, a theory of universal development, capable

³¹ The following interpretation of certain aspects of alchemy as a 'psychological theory' that unifies core aspects of Western mysticism, spiritual magic and the origins of chemistry with man's quest for knowledge of oneself and nature was incredibly modern during Waite's time. In fact, here we come across an essential foundation for C.G. Jung's much younger, yet hugely influential writings and re-interpretation of the alchemical art. However, equally in this last part of the essay Waite's desire to identify a 'Secret Doctrine of Mysticism' by far begins to outweigh his love for historical accuracy and objective reading of occult and alchemical source-texts.

of application in almost any direction, was enunciated in this division of esoteric literature, and constitutes the general and explainable principle of the Secret Doctrine of Mysticism. I have described this theory at considerable length, and, I believe, with a certain precision, in an account of the true principles of the magnum opus prefixed to the 'Lives of Alchemical Philosophers,' recently published in London. This biographical work endeavours, by a consideration of the careers of adept philosophers, to determine the true nature and object of practical alchemy, and, so far as this plan is fulfilled, it constitutes a suitable and necessary introduction to the study of historical Hermetics. I do not propose to make in the present essay any substantial repetition of what I have already stated there. The alchemical theory of universal development includes a philosophical forestatement of the modern evolutionary hypothesis which, considering the scientific ignorance and darkness of the Middle Ages, is simply bewildering, and justifies the indignant demand of one theosophical writer for the restitution of its rightful property to 'a spoliated past.'³² But the alchemical theory was originated by thinkers who believed in the paramount reality of spiritual things, and their doctrine of evolution was extended to the soul and spirit of man, though its practical application was scarcely attempted by alchemists outside the metallic kingdom.

I would direct the particular attention of earnest psychological inquirers to this grand and important doctrine, the highest outcome of Hermetic speculation which has been openly transmitted from antiquity. It is founded on a general assumption that the philosophers claim to have demonstrated as experimentally true in at least one kingdom of Nature, namely, that all existing substances whatsoever— the substance of spirit and soul, of animal and vegetable life, of metals and of stones— contain elements or seeds of a higher perfection in any given direction than they can normally manifest, that there is no practical limit to their progress towards perfection, and that man is the agent and dispenser of Divine power for the development of his own and the latent energies of all earthly things.³³ The union of individual consciousness in the universal consciousness of God was the culminating point of this theory in its extension to man, and the extraction of a tincture which would transform a million times its own weight into gold was its last assigned development in its relation to metals.

The unity and solidarity of Nature in the midst of infinite formal differentiation was the first logical outcome of this assumption, the universal potentiality of improvement constituting the bond of union. From this dual doctrine of fundamental solidarity and latent power a practical conclusion was drawn — that the processes for the

³² One can see how tempting it was for Waite to claim existence of an 'alchemical theory of universal development' - or 'alchemical doctrine of evolution' further below - given Charles Darwin had just published his theory on the evolution of species a few decades before the publication of this essay? However, one could argue, the ancient concept of the seven planets and metals, the four elements or even Paracelsus relatively late framework of the three principles of sulphur, sal and mercury actually do not suggest an 'evolution' from a lower to a higher state of being, yet an inherent fluidity in nature that allows transformation from one state to another. It is man alone who assigns a particular level of desirability to each of these states, not nature.

³³ See my earlier note on this 'alchemical doctrine' and its inherent flaws and dangers. This intellectual seed would come to bear bitter fruits with Julius Evola in the 20th century and as an essential intellectual component of modern fascist occultism.

development of inherent energies in the various kingdoms of Nature should be rigorously parallel, but with due regard to formal difference. Quod superius stent quod inferius, et quod inferius sicut quod superius ad perpeiranda miracula rei unius.³⁴

The alchemical doctrine of evolution is the philosophical basis of the sublime claim of transcendental or spiritual magic which I have already considered at such length, and the full consequent psychic importance of the literature of alchemy may be shown in a few words. Though it conceals the first matter of the magnum opus it describes the processes which, given the first matter, will ultimately eliminate the imperfections of metals. These processes are parallel by the theory in every department of Nature, and thus the magical evolution, transfiguration, or reconstruction of man is to be accomplished in a manner which is rigorously similar to the reconstruction in the mineral world.³⁵ As man is the subject of spiritual chemistry, the first matter does not need seeking in this division of the art, and as man, in the same manner, is that mystic vas³⁶ philosophorum which has been always a crux for seekers from the days of Geber downwards, it is a plain case that the development of his latent spiritual energies may be accomplished along the lines of the avowed Hermetic processes as they are described in alchemical works, provided the assumptions contained in the general Hermetic theory have a basis, as claimed, in fact. Now the processes in question are delineated with a tolerable amount of perspicuity, and I submit to those numerous students of psychology who are turning for light to the writings and to the alleged achievements of the old mystics, that here is an adequate warrant for their earnest and exhaustive study, and some ground for believing that we may strike upon an unwrought mine of spiritual possibilities in the hidden but not unattainable mysteries of alchemy.

The practical outcome of my own studies in this direction must be reserved for the present, as it would be unwise in the limited space of the present essay to forestall what I subsequently hope to treat in a comprehensive and complete manner. My present object is to draw the attention of other investigators to the only lines of research which are likely to produce a definite and desired result, and if possible to elicit their collaboration in the first serious attempt at the mystical reconstruction of

³⁴ This is a quote from the famous [Emerald Tablet](#): 'That which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing' Yet, due to his strong Christian bias it escapes Waite that the original quote only attests the similarity of the states 'above' and 'below', i.e. in the macro- and microcosm. It does not at all suggest a moral judgement or infer a spiritual weighting that would provide evidence for the 'world above' being any better or more 'evolved' than the world below. In fact in lines 5 and 6 of the Tablet it suggests the complete opposite, i.e. that an earthly state of being is just equally powerful as a spiritual state of being: 'The father of all perfection in the whole world is here. Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth.'

³⁵ See footnote 32; here Waite forces a lot of things to merge into one: Christian thinking of man's and nature's fall, the neo-platonic philosophy of emanation, the transformation of chemical states in alchemy as well as Darwin's highly judgemental interpretation of the term 'evolution' as a continuous process towards higher states of being.

³⁶ Latin for equipment/apparatus, utensil/instrument/tool, vase, or vessel/dish

humanity. From the practical magic of the Middle Ages we may learn the identity of new and old psychological phenomena, from theurgic philosophers we may ascertain the true nature of the psychic achievements which transcendental magic claims to have accomplished, for the actual processes by which it attained its grand results we must study the turba philosophorum — the long line of alchemists — and that in a consecutive and exhaustive manner. But we must carefully bear in mind that we are in search of the psycho-chemical process, which is connected, but not identical, with the metallic process of the turba that the transmutation of material substances into material gold was the object of alchemy itself, and that it can only provide us with a parallel. But the exactitude of this parallel is guaranteed by the theory, 'From the greater to the lesser, from the lesser to the greater, the consequences are identically connected, and the proportions progressively rigorous.'

The student will also do well to avoid discouragement at the antiquated forms of reasoning and the exploded physical notions of all the Hermetic philosophers. Their conceptions are crude enough, and sometimes seem scarcely consonant with sanity, but their psychic knowledge is not to be measured by their progress in physics, and even a true process for metallic transmutation is not incompatible with a disconcerting ignorance of numerous natural laws.

All persons connected with the present revival of mysticism should endeavour by its logical and consistent study, on an unbiassed historical method, to recover some positive knowledge from its secluded sanctuaries. That is an inconsequent interest which is manifested only in spasmodic investigation; rash and illiberal theories are its normal results. The secrets of esoteric literature will only surrender to the searching analysis of sympathetic minds which have been duly equipped for the task by an acquaintance with psychic progress in the present, and are endowed with a height of aspiration which is parallel to the aspiration of the hierophants.

