A Veil that Reveals: Charles Williams and the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross

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ABSTRACT
Relatively little critical attention has been paid to Charles Williams’s ten year involvement in the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross (F.R.C.), despite the possibilities for interpretation of the often obscure imagery derived from this experience and applied to his novels and poetry. This paper reviews the F.R.C.’s rituals and meeting minutes in order to gauge the level of Williams’s involvement with the F.R.C. and the mystical concepts communicated by its founder, Arthur Edward Waite. It also explores the order’s organizational, symbolic and philosophical roots, particularly the links shared with its parent order, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Having identified the historical and experiential contexts of Williams’s F.R.C. participation, the paper offers examples of the possibilities for interpretation created by greater awareness of the order’s ideas and practices. A number of Williams’s novels are explored in light of several occult concepts important to the F.R.C.—the ‘middle pillar’, the ‘higher self’, and the ‘end of desire’. This analysis indicates that comprehensive interpretation of Williams’s fiction and poetry is impossible without a thorough understanding of the ideas and symbols that he encountered in his ritual experiences. This analysis also demonstrates the importance of the modern occult context to Williams’s life and work.

Though Charles Williams (1886-1945) played a decade-long leading role in an occult secret society known as the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross (F.R.C.), little attention has been paid to this key source of the esoteric ideas and symbolism that saturate his fictional and poetic works. Interpretation of Williams’s seven
novels of the fantastic can prove difficult for his readers, no matter their level of attraction to his work, which may explain their less enthusiastic reception compared with the fantastic literature of his fellow Inklings, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. The veil that obscures Williams’s fiction is created in part by the dominant presence of esoteric symbolism and philosophy that is not familiar to most readers. Esoteric groups, individuals, ideas, and practices enjoyed a lingering popularity in his day due to a revival of interest in all things occult in the Victorian era. Themes and images drawn from this modernist occult context provide integral aspects of character, plot, setting, and theme: from the first novel, *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933, written 1925–), which features a magician who seeks to use his power to establish a sort of autocratic state of Romanticism in England, to the last, *All Hallows Eve* (1945), which again presents a magus bent on global domination through magical power, this time a more negatively portrayed necromancer who draws his power from reversed utterances of the divine names generated by the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah.

Much of the occult influence on Williams’s work can be traced back to Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), a leading mystic and amateur scholar of esoteric traditions such as alchemy, Kabbalah, magic, and Freemasonry. Williams is known to have been influenced by at least a few of these works of scholarship, but he was likely nowhere more inculcated with Waitean interpretations of esoteric knowledge then in his ten year involvement (1917-27) with the F.R.C., founded by Waite in 1915. An examination of the F.R.C.’s rituals shows that Waite drew heavily on the esoteric traditions to construct the ritual and symbolism of the order, particularly specific modern occult images and practices. Echoes of Williams’s interaction with this esoteric material resonate through his work, especially his novels and poetry. To date, little has been published about the author’s
experience in the F.R.C., despite the significant challenges to interpretation posed by the preponderance of esoteric ideas and symbolism in his novels and poetry. This paper seeks to begin research and discussion regarding this important area by examining Williams’s initiatory rise through the hierarchical grade system of the F.R.C., providing needed context on the nature of the order itself, and analyzing the impact of Williams’s initiatory experience on his work via several examples from his novels of supernatural fiction. This analysis will show that comprehensive interpretation of the author’s fiction requires a thorough understanding of the occult ideas, symbols and experiences that he encountered through his ritual activity in the F.R.C., and expressed and explored in his work.

Some Impediments to Research

In the last thirty years, Williams researchers have begun to pay attention to the author’s time in the F.R.C.¹ In the first few

decades following the author’s death in 1945, conjecture as to his occult involvement was almost non-existent, as scholars who attempted to establish the nature and extent of his involvement, such as Alice Mary Hadfield, Anne Ridler, Bernadette Bosky and Glen Cavaliero found it ‘extremely difficult to get at the truth’,\(^2\) given the lack of information available to them. In this period, based on reports from Williams’s friends,\(^3\) he was thought to have been a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded by three freemasons—William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), William Robert Woodman (1828–91), and Samuel MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918)—and perhaps best known for including W.B. Yeats as a member. Perhaps because of the uncertainty surrounding Williams’s involvement, or possibly because of the somewhat infamous reputation of the Golden Dawn, analysis of the relationship between this assumed Golden Dawn connection and Williams’s work was rare,\(^4\) despite the fact that the rituals had been publicly available for scholarly analysis even before Williams’s death, and despite sustained research into

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\(^1\) Roukema, ‘A Veil that Reveals’, p. 25


the impact of the Golden Dawn on Yeats.5 This period of uncertainty lasted until the release of R.A. Gilbert’s history of the Golden Dawn, *Twilight of the Magicians*, in 1983, and his biography of A.E. Waite, *A Magician of Many Parts*, in 1987. These definitively showed that it was the F.R.C. Williams had been involved with rather than the original Golden Dawn, and clearly established the length and extent of his activities with Waite’s order.6 With the release of Gilbert’s work, which gave scholars a good deal more to work with, the F.R.C. quotient has been more commonly factored into Williams criticism, particularly among scholars discussing the importance of his esoteric connections.7 Nevertheless, much analysis of Williams’s F.R.C. experiences remains to be done, particularly when it comes to identifying connections between the F.R.C. and Williams’s works of fiction, poetry, and theology.8 A plethora of symbols, themes, and characters remain under-interpreted or misunderstood as a result.

5 Abbreviated forms of the rituals were published as early as 1909-10 by Aleister Crowley in *The Equinox* 1, nos. 2 and 3. The rituals of a Golden Dawn offshoot known as the Stella Matutina, which would have had to be the version Williams was a part of due to his age (he was 17 when the original Golden Dawn dissolved), were published in Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 4 vols. (Chicago: Aries, 1937). Cf. Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 127-28.


8 Two exceptions are Ashenden, *Alchemy*, pp. 34-39; King, ‘Occult as Rhetoric’.
There are a number of reasons for this research gap. The most pressing difficulty, of course, is that the F.R.C. rituals, sacrosanct materials of a secret society that they are, are not exactly available on the shelves of one’s local bookshop. This is not to say that absolutely nothing is known about Williams’s F.R.C. activities or the order itself, but scholars have largely been forced to work from Gilbert’s work rather than the rituals or meeting minutes of the F.R.C. itself. Ashenden, for example, is hampered in his desire to apply the F.R.C. context to Williams’s life and work in *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration* (2006), as he was able to access only one ritual: ‘The Ceremony of Consecration on the Threshold of Sacred Mystery’. He makes several interesting connections between this ritual and two of Williams’s novels—*Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933) and *Many Dimensions* (1931), and one is left wishing he had been able to discuss this crucial aspect of Williams’s esoteric experience further. The opportunity for this paper arose after I was fortunate to gain access to the F.R.C. rituals and meeting minutes via the comprehensive Waite Collection held by the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica in Amsterdam, with the gracious permission of Joost Ritman and family. This is a rare opportunity, as Waite’s rituals continue to hold sacred value for Rosicrucian and Christian mystical groups, who tend to be understandably reluctant to share their contents publicly. While I have great respect for this sentiment, I have made public a number of aspects of the F.R.C.’s ritual activity in what follows, as they are essential to interpretation of a number of

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9 This has changed, to some degree, as a number of rituals are now freely available on the web. Their hidden nature can now be revealed via a not-so-esoteric web search.


11 My thanks to Cis van Heertum, curator at the BPH, and R.A. Gilbert for their assistance with the Waite collection.
aspects of Williams’s work, particularly in his fiction and poetry (though space limits me from discussing the latter here). In addition to the Waite collection, I have referred to three F.R.C. rituals presented in Israel Regardie’s *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic* (1984), along with a complete set of the rituals of the Golden Dawn, which, as I will show, was in many ways a genetic precursor to the F.R.C.

Another stumbling block to research into Williams’s time in the F.R.C. stems from the discursive flux surrounding words such as ‘esoteric’ and ‘occult’, which has resulted in much confusion among scholars who are not aware of the permutations such terms have encountered in different times and different cultures. Bernadette Bosky, for example, authentically seeks to understand the impact of the Golden Dawn and the F.R.C. on Williams’s work in her 1986 article, but is waylaid by a misunderstanding of the complex nature of occultism, becoming stuck on the question of how Williams’s personal involvement with ‘such an Order’ could ‘coexist with his frequent, staunch denunciation of occult practice, not only in his novels, but argued at length, *in propria persona*, in his non-fiction study *Witchcraft*. Bosky is to be admired for reaching the conclusion that the F.R.C. displayed clear occult characteristics and that Williams valued it on a deep personal level nonetheless, but because of an unfamiliarity with the history and context of esotericism and occultism, she is also forced to see this conclusion as an unresolvable paradox. Bosky’s difficulty is her understanding of occultism as equivalent to the tradition of European black magic, an understanding shared

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13 Bosky, ‘Adept’.
15 Bosky, ‘Adept’, p. 34.
by many Williams scholars. The problem is a blending of distinctively varying understandings of ‘the occult’. There is no question that scholars are right to dismiss personal connections between Williams and the black, goetic magic found in his novels — from Gregory Persimmons’s Satanic black mass in *War in Heaven* (1930) to Simon le Clerc’s twisting of the kabbalistic names of God to gain magical power in *All Hallows Eve* — but the occult ideas that influenced groups such as the Golden Dawn and F.R.C. had little in common with these and similar traditions of black magic, or *goetia*, which is the only form of the occult that Williams denounces in *Witchcraft*.

Some of the confusion surrounding Williams’s involvement with occult groups can therefore be cleared up by awareness of the particular esoteric culture in which he lived, worked, and thought, which I will refer to as ‘modern occultism’. Esoteric thinkers and practitioners of Williams’s day adapted a number of concepts and philosophies from esoteric traditions such as Renaissance hermeticism, magic, Kabbalah, alchemy, and the Tarot to suit their own specifically modern priorities. Occult adaptations of previous esoteric thought and practice included a

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18 A clarification of my use of the term ‘esoteric’ is necessary as well: Those personally invested in esoteric forms of knowledge, usually for religious or
greater synthesis of non-Christian (particularly Eastern) religions, the incorporation of new views on social hierarchy and gender inclusion, a quest for enchantment in the face of the disenchanted world perceived to have been produced by Enlightenment rationalism and scientific materialism, and an incorporation, despite this quest, of Enlightenment values such as scientific progress and biological evolutionism. These latter two characteristics required a movement away from material explanations for occult phenomena. Thus, ‘magic’ was often seen by occultists as an effect of imagination that produced psychological effects within the self so that magicians themselves, spiritual purposes, tend to see the ‘esoteric’ as a single hegemonic historical phenomenon—a body of hidden truth passed down from the ancients or available through gnostic processes that grant intuitive knowledge of God, the world, or the self. This essay will reflect this definition, as Williams and Waite shared this understanding, but in my own analysis I employ the theoretical approach to esotericism now generally found in analytical academic work, where the term is understood to describe continually transforming, often antagonistic, discourses in Western culture. In this conception, esotericism is, in Andreas Kilcher’s words, ‘The sociologies, politics, techniques, cultures, and poetics of knowledge by means of which epistemological formations such as magic, kabbalah, occultism etc. are founded, transmitted, transformed, defended, or degraded’ (‘Seven Epistemological Theses’, in Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (eds.), Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years’ Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 145).

rather than their surroundings, were affected.\textsuperscript{20} A similar example is the development of a specifically spiritual form of alchemy that sought the transmutation of the self but rejected the traditional alchemical focus on the transmutation of metals.\textsuperscript{21} Modern occultists also displayed a love for bricolage which Egil Asprem calls ‘programmatic syncretism’, arguing that occultists systematically organized a wide range of symbolism from a large variety of traditions to develop ‘a pragmatically better and more refined esoteric system’ in order to better communicate and discover the universal esoteric knowledge available to all but found by few.\textsuperscript{22}

As I will show further on, the esoteric material that Williams discovered in the F.R.C. was very much in line with a number of these modern occult trends, and was firmly rooted in the tradition of the Golden Dawn. It was, therefore, very much a part of the context of the modern occult revival. Partly because of the discursive complexity surrounding the term ‘occult’, many Williams scholars have had trouble overcoming a perceived tension between his staunch Christian faith and his quest for


occult knowledge. This tension is perhaps best exhibited in Thomas Howard’s statement that ‘no matter how bizarre and apparently occult Williams’ tales may appear to be, he is never writing about anything other than the plain stuff acknowledged by all Christians’. The unresolvable paradox of such a statement results from this tension, an anxiety that is understandable given that some modern occultists very consciously placed themselves in opposition to Christianity, and in fact adopted the term ‘occult’ precisely because it allowed them to advocate esoteric ideas that often challenged or reinterpreted Christian ideas. However, far from the majority of occultists took this tack, and it does not seem that Charles Williams found his F.R.C. involvement contradictory to his Christian faith, despite its roots in modern occultism. Williams developed a synthesis of Christian theology, mysticism, and occultism that was, for him, relatively unproblematic on a doctrinal level and (as this paper will go some way to showing) enriching and fulfilling for his mystical practice and artistic expression.

Regarding the latter, a number of scholars have provided valuable research and interpretation regarding Williams’s use of occult symbolism and imagery to enrich his mythopoeic art. This

26 E.g. Mordecai, ‘Charles Williams’, p. 268); Cavaliero, Poet, p. 4; Winship, ‘Novels’, p. 118; Flieger, Time, pp. 75-89 (here pp. 75-77); King, ‘Occult as Rhetoric’; King, ‘Pattern in the Web’, 11.
was certainly a crucial aspect of Williams’s reliance on modern occult materials in his novels and poetry, but Williams’s involvement with the F.R.C. indicates a much deeper and more experiential level of interest in occult ideas, symbols, and culture than is usually suggested. The influence of occultism in his life went far beyond the provision of literary devices—the occult was life for Williams as much as it was literary inspiration. Following an assessment of his F.R.C. involvement, I will show that the relationship between Williams’s personal occult experiences and the construction of his fiction is so intertwined as to be irreducible—that occult elements of his life directly illuminate occult elements in his novels, and vice versa.

A. E. Waite and the Development of the F.R.C.

A. E. Waite made his way onto the intellectual stage of modern England in spite of less than ideal social and financial circumstances. After attempting a poetry career with little success, Waite set to work writing dozens of books and hundreds of articles on a variety of topics, including Christian mysticism, alchemy, ritual magic, Freemasonry, the Tarot, Kabbalah, Martinism, Arthurian mysticism, and Rosicrucianism. In addition to his scholarly interest in esoteric subjects, Waite involved himself heavily in various groups founded in England during the surge of interest in esoteric myth, tradition and practice witnessed in Western industrial societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was a member of the influential Theosophical Society founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

(1831–91), the Quest society of G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933), and a number of masonic lodges. In 1891 he joined the Golden Dawn and spent nearly a decade with the order, suggesting that his actual experience was more fulfilling than he recalled in his autobiography, where he accuses the order of ‘malefic influences’ and describes its rituals as ‘a mass of confused symbolism’. He broke from the order in 1893 for unknown reasons, but rejoined in 1896 and ascended to membership in the group’s inner Second Order, known as the Rosae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis (R.R. et A.C.) on 3 March 1899. This involvement ended with the Golden Dawn itself, as Waite led a minority portion of the R.R. et A.C. in schism against the rest, resulting in the eventual breakup of the order into the Stella Matutina and the Independent and Rectified Rite of the Rosae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis (I.R.R.), led by Waite and two others, which maintained control of the Golden Dawn’s Isis-Urania Temple in London. The I.R.R. declared that it intended to move toward a mystical instead of an occult construction of the Golden Dawn’s ritual practices, as did the F.R.C. when Waite launched it in 1915 with the intention, he declared in the order’s constitution, of providing an initiatory society ‘concerned only with the quest and attainment of the


30 Quite a bit of research on the Golden Dawn is now available. Among the best is Ellic Howe, The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order, 1887-1923 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); Bogdan, Rituals, pp. 121-44. The rituals and knowledge lectures of the original order are printed in Regardie, Complete Golden Dawn.

human soul on its return to the Divine Centre’. The central goal of the latter two orders was thus more essentially mystical than the Golden Dawn, and they also eschewed their parent order’s interest in more practical forms of magic such as the invocation of angels and demons; nevertheless, the movement to this more mystical focus did not sever the umbilical cord along which occult image, symbol, ritual, and philosophy flowed from the Golden Dawn. Moreover, the ultimate aim of Golden Dawn adepts was also mystical; namely the elevation of the self toward union with a higher, or divine self, a goal accomplished through concepts and symbolic systems discovered in Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah, the Tarot, alchemy, Freemasonry, and ritual magic among a variety of other esoteric traditions.

F.R.C. initiates interacted with materials from these same symbolic systems as they imagined themselves ascending toward spiritual union with the divine. Like many occultists, Waite identified a common body of secret knowledge he believed to be communicated by these traditions. He called this hidden, perennial knowledge the ‘Secret Tradition’. The Secret Tradition is, at the

32 Gilbert, Waite, p. 182.

33 Alex Owen, The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 76. Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism were at the root of much of the purpose and organization of all three orders, as both Waite and the three founders of the Golden Dawn were all members of the masonic Rosicrucian order Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (S.R.I.A.—founded 1867) before founding their own secret societies, and drew heavily from the legend of Christian Rosenkreutz established by the Rosicrucian manifestoes of 1614 and 1615 (See Gilbert, Waite, 105-07). Waite also involved himself with a number of other masonic orders in order, he claimed, to gain material for the construction of his own rites (Waite, Shadows, p. 161).

34 References to the Secret Tradition can be found throughout Waite’s work, beginning in The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah. Cf. Gilbert, Waite, p. 97;
same time, both an invaluable set of knowledge to be gained from mystic union with God, and the path laid out to this union by those few who have returned from their own transcendent experiences. These few Waite called ‘the Holy Assembly’—a group of adepts scattered through time and place who are able to identify the esoteric substrate of the Secret Tradition beneath exoteric forms of doctrine. These initiates can come from any cultural, temporal or doctrinal background, but the perennial tradition of knowledge that they are able to access and communicate is universal, though it will be expressed by members of the Holy Assembly in historically specific terms.

The goal of the ritual activity of the F.R.C. was to guide initiates toward mystic union, thereby adding precious members to the Holy Assembly. Having reached the level of successful mystical experience, members were tasked with expressing the inexpressible, as Waite believed the ultimate experience of transcendent union with God to be completely removed from the phenomenal and therefore imageless. However, the paths to mystic union could be communicated through interaction with symbols that could express all but the most intimate aspects of the Secret Tradition. In Waite’s system these symbols reveal the divine to humans by reflecting the supernal realms above, known as the macrocosm, in the material world below, or microcosm. A common element in esoteric systems, this concept is often known as the doctrine of correspondences.


35 For the essence of Waite’s beliefs on the praxis of achieving mystic union see Waite, *Shadows*, p. 235-45; Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 163.


37 Antoine Faivre identifies the concept of correspondences as one of four definitive identifiers of esoteric thought (*Access to Western Esotericism* (New
Waite’s focus on the ability of correspondent symbols to provide guidance along the path from the material world to the spiritual led him to follow the Golden Dawn’s methods and purposes in much of the deployment of esoteric symbolism in the F.R.C.’s rituals and initiatory structure. In fact, Waite must have found more points of importance in the Golden Dawn rituals than he admits in his autobiography, because the first seven rituals of the F.R.C. still bear evident similarities to earlier Golden Dawn versions. Waite also followed the Golden Dawn in organizing the F.R.C.’s intricate symbolic system around a single set of symbols in the manner usually seen in the programmatic syncretism common to occultism. This single symbolic apparatus was the modern occult adaptation of the kabbalistic Tree of Life, a schematic dating from the medieval period used by Jewish kabbalists to pictorially organize the hierarchical arrangement of the ten sefirot, conceived as aspects of God that continuously emanate out from Ein Sof, the ultimate divine


The process of transforming the Golden Dawn rituals so that they better reflected Waite’s approach to initiatic ritual activity occurred over a long period of time and involved several different permutations. The process began ca. 1905, when Waite began rewriting the original Golden Dawn rituals for the I.R.R. See Gilbert, Waite, p. 137.

Asprem, ‘Kabbalah’, pp. 146-47. Cf. Bogdan, Rituals, p. 121. As we have seen, Waite rarely expressed support for the Golden Dawn in his autobiography, but he did reserve admiration for one aspect of the order’s teachings: ‘the notion of a Candidate ascending the Tree of Life’ (Shadows, p. 230).
principle that is both all things in their summation and an ineffable principle of nothingness.\textsuperscript{40}

Just as in the Golden Dawn, F.R.C. initiates visualized themselves rising through the order’s grades by symbolically ascending along the paths of the Tree of Life, stepping from \textit{sefirot} to \textit{sefira}.\textsuperscript{41} Each initiatory ritual involved the imaginative opening of at least one path between the \textit{sefirot} so that the adept could proceed further up the tree toward mystic union. For example, the path of \textit{Resh} was opened for a Frater Theoreticus seeking to advance to the grade of Practicus, thus allowing the adept to envision himself advancing from \textit{Yesod} to \textit{Hod}, the \textit{sefira} equivalent to the Practicus grade.\textsuperscript{42} Each path and each \textit{sefira}, the adept was told, are equivalent to different ‘modes and aspects of consciousness’\textsuperscript{43}. In this manner, the sefirotic tree acted as a symbolic tool for the imagination of the F.R.C. initiate with which they could effect the transformation of mind and consciousness needed to achieve divine union, as well as a taxonomic device for organizing the order’s levels and rituals. (See figure 1.)


Figure 1.1—Diagram of the Tree of Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F.R.C. Grade</th>
<th>Corresponding Sefira</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Order</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neophyte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zelator</td>
<td>Malkuth</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second Order</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoreticus</td>
<td>Yesod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicus</td>
<td>Hod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophus</td>
<td>Netzach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Order</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adeptus Minor</td>
<td>Tiphareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adeptus Major</td>
<td>Geburah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adeptus Exemptus</td>
<td>Chesed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fourth Order</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adeptus Exaltatus</td>
<td>Daath</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.2—The Grade System of the F.R.C.
Liz Greene argues that the Tree of Life was only valuable as an aid for imagination for Waite, stating that he was not interested in using it in terms of a rational system.\(^{45}\) However, the F.R.C.’s grade structure and its use of the sefirotic tree to organize symbolism from a number of diverse traditions indicate that Waite, like the Golden Dawn, was motivated by the opportunities for both rational classification and elevation of mystical imagination. Characteristic of programmatic syncretism, Waite followed the Golden Dawn in disembedding particular aspects of sefirotic symbolism from their Kabbalistic context and reapplying them in order to structure the order’s rituals, provide symbolic fodder for the mystical imagination, and express the perennial knowledge of the Secret Tradition. Thus, despite Waite’s discursive distancing of his order from occultism, the ritual and symbolic environment in which Williams flourished as a mystic and poet in the F.R.C. clearly rose out of the occult milieu in general, and had its roots in the Golden Dawn specifically.

Charles Williams’s Initiatic Journey

Charles Williams met Waite in 1915, after he read his thesis on Arthurian mysticism, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* (1909), and felt moved to send him a recently published volume of poetry, *The Silver Stair* (1912).\(^{46}\) After some initial correspondence

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and a meeting, Waite invited Williams to join the F.R.C. in 1917. Williams was initiated into the F.R.C.’s entry grade of Neophyte on 21 September 1917, at the Salvator Mundi Temple, set up in the Imperial Hotel on London’s Russell Square. On this particular occasion the Neophyte ritual was followed by the ‘Festival of the Equinox’, a ritual always held to celebrate both the autumnal and vernal equinoxes, times at which the F.R.C. usually appointed members to positions of leadership. Williams took the secret order name of ‘Qui Sitit, Veniat’ (‘He who is thirsty, come’), derived from Revelation 22.17. Waite appears to have held Williams in high regard, as he tasked him with the role of Ostiarius (gatekeeper) in both the rituals that took place before his ascendance to the second grade of Zelator. This was the first instance of a Neophyte playing a role in the rituals, though it subsequently seems to have become a more accepted practice. Williams’s achievement of the Zelator grade on 19 April 1918 completed his passage through the rituals of the first of four orders, each successive order representative of a higher degree of initiation and more advanced mystical knowledge.

Over the next year, Williams advanced quickly through the Second Order grades until he reached the level of Philosophus. He rarely missed a meeting in this period, and frequently repeated the role of Ostiarius. After his advancement to Philosophus, he was made Aquarius—a lesser officer of the temple. On 7 July 1919, Williams was inducted into the Third Order via the ‘Ceremony of Reception in the Portal of the Third Order’. On 26

47 The following account of Williams’s F.R.C. involvement is constructed from the minutes and rituals of the F.R.C. accessed in the Waite Collection at the Bibliotheca Philosophic Hermetica. The minutes are contained in the Records of the Sacred Temple (2 volumes) for the F.R.C., and Records of the Holy House, (2 volumes) for the Ordo Sanctissimus Rosae et Aureae Crucis, a separate inner society which encompassed the society’s Third and Fourth Orders.
August he was ‘raised on the cross of Tiphareth’ in a ritual that involved, as it did in the Golden Dawn, being literally bound to a cross in symbolic emulation of Christ’s death, with Christ seen as symbolically equivalent to the sefira of Tiphareth, as was common in modern occultism. These two rituals allowed Williams to achieve the level of Adeptus Minor, the first grade of the Third Order. Williams seems to have enjoyed these initial Third Order rituals, as in the course of the next two years he participated in the induction of other initiates in the Portal ritual five times, and the Adeptus Minor ritual nine times.

He was also very active in the lower two orders during this period, acting in several official capacities, including the relatively minor offices of Thurificans (incense bearer), which he held for six months, and Proclamator et Lucifer (herald and light-bringer), which he held for nearly a year. In both functions, he participated in rituals to celebrate each solstice and equinox in addition to the rituals designed for the initiation of adepts into the grades of the lower two orders. He held the more significant office of Warden of the Temple for six months, and on 26 September 1921 he was invested as Master of the Temple, which, Imperator Waite would have told him in the relevant ritual, is ‘the highest office which I can bestow on you in this temple’. (See figure 1.2)

Williams’s involvement in the F.R.C. reached a peak as Master of the Temple, as his duties included leading all rituals, appointing junior officers, and keeping minutes of each meeting. Williams was appointed Master of the Temple twice more, in 1923 and

1924. Each appointment represented a period of intense involvement, after which he would appear at meetings more sporadically until he took on another leadership role.

Williams was elevated to Adeptus Major on 5 June 1923, surrounded by other adepts of Waite’s new inner order, the Ordo Sanctissimus Rosae et Aureae Crucis (O.S.R. & A.C.), which he formed from the Third and Fourth Orders in 1922.\(^5\) His ascendance to the grade of Adeptus Exemptus on 10 July 1924 was a strange one, as another adept seems to have performed the ritual in the role of postulant while Williams and a third aspirant to the grade looked on. After achieving the grade of Adeptus Exemptus, Williams attended an O.S.R. & A.C. ritual only once in the next year, as he had been appointed to his third term as Master of the Salvator Mundi Temple on 30 September 1924 and was busy attending lower order rituals. On 1 July 1925, however, the O.S.R. & A.C. suddenly gained prominence in his occult life, as the first rituals of the Fourth Order were performed and Williams, along with the other leading adepts of the F.R.C., entered the final stage of the order’s ritual progression.

Throughout July of 1925, the O.S.R. & A.C. held multiple performances of the ‘Ceremony of Reception in the Portal of the Fourth Order’ and its partner ritual, the ‘Ceremony of Contemplation on the Further Side of the Portal’. Williams went through ‘the portal’ on 22 July and then through the ‘further side of the portal’ on 29 July. On 16 September he participated, for the only time, in the rarely performed ‘Ritual of Return in Light on the Threshold of the Holy Supernals’, which did not perform an initiatory function, but served to educate Fourth Order adepts about the nature of the path of return from mystic union and its incumbent responsibilities (on which I elaborate further below).

\(^5\) Gilbert, *Waite*, 143. The acronym follows Waite’s usage.
Through the next two years, he continued to attend both the F.R.C. and O.S.R. & A.C. meetings sporadically, but his interest seems to have been waning. He did not, for example, attend any of the lower temple’s equinox or solstice celebrations during this time, though it was generally expected that members attend these rites.\textsuperscript{51} On 29 June 1927, Williams played the role of Second Spokesman in a new ritual for the Fourth Order written by Waite in 1926, the ‘Ceremony of Consecration on the Threshold of Sacred Mystery’—created as a bridging ritual between the Third and Fourth Orders.\textsuperscript{52} This was to be Williams’s last known involvement with Waite’s order. The minutes record that he sent his regrets for absence from the celebration of the next autumnal equinox, but following this, Frater Qui Sitit, Veniat disappears from the records.

It is unclear why Williams ceased his involvement with the F.R.C., but the simple application of Occam’s razor may be called for on this question. It is probably not a coincidence that he performed the only ritual he had yet to experience in his last known involvement in the F.R.C. Having experienced all the rites, a certain curiosity would have been satisfied and, like a reader reaching the end of a good page-turner, Williams may simply have chosen to close the book on the F.R.C. Williams’s involvement in Waite’s order thus displays his character as poet, artist, and dramatist. As long as he was involved in the ceremonial, as long as new stories and new symbols waited to be revealed, the F.R.C. held Williams’s interest. Though Williams was heavily involved in the communal aspects of the F.R.C. for a number of years, and was thus willing to frequently repeat his participation in many of its rituals for the sake of other members seeking to ascend to

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 145.

\textsuperscript{52} R.A. Gilbert, personal correspondence, 30 August 2013.
higher grades, we have seen that the intensity of this attachment seems to have faded in later years. Without the communal commitment, and having experienced all there was to experience, Williams seems to have naturally drifted away. He certainly continued to value both his relationship with Waite (the two stayed in limited contact until at least 1931) and his time in the order, shown by instructions given to a friend to bury his F.R.C. regalia after his death, a gesture that seems to indicate both his attachment to the order and his attachment to the vow he had taken to maintain its secrecy. Whether he achieved the direct mystic union sought by the F.R.C. initiate we don’t know, but the numerous descriptions of mystical experience in his novels—whether Roger Ingram of Shadows of Ecstasy, Chloe Burnett of Many Dimensions, or Anthony Durant of The Place of the Lion (1933)—suggest that he had at least some personal experiences on which he could rely for source material. Not only that, his novels also indicate that he remained attached to the F.R.C.’s goal of mystic union and to the esoteric traditions on which the order frequently relied for the symbols, philosophies and practices required to effect this state of being. In the following section, I will argue that the novels were, in part, actually a result of Williams’s mystical experiences in the F.R.C.

53 Ashenden, Alchemy, p. 6.
54 Alchemy, p. 6 n. 32.
55 See below p. 29.
56 See below p. 24.
57 Charles Williams, The Place of the Lion (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 113-16.
The Novels of an Adeptus Exaltatus

While one influential critic has claimed that Williams wrote his novels as a source of extra income,58 I wish to suggest another motivation, one perhaps more pressing and definitely more consistent with the author’s ultimate areas of priority—the metaphysical and the poetic. No doubt he hoped to profit from any publication he made, but there seems to be a significant relationship between the manner and purpose of his fiction writing and his F.R.C. experiences. It is notable that as Williams began to write his first novel in 1925, he was also elevated to the O.S.R. & A.C. Fourth Order, where he received a summons to generate symbolism with which the Secret Tradition could be communicated.59 This elevation to the final degree level of Adeptus Exaltatus was considered to be equivalent to membership in the Holy Assembly, where interaction with the symbols previously necessary to guide one along the path to mystic union ceased. The imagelessness of the Fourth Order was a logical result of Waite’s conviction that the highest levels of mystical experience are immaterial and inexpressible. ‘Beyond this world’, says the portal ritual for the Fourth Order, ‘No signs are given—no names or passwords spoken. This is therefore the great

59 Williams’s first novel, The Black Bastard, was written in the summer of 1925 but was initially rejected and not published, after significant revision, until 1933 as Shadows of Ecstasy. Williams began writing the novel that would become Shadows of Ecstasy on 8 July (Dodds, ‘Charles Williams’, 319), seven days after the first performance of the portal ritual of the Fourth Order on 1 July. On 22 and 29 July, Williams himself participated in the two rituals that inducted him into the Fourth Order. See p. 16.
rite of the dissolution of symbols’. Even here though, the role of symbol only lost precedence during the fleeting moments of the experience of mystical union. Adepts were expected to return from their illumination to express the ‘tidings of the Hidden Church [with] the sacred word of symbol’. The adepts of the Holy Assembly thus became the ‘fontal source whence all the signs proceed’. Prior to his initiation into the Fourth Order, Williams had absorbed the symbolism of the Secret Tradition. Now, as a member of the Holy Assembly, he was expected to generate it.

And generate he did. Williams’s novels and poetry are themselves a bricolage of symbolism that exhibits the modern occult passion for blending the widest possible array of esoteric images and traditions. Like the F.R.C. rituals, kabbalistic and alchemical symbolism feature prominently, along with the trumps of the Tarot deck, Arthurian mysticism and, most of all, a variety of magical symbols and practices. In what follows, I will analyze passages from five of Williams’s novels that derive from occult symbol and practice, in order to indicate two centrally operative principles that explain this heavy reliance on occult phenomena. First, as we have seen, the Secret Tradition that Williams was expected to express as Adeptus Exaltatus was felt to be singularly expressed by the hidden, symbolic knowledge of the esoteric traditions, including modern occult interpretations. Secondly, occult symbolism was a natural tool for Williams, as he frequently encountered it in his own life, particularly in the F.R.C. This close synchronization between life and work was not unusual for

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62 A. E. Waite, ‘The Ceremony of Contemplation on the Further Side of the Portal which is 0=0 In Supernis’, Waite Collection, Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 1922, p. 35.
Williams, as indicated by his friend T.S. Eliot: ‘I can think of no
writer who was more wholly the same man in his life and in his
writings’.63 Because of this close relationship, Williams’s novels
can be more comprehensively interpreted by analyzing the
experiential dimensions that emerge from biographical data, such
as the F.R.C. experiences detailed above; conversely, these same
experiential dimensions (and their corresponding belief structures)
can be better understood when viewed through the prism of the
novels, which are, in part, narratives of these very experiences
themselves.

There is no better example of this dual interplay between life
and fiction than Williams’s presentation of the transcendent
experience of one of the central characters of Many Dimensions,
Chloe Burnett, who perceives herself to be in unity with the divine
and all other aspects of existence during her mystical ascension in
the novel’s climactic scene. Many Dimensions follows Chloe and her
boss, Lord Arglay, the Chief Justice of England, as they seek to
restore the curious ‘stone of Suleiman’64 to its rightful place. The
magical stone has been stolen from its Sufi guardians and is
causing havoc in inter-war England because of its otherworldly
abilities. It offers many of the powers dreamed of by modern
occultists, including astral travel, telepathy, healing, and
clairvoyance. It even enables time travel.65 The stone can offer

63 T.S Eliot, ‘Introduction to All Hallow’s Eve by Charles Williams’ (New York,
Williams: Occult Fantasies/Occult Fact’, Robert A. Latham and Robert A.
Collins (eds.), Modes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twelfth International
(here. p. 178).
64 The Islamic name for Solomon.
20, 24, 101, 192, 198.
such complete control over time, matter, and space because it combines ordinary matter with divine essence. While all other forms of matter simply reflect the supernatural, the stone of Suleiman is both natural and supernatural at the same time. The stone thus recalls the philosophers’ stone sought by alchemists for centuries—a substance that has the power to control all lesser forms of matter because of its dual material and spiritual nature.\footnote{See Chiara Crisciani, ‘The Conception of Alchemy as Expressed in the _Pretiosa Margarita Novella_ of Petrus Bonus of Ferrara’, _Ambix_ 20, no. 3 (1973), pp. 165-81, (here p. 173). For further discussions of the stone, its attributes, and its potential allusive connections see Vlieger, ‘Time’, especially p. 79; Mary Shideler, _The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams_ (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 19.}

The stone is also connected to the kabbalistic myth of a stone called _Schethiya_, originally a part of the throne of God, but cast by him into the abyss in order to create the world. Waite discusses this myth in _The Secret Doctrine of Israel_ (which we know Williams read and treasured),\footnote{Ridler, ‘Introduction’, p. xxv.} where he connects the stone to Shekinah, the feminine aspect of God in Kabbalah. This connection to Shekinah is most important for the overall theme of mystic union in the novel, as it relates to the kabbalistic effort to participate in the reunion of the masculine and feminine aspects of God. The exact details of this myth vary (as do most thought systems in Kabbalah), but the essential concept is that the feminine aspect of God existed in a state of primordial union with the masculine aspect—often identified as Jehovah—but was cut off from him at the creation of the material universe and thus exists, like man and nature, in a state of separation from the divine. _Shekinah_ is thus associated with _Malkuth_, the lowest of the ten _sefirot_, though a higher aspect of the feminine principle is said to remain in union...
with the masculine in the spiritual realm symbolized by the highest three *sefirot*, known as the ‘supernals’.

Just as in the myth of *Schethiya*, the stone of Suleiman represents Shekinah divided from Jehovah at the creation of the world. This division is enhanced by the mysterious divisibility of the stone itself—the original stone can be divided into an unlimited number of copies, or Platonic ‘types’ of the original divine stone. When various governmental officials, academics, and private corporate interests discover the stone’s power, they seek to possess these types rather than the original stone, and exploit them for their own material interests. Chloe and Arglay resist these divisions, as they are intuitively aware that to abuse the stone’s power for material purposes is a violation of its intertwined spiritual essence. Arglay and Chloe intuitively come to feel that the stone is calling them to help restore it to the transcendent unity it once enjoyed. The stone thus represents the divided feminine longing for reunification with the masculine.

In Kabbalah, this return to primordial unity is sought because it will restore the unity of material and spiritual in the entire universe and in man; the novel’s focus, however, is not on apocalyptic redemption. The most important symbolic aspect of Shekinah for Waite and the F.R.C. is her longing for the masculine.

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principle. In Shekinah’s desire, and in her path to achieving that desire, Waite saw the ideal representation of the mystic’s longing for union with the divine. Various representations of Shekinah appear in the of F.R.C. rituals, always as a guide for the mystic to follow along the symbolic paths of the Tree of Life on their transcendent journey. However, while the F.R.C.’s initiatory structure guided the initiate in a zig-zag pattern up the Tree of Life, passing through various stages in the mystical journey represented by each *sefira*, Shekinah symbolized the more sudden mystical ascension of the ‘middle path’ up the centre of the tree. Waite followed the kabbalistic tradition of linking Shekinah with this ‘middle pillar’, a concept that was important to a number of occult groups, especially the F.R.C. The middle pillar is the central vertical line on the diagrammatic Tree of Life, beginning with Malkuth at the base and ascending through Yesod to Tiphareth before culminating in Kether, the topmost *sefira*, seen as closest in essence to Ein Sof because it emanates from it first. In the F.R.C. rituals, which also refer to the middle pillar as the ‘middle way’, the ‘middle path’, and the ‘*linea media*’, the middle pillar functioned as a central symbol of mystical ascension, up the vertical line towards union with the divine. Initiates of the F.R.C. ascended through grades that corresponded to all of the lower seven *sefirot*, but for Waite the middle pillar represented the straight path to direct mystical experience.

Shekinah could thus act as a model of desire for union with God for the F.R.C. initiate, and as a guide intimately familiar with

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71 For Waite’s connection of Shekinah to the middle pillar see *Kabbalah*, p. 252; *Israel*, pp. 35, 255; *Holy Kabbalah*; pp. 161-62, 394. On modern occult understandings of the middle pillar, see Howe, *Magicians*, p. xii.

72 See Figure 1.1.
the middle way because of her symbolic association with it.\textsuperscript{73} Already in the order’s first ritual, the ‘Ceremony of Reception into the Grade of Neophyte’, an advanced F.R.C. adept plays the role of the ‘Guide of Paths’, who will show the adept the ‘middle path [to] the return of the mind into union’.\textsuperscript{74} The Guide is not linked to Shekinah in this ritual, perhaps because Waite intended this symbolism to be revealed to initiates of a higher order, but in later rituals the role is clearly linked to Shekinah and to the middle pillar.\textsuperscript{75} The middle pillar symbolism is already prevalent in the neophyte ritual, as the Guide is the ‘mediator and reconciler’ of opposing cosmic principles\textsuperscript{76} of light and mercy—symbolized by a pillar to the right of the guide—and darkness and judgment—represented by a pillar erected on the left. Waite followed the Golden Dawn in adopting the imagery of these two pillars from Freemasonry and corresponding them to the left and right sides of the Tree of Life, long held to be representative of the same opposing principles of darkness and judgment on the left side and light and mercy on the right.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{73} The F.R.C.’s clearest statement of its understanding of the symbolism of Shekinah and its importance to the mystic journey can be found in: A. E. Waite, ‘The Ceremony of Advancement in the Grade of Philosophus’, Waite Collection, Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 1917, pp. 30-32.
\textsuperscript{76} Waite, ‘Neophyte’, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{77} Williams’s familiarity with this symbolism is shown in a description of the opposing principles of mercy and judgment in a 30 November 1943 letter to Lois Lang-Sims (Lang-Sims, \textit{Letters}, p. 46).
Shekinah appears again in her role as middle pillar guide in the first ritual of the F.R.C.’s highest order. In the ‘Ceremony of Reception in the Portal of the Fourth Order’, the High Priestess—a ritual role associated with Shekinah both in the F.R.C. and in Waite’s famous Tarot deck—walks in front of a procession with a banner marked with the sefirotic symbol of Daath, a hidden eleventh sefirot on the Tree of Life, placed beneath Kether in most schema, on the boundary between the three supernal sefirot and the lower seven. Daath is commonly seen to represent knowledge, particularly the higher intuitive knowledge of God. Waite identified Daath as the sefirot equivalent to the rituals and experience of the F.R.C.’s entire Fourth Order, for it was here that he considered all symbols to dissolve for the Adeptus Exaltatus as he stood on the threshold of the imageless, ineffable state of mystic union. More importantly for our present discussion, Daath also represented that point of return from mystic union at which the Adeptus Exaltatus should begin to share his mystic knowledge through symbol. The High Priestess’s banner thus represents the head of the middle pillar in the Fourth Order portal ritual, as she guides other brethren who walk behind her with the banners of the other sefirot that form the middle pillar—Tiphereth, Yesod, and Malkuth.

Envisioning Williams’s symbolic mystical experiences with Shekinah and middle pillar symbolism in the F.R.C. is crucial to understanding both the characterization of Chloe and the plot developments through which she progresses toward transcendent union with the divine in Many Dimensions. Over the course of the

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novel, Chloe comes to realize herself as Shekinah in a state of desire for union with God.\(^{81}\) She is aware of the stone’s higher nature when she first sees it, and is disgusted by the greed with which other characters in the novel seek it.\(^{82}\) As she progresses in awareness of the stone’s true divine nature, she also begins to understand the wishes of the stone and respond to them.\(^{83}\) As the novel approaches its climax, Chloe is described as becoming more and more similar in essence to the stone.\(^{84}\) The link between Chloe, the stone and Shekinah is made clear as Lord Arglay sees her hand resting next to the stone and ‘wonder[s] suddenly at the kinship between the two’.\(^{85}\) He then fancies that Chloe’s hand is the one used in early paintings to ‘image the Power behind creation’, a power which is ascribed to Shekinah in Kabbalah.\(^{86}\)

Williams’s portrayal of Chloe’s climactic achievement of mystic union closely follows Waite’s symbolic Shekinah-middle pillar structure. As the transcendent climax of Chloe’s mystical ascent is about to unfold, she and Arglay decide that the stone must be restored to its supernal source—symbolic of Shekinah reuniting with the masculine principle.\(^{87}\) Lord Arglay, speaking ‘as if he gave judgment from his seat in the Court’, decrees ‘that there is but one Path for the Stone’, and asks Chloe if she is ready to be that path.\(^{88}\) Chloe allows herself to align with Shekinah and become the middle path by which the stone can return to transcendence, and then follows the stone to union with the

\(^{81}\) See Williams, *Many Dimensions*, pp. 45, 215, 231, 250, 259,

\(^{82}\) Williams, *Many Dimensions*, pp. 32, 120-21, 128.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., pp. 137, 195, 217-18

\(^{84}\) Ibid., pp. 45, 131-32, 197-98, 249.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., p. 230.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 255.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 257.
divine. When she has reached the point in her mystical journey where she is prepared to take the step toward realizing herself as a unity with God and nature, she takes the original stone in her hand and aligns her will with it. The types of the stone that have been divided by material human greed come of their own volition to the London house in which she stands and join with the original stone: ‘Through her they poured into the Stone upon her hands’. Once the stone has achieved this, another process takes place in which Chloe, as though she were another type of the archetype, also becomes united with the stone. Lord Arglay sees ‘[her] body receiving the likeness of the Stone…what the Stone had been she now was. Chloré’s being is now completely symbolically contiguous with the stone and with Shekinah. This symbolic union complete, both Chloe and the stone achieve complete mystical ascension; a transcendence so complete that Chloe’s spirit eventually abandons her body altogether.

It is perhaps easy enough for the reader with some understanding of the mystical tradition to understand the basic ideas behind Chloe’s ascension, but the full comprehensive breadth of the symbolically represented progression toward mystic union is not accessible without awareness of the middle pillar concept, its relation to Shekinah, and the role assumed by both in the course of Williams’s ritualistic experiences in the F.R.C. This sophisticated symbolism appears in other novels as well. For example, Williams returns to the symbol of Shekinah as a guide toward divine union in *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933), where Phillip envisages the higher correspondent relations of the arm of his girlfriend, Rosalind, as she passes a dinner plate at mealtime.

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89 Ibid., p. 260.
90 Ibid., p. 261.
91 Ibid., p. 267.
He realizes the movement of her arm as ‘something frightfully important’, through which ‘he had looked into incredible space; abysses of intelligence lay beyond it’. 92 This vision is steeped in Williams’s Romantic Theology, a ‘science of God’ influenced by a number of traditions, including Kabbalah. 93 The essential emphasis of the doctrine is that the experience of human love and desire parallels mystical union with God. More importantly for the purposes of understanding the vision that erupts from Rosalind’s arm, Romantic Theology suggests that human desire can actually direct the self toward mystic union. Through love and desire, the body and mind of the lover are transmuted, so that ‘his soul itself will enter upon a new state, becoming conscious of [the] grace of God.’ 94 Later, this presence is specifically identified as Shekinah: recalling his vision of Rosalind’s arm, Philip reflects that it was as though it had ‘lain like a bar of firmamental power across the whole created universe, dividing and reconciling at once’. 95 This connects to Shekinah’s equivalence to Malkuth in kabbalistic cosmology—Rosalind’s arm is a direct allusion to the dual symbolic role that Shekinah plays for Williams, both as a symbol of the division of spirit and matter in her state of divorce from the masculine principle, and as a promise of the unification of material and divine that will come when the divided halves of God are reunited, as well as (more importantly) of the potential

94 Charles Williams, Outlines of Romantic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 15-16.
95 Williams, Shadows, 99.
for union of mystic and God suggested by Shekinah’s quest for reconciliation.

These examples of Williams’s exploration of the symbols of Shekinah and the middle pillar in fictive form indicate the importance of his F.R.C. involvement to his fiction. In these passages, Williams mines the esoteric substrate of Kabbalah in order to carry out his Fourth Order commitment to symbolically communicate the path to mystic union. It is likely that he employed this symbolism for the same reason Waite used it to enrich the F.R.C. rituals—a perceived unique ability to communicate the Secret Tradition knowledge that points the way to mystic union. Just as Williams interacted with these symbols on his own inexpressible journey in the F.R.C., so he uses them in his novels to communicate a central message that is, as Eliot notes, ‘beyond his resources, and probably beyond the resources of language’.96 It is important to note that Williams’s deployment of both these symbols is specifically reliant on modern occult interpretations. While both Shekinah and the middle pillar are kabbalistic ideas that date back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the use of the middle pillar ‘as a map for man’s return to his soul’s source’97 was a modern mystical idea that Waite adopted from his Golden Dawn experience.98 His focus on Shekinah was

97 Howe, *Magicians*, p. xii.
98 The Golden Dawn saw the middle pillar as a visualization tool that could be used to draw down power from its divine source in Ein Sof and used to effect a wide variety of magical purposes (Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, Vol. I, pp. 179-82. Cf. Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived’, p. 369). However, the middle pillar was a two way street in the Golden Dawn. In ‘The Ritual for Spiritual Development’, for example, the adept performs the middle pillar technique and then begs the divine to enable the archangel Metatron to bring the ‘Divine influx’ to the base of the pillar ‘to rend away the veils of darkness
somewhat unique among occultists, but even here Waite’s priorities reflect the modern occult tendency to focus on the mystic fulfillment of the individual rather than society, the world, or the divine itself.\(^{99}\) While the kabbalists were focused on participating in the reunification of Shekinah and Jehovah through prayer and meditation, so that both the divine and material realms could be restored to their original perfection,\(^{100}\) the focus of Waite and the F.R.C. was squarely on how Shekinah’s example could aid in the achievement of mystical experience.

Though there is little doubt that Williams’s frequent exposure to the concepts of Shekinah and the middle pillar in the F.R.C. contributed to his use of these symbols in his novels, he could also have been motivated by his reading of *The Secret Doctrine in Israel*, wherein Waite connects the two concepts and relates them to mystic union.\(^{101}\)

There is no doubt about the F.R.C. origin of two further examples of the interaction between Williams’s life and fiction that I would like to illustrate, however. The first is an F.R.C. allusion found in several novels, but never so clearly as in *Many Dimensions*. Here, Williams frequently uses the phrase ‘the End of Desire’ to refer to the experience of mystic union.\(^{102}\) ‘The End of Desire’, says the Hajji, the Sufi guardian of the stone, is both what the stone offers to those who seek it, and what it is in itself.\(^{103}\) Williams is no clearer than this about the meaning of the phrase, from my mortal vision’ so that the initiate can in turn ascend toward ‘attainment to the eternal Glory’ (Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, Vol. 3, pp. 248, 252, 259. Cf. Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 77).

\(^{99}\) On modern occult subjectivity and its quest for a ‘spiritualized understanding’ of individuality, see Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, pp. 256-57.

\(^{100}\) Dan, *Kabbalah*, p. 46.

\(^{101}\) Waite, *Israel*, p. 255.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., pp. 42-45, 95, 102, 115, 129, 262.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., p. 43.
but the word ‘end’ appears to have a double meaning, indicating both the goal of desire and the cessation or fulfillment of it. The former meaning has important ramifications for Romantic Theology: Chloe and Arglay, like many male/female duos in Williams’s novels, guide each other toward a realization of the unity of all things in God (represented by the stone) and the potential for the self to realize this unity as well. In this sense, the end, or purpose, of desire—often physical desire—is mystic union.\(^{104}\) For our current purposes however, the second meaning—cessation of desire—has more importance, as it points directly to the modern occult concept known as the ‘higher self’.

The F.R.C. rituals, building on previous conceptions formulated in the Golden Dawn and in other occult thought systems, sometimes describe mystic union as the discovery of an aspect of the divine within the self that only awaits the mystic’s awareness of its presence for mystic union to occur. This transcendent experience was known as union with the higher self. The idea of the division of the soul into a lower, earthly entity and a higher form that exists in constant unity with the divine is at least as old as medieval Jewish Kabbalah,\(^{105}\) but the idea of the higher self as it was specifically understood in occultism can be traced to H.P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society,\(^{106}\) and was

\(^{104}\) The relationship between Chloe and Arglay is not primarily physical, though there are hints of a sexual tension between the two characters (e.g. Williams, *Many Dimensions*, p. 250). For Chloe’s recognition that the end of her desires lies beyond physicality see Williams, *Many Dimensions*, p. 51. Cf. Gauntlett, ‘Shekinah’, p. 19.


one of a variety of concepts that Aleister Crowley, an (often infamously) well known occultist contemporary of Waite and Williams, used to describe spiritual attainment.\textsuperscript{107} Given the importance of union with the higher self in the Golden Dawn, it is no surprise to find the concept in the R.R. et A.C.’s Adeptus Minor ritual, written by Mathers. ‘In Thee I am Self’, says the postulant in prayerful pose, ‘And exist in Thy Self-hood from Nothing. Live Thou in me, and bring me unto that Self which is in Thee. Amen.’\textsuperscript{108} This idea of discovering the divine through the correspondent unity of self and God is repeated in the same language, with the same tone of supplication, in the F.R.C.’s Adeptus Minor ritual: ‘Through all the grades of the Christhood, give unto us the realisation of the union, that we may attain that self which is in Thee’.\textsuperscript{109} Waite describes this coming together of divine and human selves in terms of a union of mind—a coming together of subject and object that allows for the direct knowledge of God typical of the adept at the level of consciousness symbolized by Daath. Said Waite, ‘The mind of God is our own mind in the God-state…There is no other source of knowledge’.\textsuperscript{110}

The F.R.C. rituals specifically connect the end of desire with the mystic union that occurs with the discovery of the higher self. ‘Behold’, says the initiate at the fulfilment of the ceremony that enabled ascendance to the grade of Adeptus Major, ‘I am that

\textsuperscript{107} Pasi, ‘Varieties’, pp. 147-60.
\textsuperscript{109} Waite, ‘Adeptus Minor’, p. 27. A very similar prayerful phrase is found in Waite, ‘Portal of the Fourth Order’, p. 15: ‘Thanks be to Thee for the self within and without, and for the higher self which is in Thee’.
\textsuperscript{110} Waite, \textit{Shadows}, p. 239. For a more detailed discussion of the concept, see p. 237.
which I sought, and the end of my desire is with me’.\textsuperscript{111} Mystic union is presented as the end of desire in the F.R.C. rituals because there is nothing left to desire once the initiate realizes that all things desired have been a part of the self all along—the divine mind in the human mind, divine consciousness in human consciousness.

Several of Williams’s novels channel the F.R.C.’s notion of the discovery of the higher self as the end of desire. When Chloe achieves unity with the stone in the climactic scene of \textit{Many Dimensions}, Arglay sees her standing ‘her in herself’—a reference to the material, ego-self discovering the higher self within. Having guided the stone to unity, or at least acted as a vehicle for the stone to unify itself, Chloe is described as being ‘clothed in the beauty of the End of Desire’\textsuperscript{112} before she too completes her transcendent reunification, not just with the aspect of the divine discovered within herself and available around her via the correspondent unity of all things, but also with the transcendent aspect of God—the masculine principle divorced from man and nature since the dawn of creation. Chloe thus discovers the complete fulfilment of the very desire that had driven her to seek divine union.

The ‘end of desire’ and the higher self are married again in \textit{Shadows of Ecstasy}. Much of the novel’s plot and theme rotate around the magico-mystical practices of Nigel Considine, who has developed techniques for transmuting the passions of physical love and desire, or of hatred and fear, into long life and magical powers that allow control over the conscious and unconscious


\textsuperscript{112} Williams, \textit{Many Dimensions}, p. 262.
impulses of others. Roger Ingram, a poet and professor of ‘Applied Literature’, abandons his wife and friends to follow the occultist and discover the mystical and experiential aspects of poetry that he has longed to understand. Considine assists Roger’s progression toward mystical experience throughout the course of the novel—culminating in a conversation which directly recalls the ‘end of desire’. The magus is in the midst of describing the history and praxis of his transmutative magical practices when Roger suddenly cries out, ‘And the end…what is the end?’. Considine answers only by turning to his student and looking deep into his eyes. This hypnotic gaze thrusts Roger into reverie, a vision of drowning and then emerging exultant from a great sea. This emergence cannot occur, however, before Roger recalls a line from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that had previously summoned him to inward exploration during a performance of music arranged by Considine with the express purpose of evoking mystical experience. The line recurs consistently in Roger’s mind as he listens to the music: ‘And thus the Filial Godhead

114 Ibid., p. 7.
115 Ibid., pp. 113-16.
116 Ibid., p. 203.
117 This sea can be connected to a great number of symbols and allusions, but here too the F.R.C.’s understanding of Binah, the sefira of understanding, maybe be helpful in gaining a more comprehensive view of Williams’s symbolic intentions. After achieving the grade of Practicus, the initiate was instructed that in the “Secret Church in the heart” the light of the supernal sefirot is “sphered in the Waters of Understanding, the Great Sea of Binah’ (Waite, ‘Practicus’, 39). Symbolically, then, Roger’s mystical experience is at its height when this supernal light is discovered within himself, in the complete intuitive understanding of God that is represented by Binah.
answering spake’. As the poetry echoes internally, Roger reflects on the meaning of a portion of the Godhead that is filial, or subordinate, to a higher aspect of the divine. In doing so, he realizes himself as the filial Godhead—‘it was he that answering spake’. With this realization, Williams describes Roger’s self as ‘being left behind’, a clear indication that he has begun, like Chloe Burnett, to reject individuality and realize himself as one with the divine and the universe. This first experience was the threshold of mystical ecstasy, but now, recalling the line from Milton and the realization of his higher self that went with it, Roger is thrust into the sea, representative of complete knowledge of God and the unity of all things: “Could a man’s body be always…infiltrated with this sea, he might always know!”

Just as Williams learned in the F.R.C., however, the sea of mystical experience is a body of water in which Roger cannot immerse himself for long. As Considine pulls Roger from his mystical reverie, the echoes of Waite’s Holy Assembly directive to the members of the F.R.C.’s Fourth Order echo through his words: ‘It may be known and believed’, he tells Roger, ‘It can’t be lived thus. But it can be found and lived’. Considine’s words are, like many passages in Williams’s novels, abstract enough to allow

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119 Ibid., p. 79. Williams is referring to Paradise Lost, bk. 6, line 722.
120 Williams, Shadows of Ecstasy, p. 79.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., p. 205.
123 As related in the O.S.R. & A.C. Fourth Order ‘Ritual of Return in Light’, the soul of the adept goes up through paths and sefirot ‘even unto Daath’ but ‘does not cross the threshold, save only in intimations of vision’ and ‘comes back therefrom because of its mission to the world’ (A. E. Waite, ‘The Ritual of Return in Light’, Waite Collection, Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 1924, p. 8.
124 Williams, Shadows of Ecstasy, p. 206.
the multiple interpretations the author often built into his language. However, Considine seems to offer two epistemological modes here—one the gnostic, intuitive way of knowledge in which Roger realizes the nature of God and the universe at the moment of ‘the end of desire’, the other a form of knowledge that relies on more extended experience and exploration—an understanding to be ‘found and lived’, whether that be through magical experimentation (as in Considine’s case) or through the knowledge derived and communicated via text and ritual by Waite, Williams, and their fellow Fourth Order Holy Assembly F.R.C. adepts. In this example too, then, we find that Roger’s mystical experience, encountered as a result of Considine momentarily playing Waite’s role of F.R.C. Imperator, contains levels of allusion that emerge from Williams’s private occult experiences. Fiction and experience are intertwined in a manner that can only begin to be traced with an understanding of the nature of those experiences.

In two other novels, Williams expands on the ‘end of desire’ and higher self concepts, adding layers of meaning to their original occult contexts and F.R.C. background. The climactic scenes of War in Heaven add a third possible understanding of the ‘end of desire’—an inverted understanding that associates mystical and magical activity with an utter nihilism in which desire, and therefore the very quest for mystic union with the divine centre itself, cannot exist. Just as the stone of Suleiman creates havoc in Many Dimensions, the holy graal runs amok through modern England in War in Heaven. Dmitri, a Greek sorcerer, joins


126 The spelling used by both Waite and Williams.
two other magicians, Manasseh and Gregory Persimmons, to try and possess it. The three have different reasons for trying to possess the graal: Gregory desires its power, while Manasseh and Dmitri wish to destroy it, though for different reasons. Manasseh simply aligns with the supernatural forces of destruction against those of creation, while Dmitri’s motivation is simply that all will realize the uselessness of either destroying or possessing the graal; doing either, he reasons, will hasten the conclusion of things to their end, at which point both Gregory and Manasseh will realize ‘what the end of desire and destruction is’. He invokes ‘the end of desire’ only to suggest that there is nothing beyond this end but void and impassable abyss, thus adding another sense to the term—the end of desire as annihilation.

Gregory Persimmons also refers to the ‘end of desire’. For him, it is ‘a rapture of iniquity—a union with a dark force suggestive of Satan, rather than the creating, sustaining God with whom Chloe seeks union. Though he seeks this mystical experience through goetic magic, the novel judges his quest as equivalent to any other authentic mystical journey because of its intensity. Though Gregory embraces the Greek’s assistance in his quest for magical power, he senses that Dmitri’s abyssal translation of the ‘end of desire’ is a perversion of his goal. As he watches Dmitri commit murder with black magic, he feels himself hanging ‘above the everlasting void’ and recoils from it: ‘Was this the end of victory and lordship and the Sabbath, and this the consummation of the promises and of desire?’ The ‘end’ of

128 Ibid., p. 145.
129 Ibid., p. 168.
130 Gavin Ashenden discusses the ambiguities of Gregory’s character and his surprise redemption at length. See *Alchemy*, pp. 104-14.
desire emerges here from the ‘consummation’ of desire. Gregory’s doubt that this could be the end he seeks is exploited by the Archdeacon Julian Davenant in the midst of the three magicians’ magical attack on the priest and the graal. Davenant senses Gregory’s weakening resolve in the face of the void, and responds by presenting himself to Persimmons’s spirit as a source of salvation, again invoking the ‘end of desire’: ‘The Archdeacon presented himself to that spirit...as a means whereby the satisfaction of all desire might meet it’.132 The attack on the Archdeacon is a failure, and serves only to summon the power that guards the graal—Prester John, a representative of the divine. Prester John offers the same redemptive end to Gregory as the Archdeacon, announcing that if he can sacrifice himself as he has attempted to sacrifice others, ‘there shall be agreement with you also in the end, for you have sought me and no other’. Persimmons responds by giving himself up to the police for a recently committed murder, a first step toward the redirection of his desire and the achievement of the realization of the true end he has been seeking.133 Both Gregory’s quest and Dmitri’s anti-quest are significant reinterpretations of the F.R.C.’s understanding of the ‘end of desire’, but both illuminate its essential principles in the manner called for from a Fourth Order adept. Dmitri’s nihilism provides a foil to the F.R.C.’s goal of achieving the end of desire by realizing the higher, divine aspect of the self, while Gregory’s quest for union with the divine echoes that of the F.R.C. initiate, despite his illusion that he had been seeking a different goal.134

132 Ibid., p. 241.
133 Ibid., p. 246.
134 See Ashenden, Alchemy, p. 113.
A similar expansion occurs in *Descent into Hell* (1937), this time with the concept of the ‘higher self’. Williams plays with the concept in the novel in order to create an opposition between two ethereal forms of the self that appear to Pauline Anstruther—a shadowy doppelgänger, an aspect of her interior that is produced by fear, and a supernal ideal of Pauline that replaces the doppelgänger once she has moved past her fear, sacrificing her own wellbeing to take on the fear of the spirit of an ancestor to free him from his wanderings in the realm of the dead.\textsuperscript{135} The higher self that faces Pauline once this action is complete is identical to the girl’s earthly appearance, but it is an ‘immortality’,\textsuperscript{136} a manifestation of the higher self. Here too, mystical ecstasy is the tie that has brought together Pauline’s ‘original’—her higher, divine self—and her ‘translation’—her earthly type of the higher ideal. This ecstasy, however, is produced by a different process than in the earlier novels. While mystical experience is derived from ritual, poetry, or contemplation in the first five novels, Pauline’s experience of her higher self is promulgated by the joy she feels after sacrificing herself for her ancestor, the joy that had been held back by her previous fear. This reinterpretation of the higher self concept reflects Williams’s overall movement in his later years toward emphasizing the trans-substantive doctrine he called ‘co-inherence’—a mystical substitution of the self for another with the purpose of effecting

\textsuperscript{135} Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 168-70.

physical, emotional, or spiritual healing and protection. This transition suggests that the Fourth Order priorities of the F.R.C. may have begun to fade for Williams by the mid-1930s, increasingly replaced by the priorities that would shortly lead to his formation of the much less structured ‘Companions of the Co-inherence’, a secret society dedicated to the mutual support of co-inherent action.

Conclusion

Williams’s F.R.C. experiences may appear less manifest in the last two novels, but the example of Pauline’s encounter with her higher self shows that his ten years with the order continued to press upon him. Understanding the Fourth Order priorities that Williams likely had on his mind during the writing of his fantastic fiction allows a more comprehensive view of the motivation behind the themes, symbols and characterization in his work. The

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140 Roma A. King has shown that Williams’s interaction with kabbalistic symbolism in the F.R.C. continued to play a pivotal role in his later poetry collections, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). See ‘Occult as Rhetoric’.
reader is able to access Chloe’s mystic quest, or sense the subversive metaphysical twist behind the redemption of Gregory Persimmons, without being previously aware of concepts such as the middle pillar or ‘the end of desire’, let alone their F.R.C. context. However, the examples above indicate that knowledge of the occult ritual experiences that Williams encountered in the F.R.C. can add rich layers of interpretation to our analysis of his work. Further layers of meaning and understanding can be added with an awareness of the extent of Waite’s order’s rootedness in the modern occult milieu and its genetic debt to the Golden Dawn. Analysis of the Golden Dawn’s rituals and modern occult interpretations of esoteric knowledge can shed much-needed light on the rites and practices that Williams experienced in the F.R.C., thus further illuminating some of the more obscure descriptors and symbols in his work.

Williams’s deep involvement with the F.R.C. also indicates that his interest in esoteric philosophy and practice went well beyond simply employing images as window dressing for his novels and poetry. Esoteric images, symbols and ideas, many of them the specific product of modern occultism, do not merely decorate the walls of his verse and fiction—they erect them. Williams found a vibrant tradition in occult interpretations of esoteric knowledge that enabled him to enrich and expand his theology and philosophy. He applied this vibrancy to his fiction, perhaps moved by the Holy Assembly calling of a Fourth Order adept. Even if this was not his specific motivation, Williams followed the path of a member of Waite’s Holy Assembly, using esoteric symbolism as a vehicle with which to communicate experiences provoked by imaginative interaction with these same materials. As an F.R.C. adept, he employed occult symbolism, particularly that of the Tree of Life, as a tool for visualization with which to effect mystic union through the power of ever more elevated degrees of imagination. He then followed the calling of the Fourth Order
adept and returned from his initiatic experiences with the F.R.C. to communicate the mystical philosophy expressed by the Secret Tradition through his novels and poetry. Without an understanding of this experiential context and its cultural roots, events like Chloe’s mystical ascent and Roger’s deep sea illumination are reduced from transcendence to murk. The result of this denigrated state of interpretation is the drawing of a veil that obscures in a place where Williams intended a veil that reveals.