

Master's Step

Masonic Writings of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst

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SPURIOUS ECSTASY AND CEREMONIAL MAGIC

Published in the *Occult Review* July 1911

THE strongest evidence of man's dissatisfaction with his present status and surroundings is furnished by his desire to transcend the drab routine of life and to escape from himself. The yearning to stand out beyond physical limitations manifests itself in many ways. Some of these – conventional amusements, aesthetic or religious emotionalism – are innocuous enough, but when they enter the region called occult, many become wholly evil even when initiated with good intentions, whilst one only is otherwise than entirely spurious, transient, and imperilous. Of the evil methods it may be premised that they are the shadows and perverted forms of the wholesome way; the homage of imitation and imperfection that vice pays to virtue and its attainment. The vulgar drunkard, for instance, enters after his own manner a spurious temple of the Mysteries to seek the joys of the tavern, and his cup runneth over as surely, if in a grosser fashion, as his who is inebriated by the mystic Grail in the sanctuary of his own soul. The exhilaration of the aviator is a low-grade replica of that of the religious aspirant who, sighing for the wings of a dove, learns to soar – *superasque evadere ad auras* – otherwise than in modern airships. But the mild delights of the bottle and the thrills accruing from venturesome sports pale to nothingness before the gorgeous illuminations of consciousness inducible by certain drugs and anesthetics. Few, however, care to undertake the experiences of the opium and hashish eater in view of the reaction and inexorable penalty exacted by outraged Nature from those who wilfully or through moral infirmity explore the caverns and abysses of the subliminal mind. Of recent years experimental psychology has probed this matter, and Professor James has described very graphically the effects upon himself of intoxication by nitrous-oxide gas. There is produced, he says, an intense and rapturous metaphysical illumination in which truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence; where subject and object, meum and tuum, the centre and periphery of things, become one; and where one becomes consciously blended with the Infinite.

Important philosophical deductions result from these experiments and a treatise upon *The Anaesthetic Revelation* by an American citizen is, in its way, of undoubted educational value.* [*

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See Prof. James's *The Will to Believe*, pp. 294-8 ; and his article in the *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1910.] But what is the effect of these practices upon the personal organism of the experimenter? It will vary in individuals proportionately to their native moral or immoral condition, and it may be assumed that in the morally degenerate the results would be much more appalling than those attending alcoholic delirium. But even the average clean-minded man, actuated by the good motive of scientific inquiry, testifies in the person of Professor James himself that he is left with " the sense of a dreadful and ineluctable fate; a pessimistic fatalism; depth within depth of impotence and indifference ; . . . terminating either in a laugh at the ultimate nothingness, or in a mood of vertiginous amazement at a meaningless infinity." So far, then, so bad; even at the best. The immature Icarus flying to the sun, gets his wings scorched for his pains and falls back into a sea of trouble.

Contraband illuminism is obtainable also by certain oriental yoga-practices and by the frenzy of the dance as exemplified by the whirling dervish who performs his gyrations with the object of deadening the senses and awakening higher centres of consciousness than those to which the senses are the portal. The dance has been used in the rites of sanctity, and perhaps even in connection with the Christian Mass; but it has also served in the mysteries of iniquity as a sensuous and illicit attempt to capture elements latent in the depths of human nature to the legitimate possession of which that nature has not yet attained. This latter was the classic sin of Prometheus in stealing the Divine Fire and using it for carnal ends. But it is perhaps little known that the excitation of psychic passion and the promoting a spurious ecstasy by unlocking an imprisoned essence which, by its proper user, may be suffered to act as the purifier and baptizer of the lower nature, is illustrated, beneath a thick veil of dramatic imagery, in the biblical reference to the lascivious dancing-woman whose object was to reduce into possession what is figuratively described as " the head of John the Baptist in a charger."

The practices of Theurgy and Ceremonial Magic are cognate in character to those already named. At their best (if the epithet be not an abuse) they are attempts, undercover of pseudo-dedications of sanctity, to stimulate and exercise occult faculties by constraining to the ends of selfish gratification subhuman intelligences and forces that mercifully remain unmanifested to our ordinary perceptions; at their worst, and even at a stage far anterior to that, they are

unnameable abominations. As one of the great series of studies upon the varied manifestations of the Secret Tradition in Christian times upon which Mr. A. E. Waite has now for long been engaged we have before us an elaborate volume, *The Book of Ceremonial Magic*;* [* *The Book of Ceremonial Magic, including the Rites and Mysteries of Goetic Theurgy, Sorcery and Infernal Necromancy*. By A. E. Waite. 376 pp. with 180 engravings and plates. William Rider & Son, Ltd.] a most comprehensive treatise in that it supplies the texts of all the chief magical rituals extant, describes the methods and operations, and supplies much historical and critical commentary. But the author's avowed purpose being to show that Magic, Sorcery, Necromancy and their cognates are perverse corruptions and fungoid growths upon a body of doctrine that is high and holy, the book is negative rather than positive in value; its motive is that of the Spartan fathers when they paraded drunken helots in the presence of their sons; namely, to show them something well worth avoiding.

That definite results accrue from magical practices is of course indubitable, but if from following them one were to gain the whole world, or even an inconsiderable portion of it, there is probably no surer way by which to disintegrate eventually one's own soul. It is significant that these operations demand from their devotees preparations as arduous as, and certainly far more ingenious and troublesome than, are required from those who aim at that genuine occult wisdom of which art-magic is the complementary foolishness. The doctrine of both prescribes rigorous discipline of body and mind, but whilst in the one case the end proposed is that of assisting the Divine in man to find its rest in the Divine in the Universe, in the other it is to provoke auto-hypnosis and self-hallucination, to indulge in vanity and self-glory, to truckle with obscene powers, to steal nefarious marches upon and influence the freewill of one's neighbor, and to obtain abnormal facilities for practising lewdness unperceived. *Corruptio optimi pessima*; or as S. Francis of Sales once said in taking the pure and sweet scented lily as the symbol of the perfected soul, there is no scent so foully malodorous as that of rotten lilies. Mr. Waite has performed considerable service, though doubtless a disagreeable task, in collating the literature of Ceremonial Magic, in indicating its methods and aims, and especially in demonstrating the invalidity of the distinction popularly made between magic that is thought to be White and that which is admittedly Black. It is perhaps too much to hope that efforts towards attaining artificial illuminism or that the

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prostituted use of occult powers will cease to be made as the result of this volume, but, so far as literature can pronounce it, for all but the ignorant, the imbecile, or the wantonly wicked, this book is as the Last Judgement thereupon.

One turns with relief from contemplating the ways of vanity and evil, to the one remaining path leading to the true ecstasy and veritable Magia ; the path which I have said above is alone legitimate and safe as it alone is to be computed genuine occultism and the only one worth any one's while to pursue. Given the fact, which lies at the basis of all occultism, that high and hidden centres of consciousness and power exist sealed up within the human organism, there exist also alternative ways of unlocking them. One is by forced, illicit methods conducing inevitably to mental and moral disintegration; the other is by a "graduated-fire" and methods inducing legitimate and normal growth towards, and ultimate absorption in, the focal source and holy centre of all consciousness and power, where, voided of all vain desires and in utter immunity from any peril, the soul

*In the ultimate Heart's occult abode
May lie as in an oubliette of God.*

As regards the former of these methods the best of all authorities stigmatized as thieves and robbers those who sought to " climb up into the sheepfold by some other way " than that of growth in grace and sanctity and through the strait gate and narrow way prescribed by the law and the order; whilst a lesser one who learned the Secret Doctrine independently of the Christian fold has also testified that those few who find the hidden door legitimately are such as have been found specially worthy to be interiorly illumined or have won their title to the heights by an inflaming passion for holiness;

*Pauci, quos aequus amavit
Jupiter, aut ardens evexit ad aethera virtus,
Dis geniti potuere.*
[Virgil, A en. VI. 129–131.]

I will add but one word, lest Mr. Waite's new volume should by any be thought negligible because it treats of a subject that is so. In a succinct and powerful introduction he has himself provided the antidote and counter-thesis to the main subject-matter of his book.

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No terser summary, yet no more explicit and luminous exposition of the one legitimate occult path, as often defined and often traversed during the age of Christendom, has to my knowledge appeared in public literature. And at a time when many minds are seeking for sound counsel and feeling after the true way, and yet when, to meet this demand, glittering temptations exist to divert them towards spurious and dangerous processes, Mr. Waite's introductory pages to the collated records of Pseudo-occultism come as a warning to inexperienced aspirants and as a trumpet-challenge that says, "Choose ye this day whom you will serve !"

THE MYSTICAL BASIS OF MASONRY

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When, in 1646, the founder of the Ashmolean Library recorded that he had been made a Freemason at Warrington, or when, some five decades later, the architects, contractors and superintendents of works engaged upon the reconstruction of the metropolitan cathedral foregathered after their day's work in masonic assemblies of another character at the Goose and Gridiron Tavern in St. Paul's Churchyard, no one was likely to have foreseen that during the ensuing two centuries, and out of the then exiguous community of Freemasons, the enormous Masonic organization that now flourishes in our midst would have sprung into being. At the present moment, holding warrants from the central authority - the Grand Lodge of England - alone, there exist roughly some three thousand Masonic Lodges with an estimated aggregate membership of 150,000. The Scottish and Irish divisions of Great Britain work under separate constitutions of their own but upon similar lines to the English, whilst the British dependencies, the United States and every other civilized country in the world, with the exception of Japan, contain Masonic organizations, the total membership of which constitutes a great multitude which there is no opportunity of numbering, and which is annually increasing. It is thus obvious that the Masonic idea has caught and continues to hold a firm grip upon the imaginations of a very considerable body of humanity and that distinction of race and language has proved no bar to a universal appreciation of it. The inwardness of the phenomenon passes unobserved even within the Masonic community itself, although the external fact of the diffusion of the Masonic system throughout the world is, of course, not merely notorious, but is one of which large and agreeable advantage is taken by members of the Fraternity, and it may be profitable to accord a brief consideration to it here and to inquire what is the secret of the wide appeal Freemasonry has made during the last couple of centuries and still continues to make.

The problem is doubtless very complex, and to the question proposed a variety of offhand answers might be tendered, the value of which would depend largely upon the lucidness of the respondent and his friendliness, or the reverse, towards the Masonic system, That that system provides occasion for social, fraternal - and, to meet the

claims of the, cynic, I will add - convivial, intercourse amongst a number of individuals who choose to segregate themselves into a distinctive fraternity with no deeper purpose than this is, one may reasonably submit, an incredible motive to justify an organization so firmly entrenched, so robust and associated with such personalities of eminence and character as have been formerly or still are actively connected with it. That it is an instrument for furthering practical benevolence and philanthropy, which it certainly does and does handsomely, is a similarly inadequate pretext; Masonry was not intended to be, and is not, a high-grade Friendly Society and its charitable energies are merely an incident of, and not the motive for, its existence. That it is a school of morality, tending to promote peace and goodwill amongst men, which is also wholly true, again fails to suffice, for men need not join a secret society, or enter into the obligations of silence required therefrom, merely to learn rudimentary ethics which it is the common duty of the whole world to know and practise. That it is, as is not infrequently alleged, an engine for promoting the mutual temporal aggrandisement of its members to the prejudice of non-members; a cover for political intrigue, or a screen for propagating anti-religious ideas, are again idle suspicions. That political or other intrigues have in the past been conducted — as in connection with the pretensions of the Jacobites and Legitimists in both England and France in times of revolution — under the aegis of societies claiming to be Masonic, is doubtless a fact; but this, when established, proves merely that a fraud has been committed upon a system devoted to entirely different purposes. Speaking for British Masonry today it is as innocent of such purposes as a mothers' meeting and, indeed, is wholly untinged with even the political partisanship manifested, whether passively or actively, by the official churches of the land; whilst the notorious ban of the Roman Church upon the Masonic brotherhood as being a trespass against the exclusive spiritual and temporal rights of the former is, upon a moment's reflection, stultified by that Church's own insidious political record.

By an eliminative process, then, we arrive at the sole remaining *raison d'être* for the spread and attractiveness of the Masonic system, namely, the significance and implications involved within its ceremonial rites. Now if these, or some subtly-speaking voice in these, be not, when all irrelevant and accretionary considerations have been removed, the fundamental essence and the secret of the vitality and the development of Masonry, there remains no justification for its

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existence worthy of account. It matters not, that in the case of a large majority of the Fraternity that voice is not a loud one or that the significance, of its purport is but dimly recognized; and it may be admitted that among Masons themselves there are but few who have entered into a full intellectual realization of their own heritage. The fact remains that something veiled, latent and deep down in those rites speaks to something that is latent and responsive, however faintly, in those who participate in them; some remote *causa causans*, apart from the mere impressiveness and solemnity of the rites themselves, which for most remains unrealized and unformulated in the consciousness, but which, nevertheless, induces those who partake in them to feel that they are in the presence of a mystery that goes to the root of their being and that it is good for them to be there.

To what element in the Masonic rites, then, is to be traced the effectiveness and subtlety of the appeal alluded to? Among the Fraternity, as well as among the outside public, there are many who, in the absence of better information, suppose Masonry to be a system of immemorial antiquity, one which for some undefined reason or another, became instituted for no very definite object among primitive inhabitants of the East, and which for some equally indefinite purpose it is still desirable to perpetuate in the West. It is supposed also that the predecessors of the present Craft were concerned in operative building and erected, among other edifices of both earlier and later date, the national Temple of Israel at Jerusalem traditionally associated with the name of King Solomon. To dissipate the misconceptions inherent in these suppositions to dematerialize the outward veils and exhibit the inward and real significance of the matter, would take me far beyond the limits permitted to the present paper. It is a fact of commonest knowledge that systems of initiation into certain spiritual secrets and mysteries have obtained immemorially; it is doubtless true that guilds and trade-unions of operative builders possessing also elementary rites, secret signs, tokens, and privileges of membership, flourished from very remote epochs and subsisted until comparatively recent times; it is the fact also that at least the superiors and chief architects connected with such communities were profoundly instructed, as the monuments of the past and the great cathedrals of Christendom attest, in the principles of deep-reaching symbolism, and that with consecrated minds and reverent hands they introduced those principles into the construction of religious edifices byway of emblemizing in stone the perfect temple man should build

in his mind and body if ultimately he is to participate in another temple that is eternal and not built with hands. But this is far from saying that modern Masonry is the perpetuation, or the faithful, lineal image, either of ancient mystery-systems or of the operative masonic communities, though doubtless points of connection with both survive. Every Mason knows that his Craft purports to initiate into certain secrets and mysteries; every Mason knows that in that system the tools, tackle and terminology of operative masons are employed; but a moment's reflection will tell him that the secrets and mysteries referred to are not those of any industrial trade (which, of course, can have none of other than commercial value) ; that the incidents of the operative trade have been merely used as the outward apparel within which to clothe truths of a moral, and spiritual order; and lastly that the chief of the Craft degrees — that which embodies its great and central legend or traditional history,, and as a preparation for instruction in which the antecedent degrees are, in theory, processes of purification — is devoted, from the first word of its opening to the last of its closing, to the veiled presentation of something which, upon the one hand, is as unassociated with mundane architecture as the east is distant from the west, but which, upon the other, is an integral factor and root element of every system of religious initiation of antiquity.

In modern speculative Masonry, then, is to be traced a confluence of two distinct systems. Some time in the seventeenth century the elementary rites of membership used till then among the then virtually obsolete operative guilds became taken over, under circumstances now very obscure and by individuals almost equally so, and adapted to serve as the vehicle for the expression of a highly mystical and religio-philosophic doctrine disconnected altogether from mundane architecture and unrelated to any form of masonry other than that which, by employing metaphor, we may call the building — or perhaps the rebuilding and reintegration — of that uncompleted temple, the human soul. It may be stated at this point that the credit of reaching the conclusion just mentioned is attributable wholly to Mr. A. E. Waite, who first gave voice to it in some illuminative papers in his *Studies in Mysticism* and added some confirmatory words in his subsequent book, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail*. The facts involved in the conclusion had previously escaped the observations of historians of Masonry, who speaking perhaps without any, and certainly without Mr. Waite's extensive, knowledge of the movements

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in occultism and mysticism that were occurring behind the scenes of public history in Europe and England during the past few centuries, have been without adequate equipment for tracing the real genesis of modern Masonry. It is notorious that at, and for long prior to, that genesis this country and the continent were alive with occultists and initiates — of pretensions both meritorious and the reverse — connected with schools of alchemy, magic, Rosicrucianism and what not. The worthy name and written remains of Thomas Vaughan alone, apart from the wide testimony of contemporaneous literature to the prevalence of occult inquiry, testify that earnest students and genuine adepts were in the field at the date of the inception of the Masonic movement, and it is reasonable to deduce a connection between these and the movement itself. In the old operative system they, or some of them, found, as it were, a body prepared; they imported into that body a new spirit and gave it a transfigured life, a life which, in its maturer growth, is with us in such magnitude today. To use an expression of Mr. Waite's, "they made an experiment upon the mind of the age," and, be it remembered, it was an experiment made, and perhaps made with shrewd insight and foresight, at the commencement of an epoch when the tide of spiritual life and understanding in the official churches was about to run extremely low and the tide of rationalistic thought and scientific materialism to rise extremely high, and when, maybe, it was found desirable, for the benefit of a few in the dark days that were to follow, to kindle a new beacon-light testifying to a truth and a doctrine that have never been absent from the world.

It being my purpose in this article to bespeak the attention alike of those who are technically Masons and of those who are not to a further and extremely valuable work upon the esoteric development and mystical aspect of Masonry and its numerous ramifications and allied rites, the foregoing considerations may perhaps not be misplaced, since their intention is to clear the somewhat befogged atmosphere in which the true history and vital purpose of the Masonic system have become involved in both the Masonic and the public mind. In the volumes referred to — and they deal not with the external and virtually negligible history of Masonry, but with its interior content, its mystical purport and its place in the long chain of occult tradition — Mr. Waite demonstrates after what manner Masonry, in both its Craft and High Grades and its cognate rites, is an expression, perhaps far from a full, but still an indubitable, one, of that Secret

Tradition which throughout all time has been perpetuated with the object of instructing those that were keenly enough concerned with solving the riddle of existence to consent to adopt the methods which that Tradition accredits and guarantees. The quest after that solution is for ever proceeding, amongst however few. We may call it the quest of the Graal; we may call it the search for the Lost Word, or the guarding of an empty Sepulchre; we may term it the achievement of the Great Work, or the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone; or we may refer to it in the terms of the Platonist as the task of re-integrating the divine element in man with the Divine Basis of the Universe. The systems have been many, but the quest, and the goal of the quest, are but one. Many of these systems, expressed sometimes in terms of baffling ingenuity lest the pearls they contain should fall into unworthy hands, have long since passed away, to be replaced by others. Like the ever-renewed branches of the Tree of Life — *uno avulso non deficit alter aureus*; when one has served its day another has manifested without fail, as if (but is it not part of the Tradition that it is so ?) there was watching over Israel — the small, but continuous body of dedicated, undaunted aspirants — that which slumbers not nor sleeps; a watch, of unseen wardens whose concern is to keep ever open and illumined the pathway to that Centre whereto all experience leads and wherein all quests end.

Mr. Waite defines the Secret Tradition as (i) the memorials of a cosmic loss which has befallen humanity, and (2) the records of a restitution in respect of that which is lost. It is innermost knowledge concerning man's way of return whence he came, by a method of inward life. But, by a paradox, that method of inward life is also one of inward death. There has been no accredited system of mystery-teaching but has proclaimed, whether in legend, symbol, or dramatic representation, the fact that death, interpreted in a mystical sense, is the gate of that life which is not merely post-mortem existence, but conscious, irrefragable union with the Eternal Basis of the Universe. It may be urged, and with truth, that this doctrine is, or was intended to be, that of official public religion. I am not concerned here to discuss to what extent the churches have conveyed or failed to convey this truth in its plenitude to the consciousness of their adherents, and I am far from asserting that the collateral Masonic system can claim an advantage in this respect, But there is none among the millions who have received the degree of Master-Mason but may reflect that not only has he symbolically undergone an experience which has been