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**Recycled Religions: Egypt in Fin de Siécle Hermetic and
Thelemic Thought**
Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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I. Theme and aims of the dissertation

The topic of my study is the reception of ancient Egypt in the turn of the century context of Western esotericism in Britain, through the examples of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the early works of Aleister Crowley. The late nineteenth century saw a rising interest in all things Egyptian, termed Egyptomania, as well as the so called occult revival. My research deals with the interaction between these two cultural currents. Although Egypt, or more accurately images of it, occupied an important role in the framework of the esoteric tradition the decipherment of the hieroglyphs and a growing understanding of ancient Egypt even furthered its prominence. Esotericism also changed in the late nineteenth century, particularly in organization and methods of transmission with the creation of new societies that disseminated esoteric knowledge in a school like way. Among these societies the most important magical organization was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn that organized tradition into a teachable structure that remained influential up until contemporary esotericism. Aleister Crowley, the most notorious occultist of the early twentieth century, was for a short time member of this order and his works incorporated numerous elements learned from the Golden Dawn system. An image of a mystical Egypt, a fountain of lost wisdom and living magic played an important role in the self-legitimizing constructed tradition of both.

The hypothesis is that the Golden Dawn and Crowley's early works employed a considerable amount of Egyptianizing symbolism in an

internally consistent and logical manner. While the sources of these motifs, and their variation was limited by a lack of knowledge and proper Egyptological training, they often fulfilled crucial roles in the structure of their beliefs. Both of them employed an invented or invoked tradition to supply their teachings with legitimacy and a key aspect of this tradition was the purported connection and legacy of ancient Egypt. An aim that from an objective perspective they failed, but they were successful in maintaining alternative/rejected ideas and concepts about Egypt and in integrating these ideas into the larger frame of Western esotericism on a level that was previously impossible, which left a mark on later developments of the field and on modern popular culture as well. To investigate the issue I researched the rituals, lectures and other available sources of the Golden Dawn and the *Liber AL* by Crowley to catalogue and examine the Egyptianizing elements and the place they occupied in turn of the century esoteric ideology.

II. Method and sources

The Golden Dawn left behind a considerable amount of written material, of which the “official” documents, the texts of the rituals, lectures, and some essays have been published first by Crowley then Israel Regardie, and others based on F. L. Gardner’s collection. Aside from the published material the Golden Dawn archives survived in seven collections. The two major public collections are the Gerald Yorke collection, which contains the collection of F. L. Gardner,

manuscript copies of rituals, essays, and letters, supplemented by Yorke's own collection of material relating to Aleister Crowley. The other is the so called Yeats Occult Papers, of which there are some excerpts published as well. The three major private collections, referred to as Private Collection A, B, C are the following. Collection A contain the "official" records of the order and were kept by the Stella Matutina, and were given to a senior member and remained in the family's care since. Collection B and C contain materials from members of the Independent and Rectified Rite, A. E. Waite's successor organization, and are in the custody of the families of the original owners. The two minor collections are the collection of Carr P. Collins in Dallas, and the collection of R. A. Gilbert. Most of the papers from the early years of the Order, including the original Cypher Manuscripts, correspondence between Westcott and Anna Sprengel, official printed documents from 1888-1902, balance sheets of the Isis-Urania temple, and the turmoil of 1900 with all related manuscripts are contained in Private Collection A. The Collection B contains the address book, recording the name, motto, address, and reason of leaving, of the 332 members of the orders who joined and left between 1888-1897. It also has copies of Second Order rituals and papers on various topics. Private Collection C contains copies of both Inner and Outer Order rituals and Flying Rolls, as well as the parchment Roll of the Isis-Urania temple. The Yorke collection contains the most extensive record of rituals, lectures and related material, records of personal and group magical experiments, a large number of correspondence and various Golden Dawn related memorabilia. This

is supplanted by a large number of Crowley related material, including an obiter dicta for the Liber AL. The time constraints of the dissertation are visible from the sources presented here. As the earliest copies of the ritual are from 1895, and they remained the same until the changes brought on by the Stella Matutina that is the period that we will be focusing on. It can be assumed that the textbook of the initiation rituals was not changed by Mathers, nor were the original knowledge lectures since the order's inception. When the Second Order was created in 1892 the available corpus was expanded upon, but the texts were left unedited. The list of Flying Rolls was changed multiple times, and whenever possible we try to find the sources that were available during Mathers' leadership of the order. Of these sources I used the various published versions, consulted the Yorke collection in person and the Yeats Occult Papers in digital edition.

The method employed in the dissertation are dual: a historical approach and textual criticism. Historical approach is needed as both the Golden Dawn and Crowley were very much products of late nineteenth century intellectual and religious developments and a proper contextualization is needed to understand the internal structure of the examined sources. Textual criticism is employed to uncover the place, internal logic, and reason for being of the Egyptianizing elements in the explored material, and when possible to find the origin of these elements and ideas.

III. Results of the research

The key results of my dissertation can be summarized in the following points:

The nineteenth century reshaped the landscape of the Western esoteric tradition. The so called “Occult Revival” saw the rediscovery of a number of neglected sources of magic, as well as the ease of accessibility of esoteric knowledge. The social changes and the burgeoning middle class created a new audience for esoteric ideas. The ideas about the aims and function of magic changed considerably. In earlier traditions where the aim often was a physical goal, the acquisition of wealth, health, protection, precise predictions about the future, or just generally making life easier, in the financially secure middle class of Victorian Britain these were not the aims anymore. The void that could be filled with magic was of a spiritual nature, and the magician’s quest became a search after divine unity, mystical experiences, and a greater understanding of the secret workings of nature. Esoteric writings often borrowed the language of science with rules, causes and effects, observations, experiments, etc. and were presented as a valid alternative to the fast developing sciences. Occultists also relied on the developments of the sciences to form new theories and introduce new elements and sources to their respective esoteric worldviews.

In turn of the century Britain popular understanding of Egypt produced at least three distinct images that shaped the reception of newly discovered sources, textual and material alike. The most prominent was the Familiar concept, centered around the antiquity, majesty, and timelessness of Egypt, with elements like emphasis on morality and ethics, outward dominance in the Near-East, and scientific achievements provided an analogous image for the British Empire. The second image was the Exotic that presented ancient Egypt as ultimately foreign, a place of adventure, wonders, sensuality, and sexuality. A strange land of harsh desert winds blowing among ancient structures, filled with beautiful priestesses and dancers, mighty pharaohs, and exotic animals. The third image was the Mystical that painted a picture of a civilization of magic, closeness to the gods – or god as the debate on Egyptian monotheism was still very much ongoing, especially after the 1881-1882 excavations in Amarna – and the wisdom of the perennial philosophy not yet forgotten. These images formed the basis of the preconceptions about ancient Egypt and shaped how the scholarly literature was received by the public. And above these three stood the general Bible oriented worldview of the nineteenth century, where new discoveries were cross-examined with biblical accounts and interpreted in a shared thought-frame, and Egypt was a “divine tool to rebuke the rampant infidelity of the time”. The first two images intensely shaped the approach of early Egyptology as well, determining how scholars construed the available data, and there are a handful of examples when the Mystical image was important for individual Egyptologists. Bernard Grenfell spoke

about spirits and curses encountered on excavations, M. W. Blackden was a member of the Isis-Urania Temple, Battiscombe Gunn was for a short time a member of A. E. Waite's Independent and Rectified Rite, and Margaret Murray became the "Grandmother of Wicca". But these are rare cases, and there seems to be little to no direct reaction on the part of Egyptology to ideas presented by occultists. In cases of pleas for help in translating certain texts, Egyptologists were helpful, but this was not limited to esoteric oriented questions. In relation to the material discussed in the dissertation Florence Farr's book on Egyptian magic was dismissed as ahistorical, the rituals of the Golden Dawn, or Mathers' Isis rites were not publicly addressed. In the case of the Golden Dawn this was due to the secrecy as the ritual were unknown outside of the initiates, and by the time the secrecy was broken Egyptology underwent a series of secularization and professionalization and was uninterested in fringe ideas. Crowley's Rites of Eleusis, a series of performances in 1910 garnered some public attention from the press that warned women from seeing the play on account of it being "immoral under the guise of a new religion" but there was no professional interest to speak of.

Newly discovered Egyptian sources found their ways into esotericism and played an important role in Golden Dawn theory and practice. The exploration of most occultist in the field of professional Egyptology was superficial, the most important primary source employed was the *Book of the Dead*. The used Egyptian sources were reinterpreted in a Hermetic frame, in conjuncture with pre-decipherment assumptions on Egyptian religion and magic, often disregarding current

professional developments and theories. The Golden Dawn, and Crowley as well, used the image of Mystical Egypt in multiple ways, it was an important part in the order's cosmology, claimed legacy, and during the conflicts surrounding leadership personal connection to Egyptian spirits was used as leverage in legitimacy. In rituals Egyptian motifs accompanied a Hermetic and Kabbalistic system primarily through visual to aid the participant's associations and to signify the order's connection to the origin of perennial wisdom. Egyptian deities were reinterpreted as forces of nature that one could communicate with, and evocate to experience an altered state of consciousness and authority above those forces. The technique of becoming one with an Egyptian god was at that time a practice unique to the Golden Dawn.

An example to illustrate the above point: *The Pyramid Gods and their Attributions*, by Mathers, in which he details the Enochian elemental pyramids and corresponding Egyptian deities, as well as the place these deities take during the Neophyte Ritual. He also provides a Coptic name variant with the addendum that the ending "st" signifies a more spiritual force. The scheme of the correspondences follows the same sequence. The name of the god is given, both the common Greek or Egyptian variant, then the Coptic. This is followed by the elemental attributes, then the description of the god's appearance. As an example "Fourth. HORUS. Hoor. Ruleth above when the Four Triangles of the Pyramid or three out of the Four are of the Element of Fire. For he representeth the letter Yod of YHVH, the fiery and avenging force of the Spirit, the opposer of the infernal and devouring fire. Shape: God with Hawk's head and double mitre. Phoenix wand and Crux Ansata."

The attributions are through the mythology of the deity, the imagery somewhat follows the original Egyptian depictions but complemented with Golden Dawn magical implements in the form of wands. In the case of better known deities like Horus in the example the attributions of the corresponding fire and themes of revenge are easy to understand but in some cases the correspondences seem entirely accidental.

The Egyptian motifs in the Golden Dawn rituals, lectures, and other material can be categorized in to ways, an internal and an external one. The internal categorization is based on the availability of the material and the participatory aspect of it. First of all there was a sharp divide between material available to Outer Order members and Inner Order members, as well as the already structured access to knowledge based on rank. Naturally this is after 1892, and before the schismatic period, as before the creation of the Second Order the whole membership had access to the same material, and after the schisms in certain group these lines became quite blurred. Participation in rituals, as an actor or a spectator was tied to rank as well. For Outer Order members the available material was their participation in initiations, the knowledge lectures which contained no explicitly Egyptian elements, and lectures occasionally held by higher ranking members on various topics. The written material given to them contained the basic teachings of the Golden Dawn, and it seems that the basics were Hermeticism and Kabbala. The only real connection they could feel to Egypt in the workings of the order were the obvious visual elements, the robes, nemysses, Egyptian vignettes, etc. as well as the occasional mentioning of Egyptian deities during the rituals but without having

access to their deeper meaning. Another important differentiating factor in the material available to the two Orders is the chance of participation. For Outer Order members the focus was on theory and this meant that most of them participated in the rituals passively. Those of high enough rank could be active performers in initiations of lesser ranked candidates, but for most they were taken around in the temple, answered for by officials when prompted, and had little access to put into practice the theory they learned. Being the initiate in the rituals meant that the magic was not done by them but done to them, and the initiate witnesses the gods but does not become one with them. For members of the Inner Order the case was different. They had access to a wider range of material as well as they were incentivized to practice magic, solitarily, in group, or during the communal rituals. As much of the initiations was done with the leadership of high ranking members they were the ones performing magic. This meant that during the rituals when the priest or priestess evoked the gods of Egypt, this transformative act took place in him or her and not the initiate, who were in true mystery cult fashion just shown the miracles. This is of course just re-stating the obvious as most religions have a division of laymen and clergy, and in this analogy the Inner Order can be regarded as the clergy of the Golden Dawn. The material to which the Second Order members had access held the deeper theoretic foundations of the rituals and the syncretistic system of the order. It is not entirely clear whether these ideas were originally present at the time when Westcott, Woodman, and Mathers founded the order, but it can be postulated with some certainty that at first Mathers worked

out the rituals from the backbones available in the Cypher Manuscripts, and then later on created the interpretation of the mysteries.

The external category is based upon their place in the greater scheme of Golden Dawn ideology, which we will refer to as surface and foundational Egyptiana. Foundational level Egyptiana are cases when the used Egyptian elements fulfill a core function in the ritual or “theology”. These include occasions when the symbolism of the ritual is built around an Egyptian myth or religious practice, as in the case of the Z interpretation of the Neophyte ritual, the prevalent belief that the gods of Egypt are existing beings as forces of nature, their attribution to elements, cardinal directions, or as governors of angelic legions, the belief and practice that one can assume the form of an Egyptian deity partaking in its powers, and even the belief that the Golden Dawn is the descendant of an ancient Egyptian initiatory order. Surface level Egyptiana are occasions when the elements and motifs used are more superfluous and could easily be exchanged with elements of other esoteric traditions, for example the extra identifications, almost like side notes, with Egyptian traditions in the otherwise Hermetic or Kabbalistic explanations during the rituals, the Egyptianizing interpretations of tarot cards, etc. Both are abundant in the Golden Dawn.

The core beliefs of the Golden Dawn can be summed somewhat like this. Magic exists, and can be learned, and through it one can achieve spiritual development and through practice reach a mystical union

with God. The tradition of magic originates from Egypt, as visible from the Hermetic sources, the roots of the Kabbala lead back to Egypt, and the Golden Dawn is a descendant of this ancient tradition. The Egyptian gods exist in one form or another and can be reached and communicated with, but the method of communication is not through the rituals found in Egyptian sources (although in some occasions the texts and wordings can and should be used), but through Hermetic and Kabbalistic rituals and prayers. The Egyptian ancestry is further reinforced by the use of ritual clothing and implements reminiscent of Egyptian clothing, especially those worn by pharaohs, and insignias of power. But as we have taken a closer look at the available Golden Dawn material one thing is crystal clear. Although in the outward representation, and to an extent in the “theology” of the order as well Egypt seems to hold an important place, but this place is at maximum tertiary. The basis of the order’s worldview, approach to magic, goals, and methods are Kabbalistic, which in this case is not Jewish Kabbala, but the Christian and Hermetic Kabbala formulated during the Renaissance. This is supplanted by Hermetic correspondences and notions on the human capacity to effect change on the universe, the basis of the emphasis on color symbolism. The role of the Egyptian elements could easily be filled by the mythology and pantheon of any other religion, or as with the case of the Inner Order rituals with the myth of Christian Rosenkreutz. The role fulfilled by Egyptian deities is the same fulfilled by angels, archangels, and demons, often in conjunction with each other, and regarded to be similar entities. Still the idea was that the Golden Dawn

was performing real Egyptian magic, and the Egyptiana were more than visual cues but were one cornerstone of the group's self-identity.

Following the Golden Dawn's internal conflicts Aleister Crowley set out on his own path in search of esoteric understanding. He found it in Egypt where he wrote the *Liber AL* based partially on a translation of the *Stele of Ankh-ef-en-Khonsu*. This book later became the foundation of Thelema, a religion founded and propagated by Crowley through the A·A·A· and the Ordo Templi Orientis that proclaimed the coming of a new aeon and the disbanding and reformation of the current world order. He used the Golden Dawn's syncretized hermetic Egypt, the godforms, regalia, and symbols to provide legitimacy for his ideas and present them in a structure that was familiar for the esoterically inclined. Crowley used the personal connection with an Egyptian deity trope that was used by Farr in her conflict with Mathers. Although Egypt played an important part in the constructed legacy of the Golden Dawn and Crowley, in practice the religious and magical practices of ancient Egypt were foreign and the elements incorporated in ritual were reformed to fit the hermetic narrative of the order's ideology. The unspoken reasoning behind the general disregard of the available primary sources was that as the true heirs to the ancient mysteries with immediate connection to the spirits of Egypt they needn't trouble themselves with reading works of Egyptology as what they were doing was the true religion of Egypt, available only to initiates and unknown to contemporary scholars who relied on written sources.

IV. Related publications

“Aposztázia és útkeresés a Viktoriánus kori Angliában Aleister Crowley példáján” in. Gér András László, Jenei Péter (eds.) *Hiszek, hogy megértsem! Konferenciakötet*. Budapest: L’Harmattan. 2014.

“In Search of a Past that Never Was: Ancient Near-East in 19th century Occultism as a Form of Cultural Memory.” 5th International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. Riga, 2015. április 16-18.

“A Golden Dawn mágikus rendszerének társadalmi kontextusa.” Mágia az állami és magánszférában. Vallástörténeti workshop. PPKE-BTK 2015. november 19.

“Alison Butler: Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic. – Ismertető” (in progress)