

The background of the cover is a vibrant, swirling pattern of red and orange, resembling flames or a vortex. A woman is depicted in profile, facing right, with her hair flowing upwards and outwards in a similar swirling pattern. Her hands are raised, with fingers spread, as if she is channeling energy or magic. The overall aesthetic is ethereal and mystical.

STEALING FIRE
from HEAVEN

The RISE of
MODERN
WESTERN
MAGIC

NEVILL
DRURY

Stealing Fire from Heaven

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Stealing Fire from Heaven

The Rise of Modern Western Magic

NEVILL DRURY

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Lesley, who shares my journey in every way

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Preface

This book is an extension of doctoral work undertaken in recent times at the University of Newcastle in Australia, but in a sense has its origins some forty years ago when, as an undergraduate student at the University of Sydney, I first became interested in the Western magical traditions. I was spurred on by reading a controversial, popular book titled *The Dawn of Magic* (later retitled *The Morning of the Magicians*) by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. The book had originally been published in French and at the time of its release in England in 1963 had already sold over a quarter of a million copies in Europe. It was here that I learned for the first time about the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and many key figures in Western esotericism, and the book really stirred my imagination! Around the same time I discovered the artworks of the remarkable British trance artist Austin Osman Spare in a magazine and subsequently researched his magical ideas in the British Museum for my first book, *The Search for Abraxas*—co-authored with a university friend, Stephen Skinner, who had introduced me to the Kabbalah. I could not have known at the time that Austin Spare would eventually emerge as one of the most significant influences on Western magic in the latter part of the twentieth century, although I am hardly surprised in retrospect, given his extraordinary brilliance both as an artist and as an original magical thinker.

This book seeks to provide an overview of the modern magical revival—that is to say, it focuses specifically on the resurgence of interest in the Western esoteric tradition in the twentieth century. As one would

expect, the central themes revolve around the magic of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley's cult of *Thelema*, the rise of Wicca and Goddess spirituality, and the subsequent emergence of more divergent occult groups like the Temple of Set and the practitioners of Chaos Magick. However I have also intentionally delved into areas of modern magical thought that are less well known, profiling several of contemporary magic's most fascinating individuals—like the Australian trance artist and witch Rosaleen Norton, Chicago-based Gnostic voodoo magician Michael Bertiaux, Left-Hand Path practitioner Michael Aquino, and Swiss fantasy artist H. R. Giger. These individuals, in their own unique, and sometimes eccentric, ways have also helped shape the modern magical imagination.

I am well aware that in compiling and writing an overview history like *Stealing Fire from Heaven* I am entering a field that has already been well served by some outstanding research and scholarship. Key titles like Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon*, Hugh Urban's *Magia Sexualis*, and Andrei Znamenski's *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* come readily to mind. Nevertheless, the Hutton and Adler volumes focus primarily on the rise of twentieth-century pagan witchcraft—the latter dealing exclusively with neopaganism in the United States, and Hugh Urban's *Magia Sexualis* describes the esoteric groups that have been influenced by Aleister Crowley's controversial approach to sex magick (Crowley's unique spelling). Andrei Znamenski's *The Beauty of the Primitive*, meanwhile, explores the rise of neoshamanism in the West in all its myriad forms—in itself a vast undertaking. *Stealing Fire from Heaven* will, it is hoped, be seen as complementing these works rather than in any way endeavoring to compete with them. Austin Spare, in particular, has been ignored in most of the major overviews published to date, and I seek to redress that here.¹ Spare is now rightly regarded as one of the most significant figures in the twentieth-century magical revival, alongside MacGregor Mathers, Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, and Gerald Gardner.

Looking back on the lengthy period prior to my doctoral work, I can see in retrospect that certain events have greatly influenced my research interests. Prior to my more recent postgraduate studies I worked for many years in the international book-publishing industry, with occasional involvement in documentary films. I was fortunate in December 1984 to take part in the filming of an award-winning ninety-minute international television documentary, *The Occult Experience*—screened originally in Australia, where I live, and later released in the United States on Sony Home Video. My role as the co-producer, researcher, and interviewer for that documentary gave me direct personal access to several key figures in the Wicca and Goddess spirituality movements, and information acquired at that time proved invaluable by way of historical background. The most positive aspect of making this documentary—from my own personal perspective—was my direct contact with

such pivotal figures as Michael Harner, Z. Budapest, Starhawk, Alex Sanders, Janet and Stewart Farrar, Michael Bertiaux, and H. R. Giger—all of whom feature in this book.

Finally, on a personal note, I would like to thank a small group of academic researchers at various universities around the world who have encouraged my esoteric research. They include Dr. Marguerite Johnson, from the University of Newcastle; Dr. Lynne Hume, Dr. Helen Farley, and Dr. Philip Almond from the University of Queensland; Dr. Michael Tucker from the University of Brighton in the UK; Dr. J. Gordon Melton and Dr. Lee Irwin in the United States, and “new religions” specialist Dr. James R. Lewis, who is currently based in Norway. I would also like to thank Cynthia Read, Molly Balikov, Tamzen Benfield, and Margaret Case from Oxford University Press, New York, for their valuable editorial and production assistance in preparing this book for publication.

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Introduction

Magical thought is commonly identified with superstition and regarded as a form of pre-science—an earlier and less sophisticated phase of human intellectual development. Indeed, elements of this perception have entered popular folklore. One thinks immediately of evil eye amulets, of black cats, or magic spells cast by wicked, toothless crones. However the sort of magic described in this book has little to do with superstition. As we will see, the magic of twentieth century occultism has an altogether different thrust. Here the concept of magical consciousness relates much more to the concept of will or intent—to the idea that one can bring about specific effects or changes within one's sphere of consciousness. This form of magic is basically about personal transformation—or more specifically, about the transformation of one's perception or state of awareness.

Some have regarded occult exploration as inherently dangerous—as a foray into uncharted waters. To some extent this fear is warranted, for modern Western magic is, by its very nature, an esoteric tradition and involves the exploration of relatively unexplored human potentials. As the English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare once observed: the aim of magic is *to steal the fire from heaven*.¹ However, one of my aims in this book is to show that, for many practitioners, the practice of magic has an essentially spiritual intent. Its imaginal methods transport the visionary magician into transcendental realms of consciousness, facilitating direct experience of the sacred archetypes of the Western psyche.

The Concept of Magical Will

It is in relation to the issue of will that magic differs from mysticism and the more mainstream forms of religion. The magician, unlike the mystic or religious devotee, draws not so much upon the concept of grace bestowed by God as on the idea that one may alter one's state of consciousness magically at will—that the gods will respond if one undertakes certain ritual or visualization procedures. It may be that the magician dresses ceremonially to capture their likeness, and in so doing invokes their sacred and symbolic energy. Perhaps sacred god names are uttered or intoned—like those found in the Kabbalah, in the pagan traditions of contemporary witchcraft, and in certain Gnostic formulations. Here the core idea is that the name of the god or goddess embodies the very essence of the deity and that by invoking that sacred vibration one is not only tuning in to the archetypal level of awareness associated with these sacred beings but actually attaining mastery of them.

As will become evident in later chapters of this book, the idea of will is vital to the magical attitude. We find it in the magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, where focused intent enables the magician to rise through the planes of “inner space”—through the symbolic and mythological realms of the Tree of Life. We find it in the quest for the Higher Self—anthropomorphized in Aleister Crowley's writings as the Holy Guardian Angel. And we also find it in the controversial shamanic accounts of Carlos Castaneda, where the magical apprentice has to whirl his spirit catcher near the sacred water hole and concentrate on the “spaces” within the conjured sounds, in order to will a magical ally to appear. In all of these instances the idea of the magical will is central to the activity in question.

All of this, of course, is quite foreign to most established religious traditions. Prayer and supplication, offerings of thanks to a Savior god, and acts of worship in a church, are in no way intended to capture the god. Quite the reverse, in fact. Western religious devotion is an attitude of mind where one humbly submits oneself before God in the hope that He will bestow grace and salvation. There is no implied act of control or mastery here—no stealing fire from heaven. One waits, passively, until grace is received.

The magical attitude, on the other hand, is clearly more active—and often more assertive. The magician or witch is at the center of his or her own particular universe. With their sacred formulae, ritual invocations, and concentrated will-power, magicians and witches believe they can bring certain forces to bear. The magician believes that he or she can *will* to effect.

In one sense the “primitivism” of this approach has been legitimized by existential philosophy and the rise of the contemporary human potential or “personal growth” movement.² It has become common for recent interpreters of the Western

magical tradition to regard the gods of High Magic as emanations of the creative imagination, as forces of the transcendent psyche. The noted authority on Western magic Israel Regardie—who was a practitioner of Reichian therapy as well as a member of the Stella Matutina, an offshoot of the Golden Dawn—employed the Jungian model of the archetypes of the collective unconscious to explain to his contemporary audience what he meant by invoking a god. For him it was nothing other than a ritual means of channeling into conscious awareness a specific archetypal energy-form from the universal or “collective” psyche.³

It is only fair to point out, however, that many modern magicians, witches, and occultists view their pantheon of gods and goddesses as existing in their own right—as beings beyond the human psyche, as entities belonging intrinsically to another plane of existence. For these devotees, magic becomes a vital means of communication. The gods and goddesses provide knowledge of these esoteric domains to the inquiring magician and thereby allow the devotee to grow in awareness. Several notable contemporary magicians, including Michael Aquino of the Temple of Set, the controversial Satanist Anton LaVey, and the Australian witch Rosaleen Norton, have held this view.

Nevertheless, most modern magicians—irrespective of the tradition they follow—do tend to share one feature in common, and that is the notion of a hierarchy of supernatural beings or “powers” with whom they can interrelate. These powers in turn provide sacred knowledge and wisdom—wisdom that allows the magical devotee special insights into the dynamics of the universe and the sacred potentials of humanity. In a sense, magic would make gods and goddesses of us all. Considered in this light, for many practitioners magic is essentially about growth and renewal on an archetypal level of being, and also about transforming one’s perception of the world from one that is profane and devalued to one that is sacred. This type of magic is about vision and deep, insightful, spiritual knowledge. This is High Magic, or *gnosis*.

The modern magical revival has been unfolding for over a century. As a spiritual movement committed to the development of esoteric knowledge or *gnosis* in the West, the occult resurgence first began to gather momentum in the final decade of the nineteenth century and has since seeded itself around the world in fascinating ways, spawning divergent esoteric groups and organizations. In terms of actual historical beginnings, however, the story of the twentieth-century magical revival commences with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, arguably the most influential esoteric organization in modern history.⁴ All modern occult perspectives—including Wicca, Goddess spirituality, and the Thelemic magick of Aleister Crowley—owe a debt to the Golden Dawn for gathering together the threads of the Western esoteric tradition and initiating a transformative process that continues in the twenty-first century.

Established in England in 1888, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn drew on a range of ancient and medieval cosmologies and incorporated them into a body of ceremonial practices centered on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, an important motif within the Jewish mystical tradition.⁵ In addition to revitalizing the use of the Kabbalah, which occupied a central position in the cosmology of the Golden Dawn, its members believed they were building on the Hermetic tradition, which had its roots in Neoplatonism and underwent a revival during the Renaissance. Alchemy, the Tarot, Rosicrucianism, and the ritual grades of nineteenth-century Freemasonry were also important elements. I will discuss the historical influence of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry on the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn later in this book, but it is appropriate in the first instance to consider the key esoteric source-traditions that provide the foundations on which the structures of twentieth-century occultism have been built. These key traditions are the medieval Kabbalah, the Hermetica, Alchemy, and the Tarot—and this is where the story of the modern magical revival really begins.

In later chapters we will discuss some of the occasionally brilliant, and often eccentric, byways of the twentieth-century occult revival—including the highly distinctive cosmologies of esoteric practitioners like Austin Osman Spare, Rosaleen Norton, Michael Aquino, and Michael Bertiaux. But if we are to consider the nature of contemporary magical consciousness we must first explore the Kabbalistic Tree of Life—for this is the symbol that establishes the matrix of the modern magical imagination.

1

Medieval Precursors

According to Gershom Scholem, one of the preeminent authorities on Jewish mysticism, the medieval Kabbalah belongs to an emanationist cosmological tradition that has its origins in Gnosticism.¹ Indeed, Scholem has referred to the Kabbalah as a form of Jewish Gnosticism.² In its most fundamental sense, the Kabbalah can be defined as a mystical commentary on the Pentateuch: the written Torah, or “five books of Moses.”³ The Hebrew word *Kabbalah*—which translates as “that which has been received”—refers to an oral or secret tradition, and as Scholem has observed, the *Zohar*, the central text of the medieval Kabbalah, compiled in written form by the Spaniard Moses de Leon circa 1280 CE, has spiritual links with earlier schools of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism.⁴ In all three, there are references to the concept of sacred emanations from the Godhead, to the idea of the preexistence of the soul and its descent into matter, and to the sacred names of God.

Although the Kabbalah did not exist in written form until the Middle Ages, it is thought that the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or *Book of Creation*, was composed in Palestine between the third and sixth centuries CE. The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes how God created the world by means of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the ten *sefirot*—a term that appears for the first time in Hebrew literature.⁵ The ten *sefirot* of the Tree of Life (also spelled *sephiroth*) are a central symbolic aspect of the Kabbalah.

Another early Kabbalistic text, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, emerged in Provence—where there was a Jewish community—between 1150 and 1200.

Interest in the Kabbalah subsequently spread across the Pyrenees into Catalonia and then to Castile. In about 1280, the Spanish Jewish mystic Moses de Leon (1238–1305) began circulating booklets among his fellow Kabbalists. These texts were written in Aramaic, and de Leon claimed that he had transcribed them from an ancient book of wisdom composed in the circle of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, a famous disciple of Rabbi Akiva, who lived and taught in Israel in the second century. These booklets gradually formed the text known as *Ha-Zohar ha-Qadosh*, usually referred to as the *Zohar* (The Book of Splendor). Although Moses de Leon may have drawn on early material received through the secret oral tradition, it is now thought that he himself was probably the author of the *Zohar*.

According to the *Zohar*, God first taught the doctrines of the Kabbalah to a select group of angels. After the creation of the Garden of Eden, these angels shared the secret teachings with the first man, Adam. They were then passed to Noah, and subsequently to Abraham, who took them to Egypt. Moses was initiated into the Kabbalah in Egypt, the land of his birth, and King David and King Solomon were also initiated. No one, however, dared write them down until Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai.⁶

In the Kabbalah, all aspects of manifested form, including the sacred archetypes or manifestations of the Godhead, are said to have their origin in *Ain Soph Aur*—also referred to as *En-Sof* or *Ein-Sof*—“the limitless light,” a realm of being entirely beyond form and conception which “has neither qualities nor attributes.”⁷ In Kabbalistic cosmology, the subsequent emanations that emerge from this profound Mystery, and that constitute the spheres upon the Tree of Life (*Otz Chiiim*), reveal different aspects of the sacred universe but are nevertheless considered as part of a divine totality. *Ain Soph Aur*, writes Scholem, “manifests . . . to the Kabbalist under ten different aspects, which in turn comprise an endless variety of shades and gradations.”⁸ These emanations nevertheless reflect the essential unity of the Godhead, and because the human form is said to have been created “in the image of God,” the spheres on the Tree of Life are also spheres within the body of Adam Kadmon, the archetypal human being.⁹ In the Kabbalah, the quest for mystical self-knowledge is therefore regarded essentially as a process of regaining undifferentiated Oneness with the Divine.

According to the Kabbalah, the mystical universe is sustained by the utterance of the Holy Names of God: the ten emanations or *sephiroth* on the Tree of Life are none other than “the creative names which God called into the world, the names which He gave to Himself.”¹⁰ According to the *Zohar*:

In the Beginning, when the will of the King began to take effect, he engraved signs into the divine aura. A dark flame sprang forth from the innermost recess of the mystery of the Infinite, *En-Sof* [*Ain Soph Aur*]

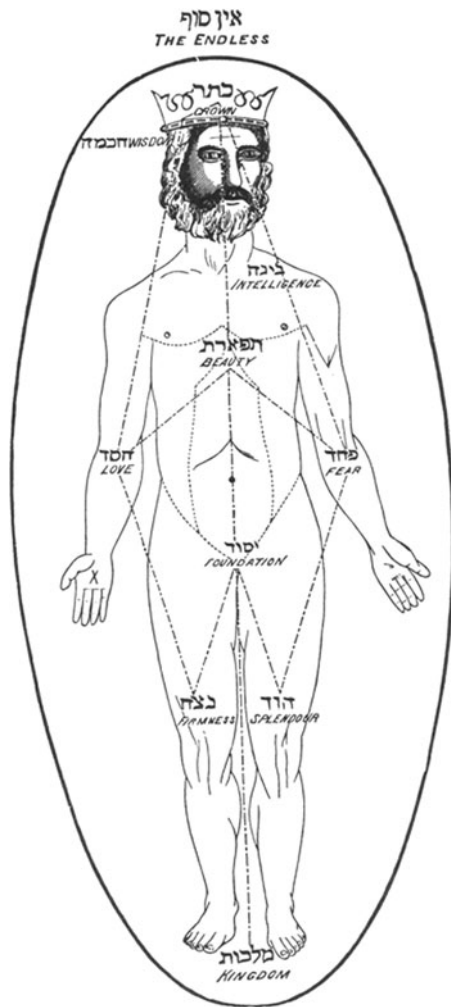


FIGURE 1.1. Adam Kadmon, the archetypal human being. His body contains the ten *sephiroth*, or emanations from the Godhead.

like a fog which forms out of the formless, enclosed in the ring of this aura, neither white nor black, neither red nor green, and of no color whatever. But when this flame began to assume size and extension it produced radiant colors. For in the innermost center of the flame a well sprang forth from which flames poured upon everything below, hidden in the mysterious secrets of *En-Sof*. The well broke through, and yet did not entirely break through, the ethereal aura which surrounded it. It was

entirely unrecognizable until the impact of its breakthrough a hidden supernal point shone forth. Beyond this point nothing may be known or understood, and therefore it is called *Reshith*, that is “Beginning,” the first word of Creation.¹¹

Scholem writes that the “Primordial Point” was thought of by the majority of Kabbalists not as Kether, the Crown (normally considered the first emanation upon the Tree of Life) but as the Great Father, Chokmah or Wisdom, which is the second *sephirah*. In Kabbalistic cosmology, the energy of the Great Father unites with that of Binah, the Great Mother (Understanding), and from her womb all archetypal forms come forth.¹² As Christian Ginsburg notes in his seminal book *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature*, “It is not the *En-Sof* who created the world, but this Trinity . . . the world was born from the union of the crowned King and Queen . . . who, emanated from the *En-Sof*, produced the Universe in their own image.”¹³ In a symbolic sense, the seven subsequent emanations beneath the trinity of Kether, Chokmah, and Binah constitute the seven days of Creation.¹⁴ The Tree of Life, with its ten *sephiroth* or emanations of divine consciousness, therefore encompasses a symbolic process by which the Infinite becomes tangible.¹⁵ The ten spheres on the Tree of Life are as follows:

Kether	The Crown
Chokmah	Wisdom (The Father)
Binah	Understanding (The Mother)
Chesed	Mercy
Geburah	Severity, or Strength
Tiphareth	Beauty, or Harmony (The Son)
Netzach	Victory
Hod	Splendor
Yesod	The Foundation
Malkuth	Kingdom, or Earth (The Daughter)

These emanations align themselves into three pillars, the outer two being the Pillar of Mercy headed by Chokmah (symbolizing light and purity) and the Pillar of Severity headed by Binah (symbolizing darkness and impurity). Beneath them lies the Garden of Eden, with its four rivers Chesed, Geburah, Netzach, and Hod converging in Tiphareth, which is located at a central point on the Middle Pillar. The occult historian A. E. Waite—a leading member of the Golden Dawn—has suggested that the Middle Pillar can be regarded as the Perfect Pillar, for it reaches to the Crown, Kether.¹⁶ The other two pillars provide a duality of opposites and represent the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The sixth emanation on the Tree

of Life, Tiphareth, is associated symbolically with the divine Son and is regarded in the Western esoteric tradition as the sphere of spiritual rebirth. The final emanation on the Tree of Life, Malkuth, The World, is represented symbolically by the Daughter, Shekinah, who in turn is a reflection of the Great Mother, Binah.¹⁷

In addition to recognising ten *sephiroth* upon the Tree of Life, the medieval Kabbalists also divided the Tree into “four worlds” of creative manifestation. God was said to be present in each of these four worlds, and each in turn was represented symbolically by a letter in the Tetragrammaton, the sacred name JHVH (consisting of the four Hebrew letters *Yod, He, Vau, He*) usually translated as Jehovah, or Yahweh, meaning Lord.¹⁸ The four worlds are as follows:

Atziluth, the Archetypal World

This level of existence is closest to the unmanifested realm of *Ain Soph Aur* and contains only one *sephirah*, Kether, which is described as “the hidden of the hidden. It is the emergence of God’s Will, His creative urge. It is the infinite, the initiation of all that can and will be. It is infinity.”¹⁹

Briah, the World of Creation

This world contains two *sephiroth*, Chokmah and Binah, representing the Great Father and the Great Mother and reflecting the highest expression of the sacred male and female principles. Their union gives rise to the World of Formation.²⁰

Yetzirah, the World of Formation

This world contains the *sephiroth* Chesed, Geburah, Tiphareth, Netzach, Hod, and Yesod. As indicated by its name, Yesod literally provides the “foundation” for all that has preceded it in the creative process of sacred emanation from the highest realms of the Tree of Life.

Assiah, the Physical World

This world represents the final materialization of God’s Will in the sphere of Malkuth on the Tree of Life and is represented by Shekinah, the Daughter, who is spoken of variously as “the Bride of the Divine Son in Tiphareth,” “the Bride of Kether,” and the “Daughter of Binah.” Shekinah personifies the Divine Feminine on Earth.²¹

Each *sephirah* is also said to contain an entire Tree of Life. The “Malkuth” of the first *sephirah* emanates the “Kether” of the following *sephirah*, and so on, through

the ten emanations on the Tree. Each of these ten spheres is therefore considered a mirror of the Divine. According to the Jewish mystical tradition, nothing exists beyond God, and as John Ferguson has observed in relation to the spiritual quest in the Kabbalah: “We must see God as the First Cause, and the universe as an emanation from his Will or Wisdom. The finite has no existence except in the light of the Infinite, which contracted so that the finite might be. . . . Man is the highest point of the created world, and his soul contains animal and moral elements, but also an element of pure spirit, which in the righteous ascends to God.”²²

The Hermetic Tradition

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Hermetica, or Hermetic tradition, gained intellectual and philosophical influence in Europe. Hermetic philosophy has its roots in Hellenism.²³ During the Renaissance, Florence became a cultural center where esoteric and metaphysical perspectives were strongly supported, and it was in the royal courts under the rule of Cosimo and Lorenzo de Medici that the Hermetic tradition received significant endorsement. In 1460, a monk named Leonardo da Pistoia brought with him to Florence a collection of Greek manuscripts that had been discovered in Macedonia and that would later become known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or *Hermetica*. These texts were presented to Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464), the Italian merchant prince who ruled Florence and who was also a noted collector of Greek manuscripts. In 1462, Cosimo passed the Hermetic texts to his young court scholar, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), requesting that he translate them into Latin. This work was completed in 1463, and Cosimo was able to read the translation before his death the following year.²⁴

The Hermetic material was essentially a body of Greek mystical and philosophical writings that drew on Platonism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonism, and then subsequently emerged within a Gnostic-Egyptian context. The Hermetic texts date from the latter half of the second century CE through to the end of the third century.²⁵ In these writings the central figure, Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice Greatest Hermes) is presented as a wise spiritual teacher, a Gnostic master who is a composite of Hermes and Thoth.²⁶ In the Hermetic model of the universe, all things were believed to have come from God, and the world was therefore part of a sacred Unity. The universe itself was divided into three worlds, or emanations. The lowest sphere was the world of Nature, which in turn received divine influences from the more sanctified realms above. At the next level were the stars, spirits, and “guardians.” Higher still was the supercelestial world of *nous*, the world of angelic spirits who were thought to have a superior knowledge of reality because they were

closer to the Godhead, the sacred source of Creation. According to the Hermetic perspective, the transcendent act of achieving a state of Oneness with God entailed liberating oneself from the constrictions of temporal life and entering the realm of pure and divine Thought.²⁷

Ficino's work on the *Corpus Hermeticum* was developed by Giovanni Pico, Count of Mirandola (1463–1494). Pico combined Ficino's Hermetic Neoplatonism with an extensive knowledge of astrology, the Kabbalah, Christianity, and "high magic" (*mageia*).²⁸ Like Ficino, Pico conceived of a universe that emanated from the Godhead. However, Pico's conception was not simply that of the devotional mystic. According to Pico, not only could man come to know God but he could also become a type of god himself—an attitude to divinity also found among some contemporary magical practitioners:

He who knows himself in himself knows all things, as Zoroaster first wrote. When we are finally lighted in this knowledge, we shall in bliss be addressing the true Apollo on intimate terms. . . . And, restored to health, Gabriel "the strength of God," shall abide in us, leading us through the miracles of Nature and showing us on every side the merit and the might of God.²⁹

According to Pico, *mageia* or high magic could provide humanity with access to the inner workings of Nature and the cosmos. *Mageia* could be employed "in calling forth into the light, as if from their hiding places, the powers scattered and sown in the world by the loving-kindness of God."³⁰ The role of the sacred magician, the practitioner of *mageia*, was to raise earth (matter) to the level of heaven (spirit). In the *Asclepius*, Hermes Trismegistus similarly urges his followers to become "god-like":

He takes in the nature of a god as if he were himself a god. . . . He is united to the gods because he has the divinity pertaining to gods. . . . He takes the earth as his own, he blends himself with the elements by the speed of thought, by the sharpness of spirit he descends to the depths of the sea. Everything is accessible to him; heaven is not too high for him, for he measures it as if he were in his grasp by his ingenuity. What sight the spirit shows to him, no mist of the air can obscure; the earth is never so dense as to impede his work; the immensity of the sea's depths do not trouble his plunging view. He is at the same time everything as he is everywhere.³¹

It was primarily the high magic or *mageia* of the Hermetic tradition that attracted the founding members of the Golden Dawn because, at its most profound level, high magic (or "theurgy") proposed an archetypal process of mythic renewal.

The magical quest, as delineated within the Hermetic and Gnostic traditions, was to be “reborn” from the limited and restricted world of material form into the realm of Spirit.³²

The Spiritual Dimension in Alchemy

Western alchemy dates from the beginning of the second century CE and flourished in Hellenistic Egypt, where there was a high level of proficiency in metal-working skills, especially in relation to silver and copper alloys that resembled gold. Two papyri found in a gravesite in Thebes, the so-called Leiden and Stockholm papyri that date from around 300 CE, include recipes for changing the color of a metal so that it would resemble gold or silver, a fascinating precursor, perhaps, of the metaphysical concept of the transmutation of base metals into gold. The word “alchemy” itself is thought to derive from an Egyptian word, *chem* or *qem*, meaning “black,” a reference to the black alluvial soils bordering the Nile. The fourth-century alchemical writer Zosimos of Panopolis (Akhmim) in Egypt maintained that a person named Chemes had given rise to the quest for gold and had authored a book of supernaturally inspired instruction called *Chema*, but proof of Chemes’s historical existence has not been established. It is thought, however, that the Greek word *chyma*, meaning to fuse or cast metals, established itself in Arabic as *al kimia*, from which the more familiar term “alchemy” is in turn derived.

As a pagan practice, the study of alchemy thrived in Alexandria in buildings adjacent to the famous Temple of Serapis, but this temple (the Serapeum), together with numerous statues and works of art, was destroyed in 391 on the orders of the Christian archbishop of Alexandria, Theophilus. The persecuted alchemical scholars then withdrew to Athens, where the Thracian Neoplatonist Proclus was teaching, and in this way a more comprehensive knowledge of Egyptian alchemy was introduced to Greece. Although pagan traditions were finally suppressed by Emperor Justinian in 529, interest in alchemy was rekindled in the seventh century when Stephanos of Alexandria dedicated his *Nine Lessons in Chemia* to the Byzantine emperor Heraclitus, and in the eleventh century when Psellus revived Platonism. According to Kurt Seligmann, the writings of Stephanos inspired a number of medieval alchemical poets, and these writers also extolled the virtues of the Hermetic philosophy.³³

Like their Neoplatonic and Hermetic counterparts, the medieval alchemists believed in the unity of the cosmos and maintained that there was a clear correspondence between the physical and spiritual realms, with comparable laws operating in each domain. As the sixteenth-century Moravian alchemist Michael Sendivogius writes in *The New Chemical Light*:

The Sages have been taught of God that this natural world is only an image and material copy of a heavenly and spiritual pattern; that the very existence of this world is based upon the reality of its celestial archetype; and that God has created it in imitation of the spiritual and invisible universe, in order that men might be the better enabled to comprehend His heavenly teaching and the wonders of His absolute and ineffable power and wisdom. Thus the Sage sees heaven reflected in Nature as in a mirror; and he pursues this Art, not for the sake of gold or silver, but for the love of the knowledge which it reveals; he jealously conceals it from the sinner and the scornful, lest the mysteries of heaven should be laid bare to the vulgar gaze.³⁴

The alchemists adopted the Hermetic concept that the universe and humanity reflect each other, which in essence is the core meaning behind the idea of the macrocosm and microcosm and the dictum “as above, so below.” It was assumed by the alchemists that whatever existed in the universe must also, to some degree, be latent or present in every human being. A Syriac Hermetic text affirms this point emphatically:

What is the adage of the philosophers? Know thyself! This refers to the intellectual and cognitive mirror. And what is this mirror if not the Divine and original Intellect? When a man looks at himself and sees himself in this, he turns away from everything that bears the name of gods or demons, and, by uniting himself with the Holy Spirit, becomes a perfect man. He sees God within himself.³⁵

In medieval alchemical thought, each individual person consisted of spirit, soul, and body, and to this extent contained the very essence of the universe as a whole. Alchemy affirmed, as the Hermetic texts had similarly conveyed, that the Universal Mind is indivisible and unites all things in the material universe. The various metals, always a specific alchemical concern, were similarly one in essence, and had sprung from the same seed in the womb of Nature. Indeed, as historian E. J. Holmyard observes in his pioneering study of alchemy, it was assumed by the medieval European alchemists that because the world was permeated by a universal spirit, this meant that “every object in the universe possessed some sort of life. Metals grew, as did minerals, and were even attributed sex. A fertilized seed of gold could develop into a nugget, the smoky exhalation was masculine and the vaporous one feminine, and mercury was a womb in which embryonic metals could be gestated.”³⁶

However, the alchemists did not regard all of the metals as equally mature or “perfect.” Gold symbolized the highest development in Nature, and as an element

came to personify human renewal, or regeneration. A “golden” human being was one who was resplendent with spiritual beauty and who had triumphed over temptations and the lurking power of evil. By way of contrast, the most base of all the metals, lead, represented the sinful and unrepentant individual who continued to wallow in sin and was readily overcome by the forces of darkness. The Philosopher’s Stone, said to be capable of bringing about a state of alchemical transmutation, was associated by some Christian alchemists with the figure of Jesus himself. Here alchemical transmutation was considered as a type of spiritual redemption, and the imagery of base and precious metals provided a metaphor for personal transformation. As H. Stanley Redgrove has noted, “Alchemy was an attempted application of the principles of mysticism to the things of the physical world.”³⁷

According to the medieval alchemists, all aspects of matter were a reflection of God, and matter itself consisted of four elements—earth, fire, air, and water—which in turn proceeded from the *quinta essentia*, or “quintessence.” The alchemists also associated certain metals with the astrological “planets”: Sun—gold; Moon—silver; Mercury—quicksilver; Venus—copper; Mars—iron; Jupiter—tin; Saturn—lead.

The alchemists believed, however, that the process of transmutation from a base metal into silver or gold was not possible without the metal first being reduced to its *materia prima*, or fundamental substance. This, in effect, involved an attempt to reduce the base metal to a state of “soul” or “essence.” According to the alchemists, the soul, in its original state of pure receptivity, is fundamentally one with the *materia prima* of the whole world. In one way, this is but a restatement of the theoretical premise of all alchemy, namely, that macrocosm and microcosm correspond to one another. At the same time, it is also an expression of the goal of the alchemical work.³⁸

The idea of the *materia prima* itself referred to the potential of “soul” to take a material form. At this level, one could consider a metal to be latent, or “unrealized.” A metal in this condition was considered “uncongealed”—free of specific qualities. By contrast, specific metals were normally, and by definition, rigid, restricted, or “coagulated.” Alchemical transformation therefore involved a shift from the initial coagulation through such processes as burning, dissolving, and purification, in order to produce a new outcome: a quite different reformulation from the original substance. However, although many alchemists believed that amorphous *materia* could be burnt, dissolved, and purified and then subsequently “coagulated” into the form of a perfect metal like gold (a literal symbol of wholeness), those alchemists who were more mystically inclined also believed that this process could be applied to the mystical quest for Oneness with God. As Titus Burckhardt has written:

The form of the soul thus “born again” is nevertheless distinguishable from the all-embracing Spirit, as it still belongs to conditioned existence. But at the same time it is transparent to the undifferentiated Light of the Spirit and its vital union with the primordial *materia* of all souls, for the “material” or “substantial” ground of the soul, just like its essential or active ground, has a unitary nature. . . . The highest meaning of alchemy is the knowledge that all is contained in all.³⁹

The Early Renaissance Tarot

Court records dating from 1392 CE indicate that King Charles VI of France made a payment to a painter named Jacquemin Gringonneur for three packs of cards that were described as “gilded and coloured, and ornamented with various devices, supplied to the King for his amusement.”⁴⁰ It has not been established whether these were early Tarot cards or hand-painted playing cards: the cards themselves have not been located. The Bibliothèque Nationale collection, however, includes seventeen cards, sixteen of which are identifiable as Tarot cards. These cards were originally thought to have been those created for Charles VI by Gringonneur, but they have now been identified as Venetian in origin, and date from about 1470.⁴¹

The earliest specific references to Tarot cards date back to 1442 and the d’Este court of Ferrara, although Tarot cards may have been invented a few years earlier, originating in northern Italy between 1410 and 1425.⁴² It seems likely that the earliest Tarot cards were associated with the aristocratic courts of either Ferrara or Milan; most of the Tarot decks that survive from fifteenth-century Italy reflect the style and fashion of the nobility from that era.⁴³ Interest in the Tarot subsequently spread from Italy to France and Switzerland. The modern Tarot deck is descended from the Piedmontese Tarot, which was widely known in northern Italy and France by the beginning of the sixteenth century. This pack consisted of seventy-eight cards divided into twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana and fifty-six cards of the Minor Arcana.⁴⁴ The Major Arcana are the so-called court or mythological cards, while the Minor Arcana consists of four basic suits—swords, wands, cups, and pentacles—which parallel the four suits in the modern (early twentieth-century) Rider-Waite Tarot deck.⁴⁵

The widespread belief that the Tarot cards conceal a hidden symbolic language based on esoteric themes has led to a plethora of fanciful explanations relating to the Tarot’s actual origins and purpose. Even today, some enthusiasts continue to claim that the Tarot cards originated in ancient Egypt and are associated with an esoteric wisdom tradition dating back thousands of years.⁴⁶ Such a view was first proposed by French theologian Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725–1784),

author of *Le monde primitif* (nine volumes), published in Paris between 1775 and 1784. His essay on the Tarot is included in volume 8 of this work, published in 1781.⁴⁷

Court de Gébelin felt assured that his “discovery” of the Egyptian origin of the Tarot would be well received, and he made brief mention of the Tarot in volume 4 of *Le monde primitif*, published in 1776: “We were convinced that the public would take pleasure in a discovery and a gift of such a kind, an Egyptian Book escaped from barbarism, from the ravages of time.”⁴⁸ According to Court de Gébelin, the Tarot cards had been invented by ancient Egyptian priests; their seventy-eight-page book, disguised as a pack of playing cards, escaped the fire that destroyed their ancient libraries:

If one heard it announced that there still exists in our days a work of the ancient Egyptians, one of their books that had escaped the flames that devoured their magnificent libraries, that contained in a pure form their doctrines concerning interesting subjects, everyone would without doubt be eager to come to know so precious and so remarkable a book. . . . The fact is, however, quite true. This Egyptian Book, the only remnant of their magnificent libraries, exists in our day. . . . This Book is, in a word, the game of TAROTS.⁴⁹

Citing evidence of the Tarot’s alleged Egyptian origin, Court de Gébelin identified Trump VII (The Chariot) with “Osiris triumphant”; Trump XV (The Devil) as Typhon, a Greek mythical being associated with the Egyptian figure of Set, enemy of Osiris; and Trump XVII (The Star) with Sirius the Dog-Star.⁵⁰ He also took the word “tarot” itself to be Egyptian, giving its derivation as *tar*, meaning road or way, and *ro*, meaning a king, or royal. The word “tarot” could therefore be translated as the “royal road” or “the royal road of life.” According to Court de Gébelin, the symbolic wisdom of the Tarot had subsequently been introduced to Europe by wandering gypsies, themselves of Egyptian origin.⁵¹

One of Court de Gébelin’s followers, a wigmaker named Jean-Baptiste Alliette (1738–1791), reversed his name to Etteilla, and in 1783 published a book titled *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées tarots* (A Way to Entertain One-self with the Pack of Cards called Tarots).⁵² In this book he claimed that the Tarot, otherwise known as *The Book of Thoth* (after the ancient Egyptian god of wisdom), had been created by seventeen Magi, 171 years after the Deluge. He further claimed that one of these Magi, Athotis, was descended from Mercury and Noah.⁵³ Alliette associated the Tarot with the Hermetic tradition, maintaining that it had been conceived by Hermes Trismegistus, and that the text of *The Book of Thoth* had been written on leaves of gold in a temple three leagues from Memphis.⁵⁴ Alliette also emphasized the role of the Tarot in fortunetelling, creating a deck of cards and an

accompanying book titled *Manière de tirer: Le Grand Etteilla ou tarots égyptiens*, specifically for the purpose of divination.⁵⁵

While Court de Gébelin and Alliette promoted the concept of an Egyptian origin for the Tarot, the French ceremonial magician Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse-Louis Constant, 1810–1875) maintained that the origins of the Tarot could be traced to an even earlier cultural epoch. Lévi possessed a copy of the *Grand Etteilla* Tarot deck,



FIGURE 1.2. French ceremonial magician Alphonse-Louis Constant, better known as Eliphas Lévi



FIGURE 1.3. Dr. Gerard Encausse, also known as Papus, amid his occult regalia

but believed that the Tarot cards represented a secret esoteric alphabet that had links with the ancient Jewish mystical tradition.⁵⁶ According to Lévi, the Tarot originated with Enoch, the oldest son of Cain, and provided the universal key to the Kabbalah.⁵⁷ In one of his major works, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (1856), Lévi proclaimed that the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana (the mythological cards of the Tarot) could be directly attributed to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and therefore linked to the Tree of Life.⁵⁸ He also believed that he had found the key to the sacred origins of the Tarot:

When the Sovereign Priesthood ceased in Israel, when all the oracles of the world became silent in presence of the Word which became Man, and speaking by the mouth of the most popular and gentle of sages, when the Ark was lost, the sanctuary profaned, and the Temple destroyed, the mysteries of the Ephod and Theraphim, no longer recorded on gold and precious stones, were written or rather figured by certain wise kabbalists first on ivory, parchment, on gilt and silvered leather, and afterwards on simple cards, which were always objects of suspicion to the Official Church as containing a dangerous key to its mysteries. From these have originated those tarots whose antiquity was revealed to the learned Court de Gébelin through the sciences of hieroglyphics and of numbers, and which afterwards severely exercised the doubtful perspicacity and tenacious investigations of Etteilla.⁵⁹

Lévi's concept of merging the Kabbalistic Tree of Life with the Major Arcana of the Tarot was developed by the French physician Dr. Gerard Encausse (1865–1916), who wrote under the name of Papus.

In 1889, Papus published an influential work titled *The Tarot of the Bohemians* which was illustrated with images from the Tarot of Marseilles.⁶⁰ Papus provided a text-commentary on the symbolism of each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in direct association with the Tarot cards of the Major Arcana, and his Tarot card images incorporated letters of the Hebrew alphabet next to their titles, thereby reinforcing the idea that the Tarot and the Jewish mystical tradition were symbolically interconnected.⁶¹ The concept of mapping the Major Arcana of the Tarot as a network of symbolic pathways upon the Tree of Life was subsequently adopted by the ceremonial magicians of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Fraternity of the Inner Light, whose philosophy and occult practices are described in later chapters.⁶² Two Golden Dawn members, Arthur Edward Waite (*Frater Sacramentum Regis*) and Pamela Colman Smith (*Soror Quod Tibi id Aliis*), created the well-known Rider-Waite Tarot deck (first published by Rider & Co., London, in 1910), which has remained one of the most popular Tarot decks up to the present day.

The key precursors of the modern magical revival, then, are the medieval Kabbalah, the Hermetic tradition, alchemy, and the Tarot. All of these elements were in turn embraced by a group of nineteenth-century Freemasons and Rosicrucians who would lay the basis for the rebirth of Western magic. Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism build on mystical themes of spiritual transformation and renewal that have become an intrinsic component of modern magical perspectives; it is to them that we now turn.

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Freemasons and the Rose Cross

Freemasonry has been defined as “a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols” and as “a science which is engaged in the search after divine truth.”¹ In his influential study of Freemasonry, *The Builders: A Story and Study of Masonry* (1914), Joseph Fort Newton acknowledges the widespread perception of Freemasonry as a secret society “based on the secret rites used in its initiations and the signs and grips by which its members recognize each other” but notes emphatically that “*its one great secret is that it has no secret*. Its principles are published abroad in its writings; its purposes and laws are known . . . if it still adheres to secret rites it is not in order to hide the truth, but the better to teach it more impressively, to train men in its pure service, and to promote union and amity upon earth.”² According to the precepts established by the Grand Lodge of England, Freemasons are expected to believe in a Supreme Being, use a holy book appropriate to the religion of the lodge’s members, and maintain a vow of secrecy concerning the order’s ceremonies.³

Modern Freemasonry has eighteenth-century origins. The Masonic Grand Lodge of England was established in London in 1717.⁴ According to Dr. James Anderson, who published an account of the historical inaugural meeting in *The New Book of Constitutions* (London 1738), members of four London Lodges met in the Apple-Tree Tavern in Covent Garden, and these lodge members constituted themselves “A Grand Lodge pro Tempore [for the time being] in *Due Form* and . . . resolv’d to hold the Annual Assembly and Feast, and then to chuse [*sic*]

a Grand Master from among themselves, till they should have the Honour of a Noble Brother at their Head.”⁵ At a subsequent meeting, which took place on St. John Baptist’s Day (24 June), 1717, at the Goose and Gridiron Ale-house in St. Paul’s Church Yard, London, Mr. Anthony Sayer, Gentleman, was duly elected Grand Master of Masons.⁶ All forms of modern English Freemasonry can be traced to these two meetings, which resulted in the constitution of the Grand Lodge of England. Since 1721, when the Duke of Montague was appointed to the position, the Grand Master has been a person of noble or royal birth.

The formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717 represented the beginning of what is known as “speculative” Freemasonry, the present-day fraternal order which does not require that its members should be working stonemasons.⁷ Freemasonry as a tradition, however, derives originally from the practices of the highly skilled stonemasons and cathedral builders who worked on large-scale constructions in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and England during the early Middle Ages.⁸ As early as the fourteenth century, these so-called Operative or Working Masons formed lodges and recognized “degrees” in order to maintain their professional skills and standards. An itinerant builder was required to answer veiled questions and respond to special signs and passwords in order to establish his credentials as a Master Mason. In due course, an elaborate system of masonic rituals developed, sheathed in secrecy and maintained by oaths of fidelity and fraternity.

By 1723, there were approximately thirty lodges in England; the Grand Lodge of England developed rapidly into the central governing body overseeing these lodges, thereby bringing a sense of coherence and stability to British Masonry. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were also Masonic lodges in most European countries. However, there was no central authority overseeing the rise of European Masonry. Historian Christopher McIntosh notes that it was in France that Masonry first took hold outside of Britain: “The earliest French lodges appear to have been formed in the 1720s; in 1756, a Grand Lodge of France was founded. The progress of the craft of Masonry as a British export was facilitated by the presence on the Continent of Scottish and Irish Jacobite exiles.”⁹

One of these Jacobite exiles was the Scotsman Andrew Michael Ramsay (1696–1743), an active Freemason who became chancellor of the Grand Lodge of France. Ramsay supported the idea that the Masons had been active in the Crusades and had sought to restore the Temple of the Christians in the Holy Land. According to Ramsay, they therefore developed a series of signs and symbolic words “to recognise themselves amongst the heathen and Saracens.”¹⁰ Later, Ramsay maintained, the Masons formed a union with the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. This alleged connection with the Knights of St. John led some to speculate that the Masons were also allied to the heretical Order of Knights Templar.¹¹