

Chapter 1

An Overview of the Golden Dawn System of Magic

We have set before us a certain work that may be of incalculable importance in the change of thought that is coming upon the world.

—W. B. Yeats to the adepts of the Golden Dawn, April 1901

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a secret organization formulated in London in 1887 for the purpose of occult study and practice. It is arguably the most important and influential Western organization of its kind. Its materials serve as the basis for many twentieth-century magico-religious groups and for many so-called New Age beliefs. Occultism, in Golden Dawn parlance, is the study of beliefs and practices that are thought to be powerful and effective for understanding life, effecting change, and finding inspiration. In the broadest sense, the word “occult” means secret or hidden. The beliefs are hidden or secret because of a perceived danger to the practitioner, from both within and without. The danger from within comes in the form of psychic disintegration and from without in the form of persecution by authority for engaging in heterodox beliefs and practices.

The beliefs and practices within the Order of the Golden Dawn were a syncretistic compilation from the esoterica of many cultures and times. Included was material from Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Greek sources. Golden Dawn magic was not unchristian, but it was Jewish and pagan in addition to being Christian. It was, perhaps, the ultimate Unitarian kind of praxis. The necessity for pulling knowledge and symbol from so many sources was rooted in the idea that there is not only one way to divinity.

For a Golden Dawn initiate, the work at hand was to make contact with the divine spark that was thought to reside in all humans. That divine spark is given the name, in Golden Dawn teachings, of the Holy Guardian Angel or the divine higher self. The Golden Dawn initiate wanted to raise his or her consciousness to attain what is termed *conversation* with the Holy Guardian Angel. The practice of ritual magic in the Order of the Golden Dawn was an attempt to change consciousness and to control the imagination by active participation in psychic events.

Within the Golden Dawn worldview, reality was seen as multi-layered. The mundane world was thought to be interpenetrated by other realities that could be entered through ritual and meditative visualization. The Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical system that pictures reality as an emanation from Godhead, was the framework that was used to make a matrix of symbolic correspondences that the magician could use to control and guide his imagination. There are ten Kabbalistic worlds called Sephiroth that are envisioned as the realities that the magician can enter, beginning with the one most accessible to the mundane world.

The work of the initiate is to learn the scheme of number, letter, color, and symbol correspondences that are calibrated to each of the Kabbalistic worlds. In that way, the initiate becomes proficient enough to navigate through the different realities. Within the Order of the Golden Dawn, there were ten grades, each one corresponding to a sephira on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the symbolic glyph that pictures the emanation of divinity from the first cause to the mundane world. The mundane, earthly world was numbered ten on the glyph and the ultimate world, that closest to Godhead, was numbered one as that is the first cause from which the emanation springs. The grades in the order were, therefore, as follows:

- 0=0 Neophyte grade
- 1=10 Zelator grade
- 2=9 Theoricus grade
- 3=8 Practicus grade
- 4=7 Philosophus grade

Each grade had lessons and knowledge that had to be demonstrated, such as learning the Hebrew alphabet, the hierarchy of angels, the correspondences of colors, and the rituals of the pentagram and the hexagram.¹ Before publication of the material in 1938, the teachings

for each grade were held back from those who had not yet attained it. Yeats wrote to the adepts of the Order of the Golden Dawn regarding the import of passing through the grades in the order, which he calls “degrees”:

They [the grades] are more than a test of efficiency, they are more even than an Ordeal, which selects those who are most devoted to the Order. The passing by their means from one Degree to another is an evocation of the Supreme Life, a treading of a symbolic path, a passage through a symbolic gate, a climbing towards the light which it is the essence of our system to believe, flows continually from the lowest of the invisible Degrees to the highest of the Degrees that are known to us. It matters nothing whether the Degrees above us are in the body or out of the body, for none the less must we tread this path and open this gate, and seek this light, and none the less must we believe the light flows downward continually.²

As Yeats has articulated, members of the Golden Dawn, at least during the early years of the order from 1887 to 1903, believed that the knowledge and experience gained by attaining higher grades actually meant that the candidate was evolving spiritually and psychically.

In 1892, the men in charge of the Order of the Golden Dawn—they called themselves the “chiefs” of the order, of which there were three—claimed that they were given material to found an inner order of the existing Golden Dawn. It was called the *Roseae Rubae et Aureae Crucis*, the Red Rose and the Cross of Gold. The Golden Dawn considered itself from the outset to be a Rosicrucian organization with links to prior organizations in Germany. The inner order would teach practical magic as compared to the theoretical magic taught in the four grades of the outer order. The grades of the inner order were as follows:

- 5=6 the Adeptus Minor grade
- 6=5 the Adeptus Major grade
- 7=4 the Adeptus Exemptus grade
- Beyond these grades were three more grades:
- 8=3 the Magister Templi
- 9=2 the Magus
- 10=1 the Ipsissimus³

In the original Golden Dawn, it was thought that no one living in incarnation, in a human body, was capable of achieving the last three, exalted grades.

For each of the grades there was regalia, ritual implements, secret handshakes, and words of power, but all of those material displays were understood to be symbolic apparatus that were used to elevate consciousness. Before entering the neophyte grade, initiates chose a magical name, a motto, which would be their identity within the order and for all magical work. Mottos were usually Latin, but a few members had names from other languages such as Hebrew or Sanskrit. The name was the key to the initiate's magical identity, power, and protection, becoming the first step in building a magical personality to be entered during trance and ritual working. All of the occult work within the Golden Dawn was trained on elevation and control of consciousness. As Fortune has written:

Occult science, rightly understood, teaches us to regard all things as states of consciousness, and then shows us how to gain control of consciousness subjectively; which control, once acquired, is soon reflected objectively. By means of this conscious control we are able to manipulate the plane of the human mind. It is a power that is neither good nor evil in itself but only as it is used.⁴

The Golden Dawn methods were used to give initiates a methodology for calling forth subconscious energies and for contacting the divine. Work that calls on the subconscious is called *evocation* and deals with energy in the personal, earthly realm. Work that calls on the divine is called *invocation* and deals with perfected, divine energy from realms beyond the human.

There is a famous occult adage, "As above so below." For the occultist, that phrase describes the relation between the subconscious, conscious, and material realms of human experience—sometimes called the *microcosm*—and the superconscious, divine, and cosmic realm—sometimes called the *macrocosm*. The microcosm, man, is thought to be a reflection of the cosmos, the macrocosm, a statement taken literally in Kabbalistic cosmology because the material world is an emanation from the divine first cause. Ultimately, an adept is finely tuned to the intersection of his or her personal consciousness and the matrix of life that is the cosmos. The Golden Dawn system

taught the means to elevate consciousness through rituals constructed according to symbolic correspondences and conscious knowledge of the relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Yeats explains more simply:

The central principle of all the Magic of power is that everything we formulate in the imagination, if we formulate it strongly enough realizes itself in the circumstance of life, acting either through our own souls, or through the spirits of nature.⁵

The imagination is the link between microcosm and macrocosm. Golden dawn adepts believed that the practice of magic was the active, willful, knowledgeable manipulation of reality based on symbolic correspondences and active imagination. Yeats articulated the working of symbol and imagination:

It is the first principle of our illumination that symbols and formula are powers, which act in their own right and with little consideration for our intentions, however excellent. Most of us have seen some ceremony produce an altogether unintended result because of the accidental use of some wrong formula.⁶

Practitioners believed that Golden Dawn magic worked through the embodiment of cosmic energy in talismans and symbols. According to Francis King, a foremost modern scholar of Western occultism, “the Western technique is aimed at the incarnation of spirit in matter.”⁷ In Western occultism, transcendence is found by working through the material world in which humans find themselves rather than by denying the world and the body or attempting to transcend the physicality of life.

The imagination and the will were the key elements of the human psyche with which the Golden Dawn ritual magician worked. Through meditative visualization—entering a trance state—the magician entered the various Sephirothic worlds of the Kabbalah according to the grade level he or she had attained. Within the reality to which the magician transported him or herself, there were very real psychic dangers and opportunities. A Golden Dawn initiate believed that the realities of the different planes of consciousness were “real” and

“true.” Francis King quotes J. W. Brodie-Innes, one of the early members of the Isis-Urania Temple of the Golden Dawn and a life-long practicing ritual magician:

“Whether the gods, the Qliphothic forces” (i.e., the evil demons of the Hebrew Qaballah) [*sic*] “or even the Secret Chiefs” (i.e., the supposed invisible superhumans who are believed to direct the activities of authentic magical fraternities) [*sic*] “really exist is comparatively unimportant; the point is that the universe behaves as though they do.”⁸

That is not to say that Golden Dawn occultism taught that anything was possible or any belief, no matter how spurious, was believable.

An occult conviction since the establishment of the Theosophical Society and the publication of *Isis Unveiled* is, as the subtitle of that work announces, “There is no religion higher than truth.” The Golden Dawn initiate, however, did not necessarily look for truth only through the intellect, believing that the intellect is a finite, limited instrument incapable of fully perceiving or understanding the cosmos. The Golden Dawn did not deny scientific truth. In fact, many medical doctors were members, and one of the original chiefs of the order, William Wynn Westcott, was a medical man and a coroner in London. The Golden Dawn teachings posit the Kabbalah as a symbol system that makes the cosmos intelligible to the limited mind of man. The scientific rationalist who only believes in the reality of that which is provable and repeatable is anathema to the occultist as is the purely intellectual philosopher. In his seminal book on Golden Dawn Kabbalah, Israel Regardie writes:

Formal academic philosophy glorifies the intellect and thus makes research into what are, after all, incidentals—if we consider philosophy as the supreme means of investigating the problems of life and the universe. The Qabalah makes the primary claim that the intellect contains within itself a principle of self-contradiction, and that, therefore, it is an unreliable instrument to use in the great quest for truth.⁹

Regardie’s argument, and that of occultists generally, is that the Kabbalah offers a numeric and symbolic system that is mathematical in nature. Fortune corroborates that view:

The mathematician neither bakes a loaf nor digs a field, but his science is the fundamental basis of knowledge to whose terms all things must be reduced for final accurate expression. What mathematics are to matter and force, occult science is to life and consciousness, there is possible no final expression or synthesis without the use of its particular methods.¹⁰

Again, the idea is that Golden Dawn occultism is a systematic, even quantifiable, method for developing consciousness.

Golden Dawn members believed that through learning the system of the Kabbalah and its correspondences and using that system, the magician had reached a deeper, clearer understanding of the nature of reality than the scientist had yet to achieve. The Golden Dawn taught that any successful magical operations were achieved only through natural law, so in a sense there was no wonderworking. Occult science, as it was called at least since the writings of the nineteenth-century magus, Eliphas Levi, who was much revered by Golden Dawn initiates, was thought to make use of little-known laws of nature. The ritual magician endeavored to manipulate nature with great efficacy through controlling the will and imagination.

The goal of the Golden Dawn initiate was to exercise and train the will until it became a finely tuned, powerful force that could be directed through intention. The imagination and intellect were trained to perceive the symbolic correspondences of color, angelic hierarchy, godform, number, landscape, and bodily postures and hand grips so that they became second nature. Movement through the grades of the order was the work of developing the will and imagination of the initiate to a finely honed point. Fortune describes the initiate:

He is distinguished from the unenlightened not by his clothes and personal habits, but by his mentality. Two qualities characterize him, his serenity and his courage; these are the *sine qua non* of an initiate. His training is designed to make him a man of steel with a heart of compassion. He is tried in the furnace of sorrow and suffering until his nature undergoes the flux of the soul and can be remade. Then he is forged on the anvil of discipline by the hammer of danger. Out of that forging he comes as a steel blade. That blade may be a lancet, or it may

be a sword, but nevertheless it is a blade. Those who are “interested in occultism” [*sic*] but little realize what goes to the tempering of the soul of an adept.¹¹

After the Practicus grade in the outer order was achieved and mastered, the initiate would be offered admission to the inner order.

Members of the inner order were thought to be adepts, a word with a very special and definite meaning within the order. An adept is an individual who has perfected him or herself to a great extent, thus becoming, in the words of the Golden Dawn neophyte ritual, “more than human.” An adept does not possess superhuman powers but has brought his humanity as close as possible to an ideal, perfected state. Fortune describes the adept:

The fully initiated adept should have the three-fold contacts of mystic devotion, occult wisdom, and primitive nature-forces. The spiritual, the intellectual and the elemental must be perfectly balanced in his nature, and so disciplined by the will that they are absolutely flexible to the control of the judgment. The character of the adept may be summed up in one brief phrase—he is a soldier-scholar dedicated to the service of God.¹²

The Golden Dawn conception of God is not the god of the Old Testament. Otherwise Fortune sounds like she is describing a Templar or Christian knight crusader. She is not. The phrases “energy of the universe” or “divine energy” are more suited to her meaning, but not nearly as elegant in the sentence. She is describing the mythical Renaissance figure of the Rosicrucian wanderer, an enlightened doctor who travels the world on a healing mission in the service of all that is good and right. Blackwood’s Dr. John Silence of *The John Silence Stories* is an exemplar of adepthood.

Besides the actual teachings about ritual, will, and imagination, the Golden Dawn also promulgated a few, more doctrinaire, beliefs regarding death. By and large, members of the Golden Dawn believed in reincarnation. Death was thought of as a doorway into the unseen, initially to a reality called the astral world where the disembodied soul was believed to travel first just after death. There the soul is thought to undergo a kind of purgatory—and Yeats actually called it that, even writing a play, *Purgatory*, about that after-death

state—in which it must deal with all of the events of the previous lifetime and learn its lessons. Depending on the soul's disposition, it might then reincarnate, or, in the case of an adept, move on to a more ethereal state. Like Buddhist teaching regarding reincarnation, the Golden Dawn taught that eventually the soul will be freed from the need to reincarnate, but that would be only after many lifetimes and much learning.

The Golden Dawn taught that the point of life is for the soul to evolve. Initiation and adepthood were a way for a human to evolve spiritually. It was then the responsibility of the adept to promote healing and consciousness-raising among any individuals with whom he or she came in contact. The overarching function of the Order of the Golden Dawn was to facilitate the evolution of the human race, working through one individual at a time. Yeats, Fortune, and Blackwood all believed that humans possessed latent power that resided in the subconscious mind, and each of them spent their lives trying to tap that reservoir for the good of the human race. Ritual magic served as their vehicle. Machen was much more ambivalent about his involvement in the Order of the Golden Dawn and its meaning or efficacy, but at least for a time, he too tested the waters of ritual magic.