



Ferguson, C. (2016) Reading with the Occultists: Arthur Machen, A.E. Waite, and the ecstasies of popular fiction. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21(1), pp. 40-55.

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Deposited on: 19 November 2015

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Reading with the Occultists:

Arthur Machen, A.E. Waite, and the Ecstasies of Popular Fiction

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In his 1897 article 'Pickwickiana', the Dickensian aficionado Percy Fitzgerald tells a story, perhaps apocryphal, about the ecstatic potential of popular fiction when released into the public sphere. Sometime in the late eighteen-thirties, it seems, a wealthy London patron decided to bestow a braille copy of key scenes from *Pickwick* on a blind beggar that he passed on the street every day. His beneficiary's previous pitch had been to recite biblical passages in a serious, monotone voice, but it didn't draw much trade; as Fitzgerald notes, 'nobody was improved by the lecture. They merely wonder at the phenomenon and go on their way'.¹ The braille *Pickwick*, however, was to change the beggar's fortunes dramatically:

When [the patron] arrived on the morning fixed for the first attempt he found his friend at his post with almost a crowd gathered round him, in convulsions of laughter. The "poor blind" was reading, or feeling out, old Mr Weller's ejection of the red-nosed man. The hat was overflowing with coppers and even silver [. . .] "Pickwick" was a magnificent success, and the blind man was never without a crowd round him of some fifteen to fifty persons! [. . .] the other blind readers found the demand for the sacred text vanishing; and people would actually interrupt them to inquire the way to the "Pickwick man." Eventually, the police began to interfere, and required him to "move on."²

¹ Percy Fitzgerald, 'Pickwickiana', *The Gentleman's Magazine* (February 1897), 178-202, (p. 182).

² Fitzgerald, 'Pickwickiana', p. 182.

Picture the scene: a blind seer channels words through his fingers using a still new, seemingly magical, reading technique; a secular text replaces and supersedes the appeal of religious scripture; and disengaged urban walkers temporarily come together in a gleeful, ribald union that threatens the orderly flow of the city's thoroughfares. In these coordinates, the anecdote suggests how the Victorian encounter with popular fiction could fuel a form of joyous communion no longer accessible, if it ever was, through sacred texts. This potential forms the basis of a fascinating mode of late Victorian popular fiction criticism, one that has been completely omitted from established historiographies of the critical sub-discipline's emergence and development. Centered around *Pickwick* and on other, less canonical and more ephemeral, types of popular periodical romance, what I will here describe as occultic popular fiction criticism had its origins in the late Victorian occult revival, specifically in the writing of two of its central participants: Welsh writer Arthur Machen and his lifelong friend, the English mystic, occult historian, and self-described bibliomaniac Arthur Edward Waite. This occluded episode in the history of popular fiction studies is worth reclaiming, not simply out of antiquarian interest or an unreflexive attachment to recovery work, but for its value in challenging the anxiety thesis, the hermeneutic paradigm that has dominated Victorian popular fiction studies since the early nineties and still shows few signs of abating despite recent neo-formalist and material culture turns.

Pioneered in groundbreaking studies such as Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988) and Stephen Arata's *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1996) and, as even a cursory MLA search will reveal, still enduring midway through

the twenty-teens,³ the anxiety thesis has legitimized the study of popular texts once dismissed as trash or condemned as a threat to legitimate culture by the likes of F.R. Leavis, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and others.⁴ This is no mean accomplishment, and for this the anxiety thesis should be lauded— but it has performed this recuperation at a certain cost. Typically waiving the issue of aesthetic value or pleasure as irrelevant, anxiety theorists have argued that Victorian popular fiction is valuable for its expression and containment— albeit often incomplete— of discrete and construable forms of collective cultural anxiety, usually related to sexuality, gender, race, class, evolution, and the body. Victorian readers, whose motivations are rarely if ever differentiated in this approach, are said to have turned to popular texts such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897)— gothic texts proving highly, if not exclusively, conducive to such readings— to assuage, work through, or productively exacerbate their collective concerns. Quoting Frederic Jameson, Stephen Arata describes the process of anxious interface as such in his introduction to *Fictions of Loss*:

If in the modern world literature is invested [. . .] with “the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions,” much more of that kind of cultural work goes on in popular fiction than is generally acknowledged. . . [T]o a greater extent than on the

³ Despite frequent rumours of its eclipse, the anxiety paradigm remains a common touchstone in contemporary Victorian studies; at the time of writing, the MLA database returns 50 hits for the search terms ‘Victorian’ and ‘Anxiety’ since 2010.

⁴ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Continent, public discussion in Britain about social problems was carried on through the medium of mass-market texts. That their strivings to achieve satisfying solutions never wholly succeed constitutes their interest and much of their value.⁵

Arata thus redeems the popular novel because of its previously underappreciated use-value in symptomizing and addressing, albeit ultimately ineffectively, a particular set of widely experienced real-life social contradictions.

While the anxiety thesis has undeniably rejuvenated Victorian popular fiction studies, it has also, as critics such as Nicholas Daly, Andrew McCann, and others have pointed out,⁶ sometimes skewed or diminished the complexity of its target texts. For Daly, the constant attribution of anxiety to the *fin de siècle* belies the period's as yet relatively unpunctured imperial confidence;⁷ McCann, by contrast, finds in the late century gothic, not an arena for the projection of anxieties, but a source for the conceptualization of new, intriguingly anti-commercialist, paradigms of popular authorship.⁸ My own concern with the anxiety thesis, or rather, with its ubiquity, is two-fold: firstly, that it has the potential to blunt and homogenize the texts to which it is repetitively applied, and, secondly, that it pitches the encounter between readers and popular texts as a tense, fraught, and

⁵ Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 4.

⁶ See Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin-de-Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship, and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷ Daly, *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle*, p. 30.

⁸ McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship, and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain*, p. 6.

even potentially pathological one where, more often than not, fears are confirmed rather quelled. Such a positioning, as my article will demonstrate, blatantly disregards those contemporary Victorian theorizations of popular fiction which betray no hint of anxiety or paranoia. Granted, one does not need to dig too deeply into the periodical annals of the Victorian public sphere to find conservative reviewers bemoaning the debasing effects of sensational penny fiction.⁹ Their position was, however, by no means wholly representative; it had to contend for attention alongside positive appraisals of the mode's ability to foster the imagination and bemused meditations on its repetitive plotting and distinctly outmoded fixation on the punishment of vice and the reward of virtue.¹⁰ My essay focuses on a form of Victorian popular fiction criticism that is even less reconcilable with the anxiety thesis than the examples above. In what I am calling the occultic approach to popular fiction, the public's varied relationships with cheap novels and serialized stories—whether as collectors, readers, or writers—has less to do with fear, trauma, anxiety and sexual frustration, than with their very opposites—namely, ecstasy, awe, and the opportunity for direct encounter with a hidden

⁹ For examples of anti-penny dreadful critiques in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century press, see 'Street Literature of London', *Leisure Hour* (22 January 1852), 50-54; James Greenwood, 'Penny Awfuls', *Saint Paul's Magazine*, (February 1873), 161-68; 'Cheap Fiction', *Saturday Review* (26 February 1887), 288-89; and George Humphery, 'The Reading of the Working Classes', *Nineteenth Century*, (April 1893), 690-701.

¹⁰ Representatives of the former approach include Thomas Wright, 'Concerning the Unknown Public', *Nineteenth Century* (February 1883), 279-296 and C.W. Boyd, 'Enchanted Fiction', *Speaker* (30 September 1893), 351-2; representatives of the latter include Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words* (21 August 1858), 217-222; 'Penny Novels', *Macmillan's Magazine* (June 1866), 96-105; James Payn, 'Penny Fiction', *Nineteenth Century* (January 1881), 145-54; 'Concerning Sub-Fiction', *Academy* (9 November 1901): 445-6.

ancient wisdom tradition associated contemporarily with occult experience. For A.E. Waite and Arthur Machen, both lifelong documenters and pursuers of numinous encounter, such was the case, and popular texts, whether Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) or Thomas Peckett Prest's *The Old House on West Street* (1844-46), could be understood as the modern-day heirs to an ancient tradition of ecstatic, occult writing in place since the dawn of the Western hermetic tradition in ancient Greece and Egypt.

In characterizing Waite's and Machen's critical approach to popular fiction as 'occult', we need to proceed with some caution. This over-determined designation is, as Wouter J. Hanegraaff argues in *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012), neither value neutral nor precise in its signification; on the contrary, the occult, he demonstrates, has since the Enlightenment been used as a sort of loose semantic wild card to designate a fluctuating body of beliefs excised by scientific rationalism.¹¹ '[T]he category of the occult', Hanegraaff writes, 'emerged [during the nineteenth century] as a conceptual waste-basket for "rejected knowledge" and it has kept functioning as the academy's radical 'Other' to the present day.'¹² We need to think of the occult, then, less as a fixed category of timeless ideas, practices, or identities than as a function and form of alterity, one whose coordinates are mobile. This flexibility is reflected in the print archive of the Victorian occultural public sphere, in which, as in the masthead for the Spiritualist journal *Light*, the 'occult' was sometimes listed

¹¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 157.

¹² Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 221.

interchangeably with 'mysticism,' or used as a synonym for other terms such as magic or esotericism.¹³ In choosing this designation rather than these other possible substitutes, I follow what I recognize as Waite's and Machen's own emic understanding of the occult—as expressed their literary critical writings at least—as an ancient and arcane knowledge system that could offer a route towards the powers behind the veil. They also simultaneously attributed a slightly differently calibrated *mystical* function to popular fiction, one which could induce a spontaneous and epiphanic encounter with the divine in readers independently of effort, will, or directed tutelage under a learned adept. But it is the writers' paradoxical sense of popular fiction as being, not only accessible to the masses, but also animated by hidden forces and traditions, that most distinguishes their criticism and thus warrants the occult nomenclature, even despite their own highly ambivalent attitudes to the contemporary occult organizations with which they were linked. Machen, although briefly a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, generally viewed the new occult orders that sprung up over his lifetime with a mixture of bemusement and disdain;¹⁴ Waite, who by contrast participated in a far wider variety of esoteric groups than Machen, nonetheless

¹³ See for example Waite's *The Occult Sciences: A Compendium of Transcendental Doctrine and Experiment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co., 1891), which declares that 'every branch of the occult or secret sciences may be included under the word MAGIC, with the sole exception of astrology, which, important and interesting as it is, can hardly be termed a branch of arcane wisdom [...]'. (p. 9).

¹⁴ For Machen's view on initiatic occult orders, see his *Things Near and Far* (London: Martin & Secker, 1926), in which he describes the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as 'pure foolishness concerned with impotent and imbecilic Abracadabras' (p. 152) and characterizes Theosophists and Kabbalists as 'Oriental Occult Ass[es]' and 'Occidental Idiot[s]' respectively (p. 143).

frequently positioned himself as a mystic for whom occultism was an object of contempt.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in their writings on the ancient and modern fictional narratives beloved by the *demos*, the pair's commonly evinced attitudes towards the occult took on a far more laudatory and reverential tenor.

1. Waite and the Unknown World of the Penny Dreadful

Outside of academic and occult practitioner circles, A.E. Waite (1857-1942) is today most famous, not for the prodigious if uneven body of scholarship on occult and mystical topics he published during his lifetime, but rather for his 1910 co-production, along with illustrator Pamela Colman Smith, of one the most recognizable and commercially successful occult leisure products of the twentieth century: the Rider-Waite tarot deck. He was by then Britain's leading, and arguably only significant, historian of Western occultism, working from the 1880s onwards to rescue the subject from its associations with dilettantish amateurism and crackpot fanaticism.¹⁶ He was also a dedicated and longstanding ritual practitioner, holding memberships in most of the British and many of the Continental esoteric societies active at the turn of the century—he jokingly referred to himself as the 'most

¹⁵ Waite's views on the occult, as Aren Roukema has recently shown, were actually much more ambiguous and in some instances accommodating than his more hostile public comments have led scholars to believe. See Aren Roukema, *Charles Williams and Modern Occultism: The Influence of A.E. Waite* (M.A. Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2013).

¹⁶ In his first book, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians* (1887), Waite identified the mode of scholarly neutrality and rigor that he felt it necessary for esoteric research. 'I offer for the first time in the literature of the subject the Rosicrucians represented by themselves,' he writes. 'I claim that I have performed the task in a sympathetic but impartial manner, purged from the bias of any particular theory, and above all uncontaminated by the pretension to superior knowledge, which claimants have never been able to substantiate.' A.E. Waite, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians, Founded on their own Manifestoes, and On Facts and Documents Collected from the Writings of Initiated Brethren* (London: Redway, 1885), p. 4.

initiated man in Britain’—¹⁷ and also starting some of his own, most notably the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross in 1914. Long before he took up any of these roles, however, he was a voracious reader and collector of mid-Victorian penny dreadfuls. For Waite, these esoteric and exoteric pursuits were intimately connected. He esteemed the cheap periodical fiction of his boyhood as no less important to his mystical subjectivity than the more abstruse tomes of alchemist Nicholas Flamel or French ceremonial magician Eliphas Lévi, whose *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856) he translated as *Transcendental Magic* in 1896.¹⁸ Intriguingly, Waite’s esteem did not necessarily require that he read, or read closely, his chosen popular genre; on the contrary, in his 1904 essay ‘Dealings in Bibliomania’, he argued that ‘the best impressions concerning certain literatures are not derived actually by reading them.’¹⁹ Another, less instrumentalist, approach was needed when dealing with these sacred relics of a popular taste.

Waite’s first study of the penny dreadful appeared in an 1887 issue of *Walford’s Antiquarian Magazine*, an eclectic journal published by Covent Garden-based occult publisher George Redway and then edited by his new friend Arthur Machen. Entitled ‘By-Ways of Periodical Literature’ and published in two parts, it has been correctly lauded by Waite’s biographer R.A. Gilbert as an ‘important[. . .]

¹⁷ R.A. Gilbert, *A.E. Waite: Magician of Many Parts* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1987), p. 117.

¹⁸ Eliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, ed. and trans. A.E. Waite (London: George Redway, 1896).

¹⁹ A.E. Waite, ‘Dealings in Bibliomania’, *Horlick’s Magazine and Home Journal for Australia, India, and the Colonies* 1.4 (15 April 1904), 405-16, (p. 407).

early recognition of the historical significance of popular literature.²⁰ Intriguingly, the essay seems at first to hold only a slighting opinion of the mid-century periodical stories it nonetheless catalogues in loving detail. Opening with a lament for the disappearance of this 'vast and perishing' literature as a result of poor or non-existent cataloguing methods, Waite then notes the derivativeness of the form's plots, its defects of grammar and style, its debilitating effects on writers who, like Thomas Prescott Prest, might otherwise have been destined for literary greatness, and its potentially actionable obscenity.²¹ 'It may be safely affirmed', he writes

that a large proportion of periodical romances once widely circulated would not now be republished by the most "enterprising" bookseller. Public opinion has changed during the last twenty-five years in the matter of periodical literature, and that which then passed unnoticed would now be dealt with according to law.²²

Unlike some of his late Victorian contemporaries, Waite does not neuter the penny dreadful by sentimentalizing it or insisting on its moral conservatism;²³ nor, like subsequent recovery critics, does he insist on its aesthetic quality or previously undetected socio-political engagement. Indeed, with allies such as Waite, one might wonder, surely the mid-Victorian penny dreadful didn't need any enemies.

²⁰ R.A. Gilbert, *Magician of Many Parts*, p. 28.

²¹ A.E. Waite, 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature', Part I *Walford's Antiquarian Magazine* XI (1887), 179-86, (p. 179).

²² A.E. Waite, 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature', Part II *Walford's Antiquarian Magazine* XII (1887), 65-74, (p. 68).

²³ See Payn 'Penny Fiction' (1881) and 'The Penny Fictionist', *Cornhill Magazine* (February 1889), 187-94.

Yet the faults that Waite enumerates in 'By-Ways' fail to damn his penny dreadful subject, simply because the criteria on which they rest are not for him important or final guarantors of value. The actual content of works such as 'Jack Junk, or the Tar for All Weathers', or 'The Maniac's Father, or The Victim of Seduction' should be no deterrent to their careful preservation, one whose necessity he states in decidedly modest terms here:²⁴

A little care will rescue from complete oblivion, a literature *sui generis*, which in bulk, and within certain limits, in variety, almost equals the fiction of a higher class, of which it is to some extent the reflex, and will preserve for the historian at least a scanty knowledge of the literary fare provided in the nineteenth century for the mass of the English public, by the great periodical press.²⁵

His rationale for the preservation of these texts, one that would become even clearer in his later forays into popular fiction criticism, draws on our previously articulated conception of the occult: they belong to a disappearing textual tradition of great if unappreciated consequence. He sharpened this point in 1904 when, now seventeen years into his career as a historian and practitioner of occult ritual, he next took up the subject in print; remarkably, the further Waite immersed himself in esoteric study, the more vocal a defender of popular fiction he became. In this second essay, titled 'Dealings in Bibliomania' and published in the fascinating and covert occult periodical *Horlick's Magazine*, Waite both reversed the trajectory of

²⁴ Waite, 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature', II, (p. 181).

²⁵ Waite, 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature', I, (p. 179).

influence between high and low fiction established in 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature' and dramatically extended his argument for pulp fiction's value by lauding its incantatory powers and aligning its collection with the quest for occult wisdom.²⁶ However badly constructed, periodical adventure stories were important because, like alchemical texts, they represented an occluded and disappearing discourse, one whose significance lay beyond its surface crudities. Also, instead of merely reflecting the tendencies of the more respectable and enduring classics of the age, cheap periodical fiction, he now insisted, actually produced them, even if by circuitous currents of influence: 'Dickens . . . derived his own fashion of producing continuing stories, week after week, in numbers, from the immemorial methods of the Byways.'²⁷

'Dealings in Bibliomania' opens by promising to reveal to its readers a hidden, arcane, yet ubiquitous textual tradition. Waite announces:

Let me be bold [...] and say, in all simplicity, that the Unknown World is ever at our doors, and that all things ultimately issue into the unknown. If this be true of every inquiry in general, it is true in particular of those which connect with literature and its substitutes.²⁸

This striking choice of phrasing intriguingly reiterates the title of Waite's own short-lived mid-1890s venture into the occult periodical press through his journal *The*

²⁶ Waite founded the magazine when he was working for Horlick's Malted Milk as Business Manager in 1903, initially proposing that it would act as an advertising vehicle for the product. Instead, he ran it as a literary magazine in which he published important early stories by Machen and a profusion of his own pseudonymous articles on topics such as alchemy and mesmerism.

²⁷ A.E. Waite, 'Dealings in Bibliomania', (p. 405).

²⁸ A.E. Waite, 'Dealings in Bibliomania', (p. 405).

Unknown World, established in 1894 to explore ‘those mysteries which are called transcendental, occult, and mystic.’²⁹ In reinvoking this formulation here, Waite suggestively aligns the reading, collection, and criticism of pulp fiction with occult study. Both pursuits are further connected through their reliance on the tutelage of a uniquely qualified master-adept, a role which Waite readily claims for himself. ‘It is not short of a privilege’, he writes, ‘to be the one person now living in England who is in a position to write about so many books overlooked and unknown, which are rapidly becoming unknowable [...]’³⁰ His critical intervention thus becomes a form of occult preservation and initiation, offering readers an encounter with lost and otherwise irretrievable narratives that ‘have never been written about previously; no one else knows anything concerning them, nor outside the leaves of these fantastic memoranda are they likely to learn anything—i.e. anything of moment.’³¹ The marvel and mystery of ephemeral penny dreadfuls comes less, he suggests in ‘Dealings’, from the outlandishness of their plots than from their rarity and subsequent difficulty of retrieval. Only would-be initiates with a love of the quest can enter on the path to bibliomania, one that ends in the ineffable.

Yet it is not simply that the esoteric, and decidedly un-anxious, approach to popular fiction collection described by Waite here is *analogous* to the work of the Victorian occult revival through its mode of knowledge formation and transmission;

²⁹ A.E. Waite, ‘In the Beginning’, *Unknown World: A Magazine Devoted to the Occult Sciences, Magic, Mystical Philosophy, Alchemy, Hermetic Archeology, and the Hidden Problems of Science, Literature, Speculation, and History* 1.1 (15 August 1894), 1-4, (p. 1).

³⁰ A.E. Waite, ‘Dealings in Bibliomania’, (p. 405).

³¹ A.E. Waite, ‘Dealings in Bibliomania’, (p. 405).

Waite also suggests that penny dreadfuls produce the same affective and spiritual response within collectors and readers as that sought through occult ritual. It is worth remembering that when Waite published 'Dealings in Bibliomania', he was heading a splinter group of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the pioneering British magical order whose rituals used unique visual emblems and mottos to ground experiments in scrying and astral travel.³² These practices clearly inform Waite's conceptualization of the necessary mental preparation required for entering the study of popular literary ephemera:

When subjects that are [. . .] familiar recur to the mind, it is, I suppose, almost always by some type or representation; the atmosphere of thought gives up some form or picture which stands for the whole, constituting a secret symbol which is unintelligible to the profane and can, indeed, be hardly communicated to another initiate who has, doubtless, his own individual mode of representation, secret in its turn and ineffective beyond its own sphere. To me the mystery of the Byways has an entrance gate of this kind, to which I have recourse naturally, and perhaps unconsciously when I would explore these recesses. I am brought up always before a misty landscape shining faintly under a storm-driven moon.³³

³² The Independent and Rectified Rite (of the Golden Dawn). For more on Waite's role in this organization and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, see Gilbert, *A.E. Waite*, pp. 109-26; for examples of the Order's scrying rituals, see Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn: A Complete Course in Practical Ceremonial Magic*, 6th ed., (St Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1989) pp. 467-78.

³³ Waite, 'Dealings in Bibliomania', (p. 406).

In this project of literary re-evaluation, the worth of popular literature is made to rest almost entirely upon the personalized, even solipsistic, visionary experience it induces in individual reader-seekers.

Despite its highly individualist thrust, the occult methodology of popular reading offered in 'Dealings in Bibliomania' also had a collectivist, democratic orientation, one that feeds directly into the wider egalitarian impulse that Andrew McCann has diagnosed as central to late Victorian occult fiction. After all, the literary catalysts for the form of visionary transport Waite proposed were far more widely accessible, and in some cases affordable, than membership within any of the late Victorian occult organizations— the Theosophical Society or the Order of the Golden Dawn— whose adherents were almost exclusively middle-class.³⁴ Certainly, not everyone would be able to obtain a copy of, for example, the extremely rare 'The Old House in West Street' that formed the jewel in the crown of Waite's penny dreadful collection and whose discovery through a type of bibliomantic dowsing forms the subject of Machen's comic essay *The Grande Trouvaille* (1923). Nonetheless, cheap popular romances were not hard to find, and their mystical potential was not limited to isolated texts.³⁵ If these vehicles were easy to access, so was their promise of spiritual enlightenment universal. 'The inquiry', Waite writes, has the advantage of being curious and of enforcing no lesson unless it be that, deep down in the heart of every man, there is the worship of the

³⁴ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 405.

³⁵ Arthur Machen, *The Grand Trouvaille: A Legend of Pentonville* (London: First Edition Bookshop, 1923).

Romance-Spirit. No one was ever a utilitarian by nature, or any other materialist.³⁶

The key phrase here is 'every man'— the romance spirit, like the human soul, is imagined here as innate and ubiquitous, its apotheosis open to all of those who could read, or like the blind beggar's audience listen to, the fiction of the popular press. Waite's late-life autobiography *Shadows of Life and Thought* (1938) describes many of these instances of pulp initiation from his own past, as Waite insists that his acquisition of esoteric wisdom was wholly dependent on his childhood fiction reading: 'I should never have entered those other occult paths, and come out of them to proceed further, had I not [. . .] come across *The Shadowless Rider*, his *League of the Cross of Blood*, and the *Forty Thieves of London*, who were led by Black Hugh.'³⁷ Far more conducive to spiritual growth than ordered Christian allegories such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* which, in Waite's opinion, were always 'hopeless' in their didactic transparency, the poorly-plotted, sensational, and potentially obscene penny dreadful alone ignited the faculty of wonder necessary for contact with the creative power behind the veil.³⁸

II. Arthur Machen and the Occult Ecstasies of Pickwick

Waite's occultic popular fiction criticism thus begins to imagine a democratic and joyful form of spiritual initiation achieved through mass-market print forms, one shared and extended by his close associate Arthur Machen in his remarkable

³⁶ Waite, 'Dealings in Bibliomania', (p. 406).

³⁷ A.E. Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought: A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1938), p. 36.

³⁸ A.E. Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought*, p. 37.

1902 study of the Western romance canon, *Hieroglyphics*. Here, he identifies as one of the most significant occult texts of the Victorian era, not Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842), H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), or any of the other usual suspects in this category, but rather, remarkably, Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7). The novel features as chief among a series of popular romances, including Homer's *Odyssey* (8th century BCE), Rabelais' s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (circa 1532-64), and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), that Machen presents as ciphers for an ancient wisdom tradition, available to, and exploitable by, countless of readers worldwide.

In focusing so substantially and exclusively on *Pickwick* alone among Dickens's works, Machen both contributed and responded to the remarkable late Victorian publishing phenomenon of Pickwickiana. A lively subset of the burgeoning Dickens's industry which drew its name from Joseph Grego's *Pictorial Pickwickiana: Charles Dickens and His Illustrators* (1889), the *fin de siècle* cult of Pickwick flourished in the face of challenges from the new, sleek, single-volume bestsellers then becoming the staples of the fiction market. Between 1889 and 1910, consumers could buy the following: new editions of *The Pickwick Papers* edited and introduced by such heavyweights such as Andrew Lang (1897), George Gissing (1899), and G.K. Chesterton (1907), reference volumes such as Percy Fitzgerald's *A History of Pickwick* (1891), *Pickwickian Manners and Customs* (1897), and *The Pickwickian Dictionary and Cyclopedia* (1900), scripts of recent and revived Pickwick stage adaptations, tributes to Pickwickian visual culture such as the aforementioned *Pictorial Pickwickiana* and H.M. Paget's *Pickwick Pictures* (1891), and children's gift

books such as Thomas Cartwright's expurgated *The Children's Pickwick* (1904).³⁹ The most diehard of *Pickwick aficionados*, of whom there seemed to be no shortage in this period, could even avail themselves of the new Esperanto translation of the Bardell versus Pickwick trial released to commemorate the book's seventieth anniversary in 1907, a somewhat desperate effort to capitalize on the near universal success of *Pickwick* by a less popular universal language movement.⁴⁰

Ever a contrarian, Arthur Machen nonetheless provocatively insisted in *Hieroglyphics* that despite this craze, *The Pickwick Papers* remained an 'underappreciated book'.⁴¹ Aware of the incredulity that this statement was likely to invite, he stipulated:

Yes, I maintain the justice of the last epithet in spite of circulation, in spite of popularity, and in spite of *Pickwick* 'literature.' You may like a book very much and read it three times a year without appreciating it, and if a great

³⁹ Andrew Lang, ed., *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, by Charles Dickens, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1897); George Gissing, Introduction to *The Pickwick Papers*, by Charles Dickens (London: Methuen 1899); G.K. Chesterton, ed. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, by Charles Dickens (London: Dent, 1907); Percy Fitzgerald, *A History of Pickwick: An Account of Its Characters, Localities, Allusions, and Illustrations* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1891); Percy Fitzgerald, *Pickwickian Manners and Customs* (Westminster: Roxburghe Press, 1897); Percy Fitzgerald, *The Pickwickian Dictionary and Cyclopaedia* (London: Percy Fitzgerald & W.T. Spencer, 1900); Joseph Grego, ed, *Pictorial Pickwickiana: Charles Dickens and His Illustrators* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1889); H.M. Paget, *Pickwick Papers: A Series of Character Sketches from Pickwick* (London: E. Nister, 1891); Thomas Cartwright, ed., *The Children's Pickwick*, By Charles Dickens, (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1904).

⁴⁰ William Morrison, trans., *Bardell Kontrau Pickwick: Proceso Eltirita el la Romano*, 'Pickwick Papers' (London: La Tria Kongreso, 1907).

⁴¹ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), p. 185.

book is really popular it is sure to owe its popularity to entirely wrong reasons.⁴²

This sentiment encapsulates the ambition of *Hieroglyphics* as a whole, which was neither to consolidate, challenge, nor defend the success of, works such as *Pickwick* and *Don Quixote* (1605), but rather to radically re-assign their popularity to its esoteric source, one that was routinely misunderstood by their readers and producers alike. Like Champollion, the great decipherer of the Rosetta Stone, Machen would break down the hieroglyphics of what he saw as an ancient narrative form, revealing its occult significance and thus enhancing the pleasure of its instinctively initiated mass audiences.

Hieroglyphics is a remarkable text for a number of reasons, not least of which being the surprise it is likely to provoke in readers whose only previous encounter with Machen has been through his notorious 1894 *succès de scandale* *The Great God Pan*. Famously dubbed by a contemporary reviewer ‘an incoherent nightmare of sex’, *The Great God Pan* is a pagan-themed horror tale about a shape-shifting *femme fatale* that seems almost to have been written as a gift to future anxiety theorists in its fixation on the threats of sexual menace, gender instability, the primitive past, and decadent science.⁴³ If anxious readings of this novella are predictable, they are at least somewhat warranted; after all, the pagan Roman-British past is certainly a real danger in the narrative, threatening to seduce and then destroy all those who confront its

⁴² Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 185.

⁴³ The Philistine [J.A. Spender], *The New Fiction (A Protest Against Sex Mania) and Other Papers* (London: Westminster Gazette Office), 1895.

deadly female avatar Helen Vaughan.⁴⁴ But in *Hieroglyphics*, the classical world, and the archetypal quest narrative with whose creation it is credited, have changed sides. No longer sources of or vehicles for anxiety, they are instead conduits for readerly ecstasy.

Absolutely central to *Hieroglyphics*'s ambitious reclamation project, ecstasy is designated as the ultimate criterion of literary excellence and spiritual experience alike, the *sine qua non* which separates what Machen calls 'fine literature' (16) from its merely accomplished and intellectually distinguished counterparts. He defines it as follows:

Substitute, if you like, rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown. All and each will convey what I mean [. . .] in every case there will be that withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness that justifies my choice of 'ecstasy' as the best symbol of my meaning. (18)

Machen finds in fine literature a productive flight from the every day towards a version of Waite's Unknown World, or the hidden platonic reality that undergirds human existence. Unlike the realist novels which Machen viewed as wholly superficial in their approach to human experience, works of fine literature were faithful to life 'in the occult sense,' 'mirror[ing] [. . .] its eternal, essential forms' (37). What readers could gain through ecstatic popular fiction was not certainty, comfort, or what we might characterize as ideological confirmation, but rather a sense of occult awe.

⁴⁴ For examples of symptomatic, anxiety-based readings of the novella, see Adrian Eckersley, 'A Theme in the Early Work of Arthur Machen: "Degeneration"', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 35.3 (1992), 277-87 and Aaron Worth, 'Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40.1 (2012), 215-227.

Hieroglyphics carefully excavates *Pickwick* to reveal the esoteric symbols concealed behind the façade of its picaresque narrative, positioning the novel as a latter-day Odyssey that translates the Bacchanalian mystery rites into the vernacular of Camden Town. As a Ulysses figure, Mr Pickwick is read not as a kind-hearted bumbler but as the leader of a Bacchic cult whose drunken and sometimes licentious members, mutually identifiable through their ‘P.C.’ regalia, struggle to avoid the snares of monsters while wending their way through a fallen world. ‘[I]n its conception’, affirms Machen’s mysterious hermit narrator, *Pickwick* ‘is essentially one with the Odyssey. It is a book of wandering; you start from your own doorstep, and you stray into the unknown’ (50). Dickens’s characters, often condemned for their caricaturish unreality by other critics of the period, are here redeemed through their representation as mythical archetypes and ritual actors irreducible to the criteria of verisimilitude:

Pickwick, and Sam, and Jingle, and the rest of them are not clever reproductions of actual people [. . .] those queer grotesque people, are queer for the same reason that the Cyclops is queer and the dwarfs and dragons of mediaeval romance are queer. We are withdrawn from the common ways of life. (51)

Machen insists that we see the near constant drunkenness of the Pickwickians as part of this withdrawal process rather than as crude comic device; intoxication in *Pickwick* functions as an entheogenic process, akin to the means by which, for example, Tom Sharp in the interpolated “The Bagman’s Story” is able to talk to an anthropomorphized chair when profoundly drunk. Machen writes:

As the Athens of Sophocles is to the Cockneydom of Dickens, so is the cult of Dionysus to the cult of cold punch and brandy and water. The interior

meaning is in each case the same [. . .] I absolutely identify the ‘brandy and water scenes’ with the Bacchic *cultus* and all that it implies. (90)

Pickwick’s readers, their numbers in the hundreds of thousands worldwide, had in their hands a direct if degraded descendent of the orphic mystery tradition, one in which they too could participate as self-selected initiates when they re-read and incanted Pickwickian phrases and jokes into their everyday speech.

To understand *Pickwick* in this way— as ‘first and foremost a supernatural story,’ in the later words of Machen’s great admirer G.K. Chesterton⁴⁵— was to depart significantly from Dickens’s own retrospective assessment of the book as an augury of ‘important social improvements’ which ‘[strove] to do its duty’ to the ‘Age’.⁴⁶ Socially instrumentalist or ideological theories of literature had in general no place in the occult, ecstatic criticism of Waite and Machen; for the latter, such crude intentionalism was anathema to the processes of unconscious creation requisite to the fine literary text. This latter emphasis on the importance of unconsciousness is what distinguishes *Hieroglyphics* from its closest critical counterpart at the *fin de siècle*, Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Art and Literature* (1899; 1919). Here Symons had famously defined symbolist literature as that body of contemporary writing in which ‘the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world is no longer a dream,’ and ‘mystery is no longer feared’.⁴⁷ Symons’s symbol, like Machen’s hieroglyphic, was also a cipher for the ineffable, one located not in the popular epic but rather in the literary experimentation of the nineteenth-century

⁴⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), p. 73.

⁴⁶ Charles Dickens, ‘Preface to the First Cheap Edition’, *The Pickwick Papers*, (Boston: Books Inc., 1937), pp. xv-xix, (p. xviii).

⁴⁷ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Art and Literature* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1919), p. 4, 8.

continental *avantgarde*, namely the work of Mallarmé, de Nerval, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Huysmans. The output of these decadents, aesthetes and experimentalists was separated from that of their symbolically attuned predecessors, argued Symons, by its acute self-consciousness. ‘What distinguishes the Symbolism of our day from the Symbolism of the past’, he writes, ‘is that it has become conscious of itself [. . .] with the change of men’s thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and in its outward form’.⁴⁸

Where Symons’s symbolism was thus self-aware, modern, French or Belgian, and of a restricted audience, Machen’s was unconsciously inspired, popular, universal, and of ancient provenance, even while still thriving in the present. Like the religious ecstatic, the ecstatic fiction writer could neither deliberately contrive nor have a rational approach to creative experience. It was necessary, therefore, for *Hieroglyphics* to deny repeatedly the possibility of Dickens’s self-awareness by undermining his retrospective political framing of the novel. Consider, for example, Machen’s take on the somewhat self-congratulatory author’s preface to the 1847 cheap edition of *Pickwick*, in which Dickens enumerated the various reforms that *Pickwick* had implicitly fomented. ‘Legal reforms’, Dickens remarks, ‘have pared the claws of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg [. . .] the laws relating to imprisonment for debt are altered; and the Fleet Prison is pulled down!’⁴⁹ Writing some fifty-five years later, Machen jeers:

The law of imprisonment for debt has been altered! Fleet Prison has been pulled down! The School Board is coming! [. . .] It is evident, you see, that Dickens thought (or thought that he thought, for it is very difficult to be exact)

⁴⁸ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Art and Literature*, 3.

⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, ‘Preface to the First Cheap Edition’, p. viii.

that his masterpiece of the *picaresque*, his epitome of Pantagruelism, was written to correct abuses, and looking back, many years after its publication, he congratulates himself that most of these abuses have been corrected, and (one can almost hear him say) *ergo*, it is a very fine book.⁵⁰

The parting ‘ergo’ encapsulates everything that Machen despised about Dickens’s contemporary reformist interpreters like B.W. Matz, and, to a lesser extent, George Gissing:⁵¹ the claim of co-identity between the writer’s political and ethical sensibilities and his literary talent. ‘Consider again the grotesqueness of that preface to *Pickwick*’, Machen urges us. ‘[I]t is really as if a great sculptor, congratulated on his achievement, should answer that his Venus was indeed beautiful— because it tended to improve the marble industry and the general knowledge of anatomy’ (119).

Such scathing dismissals of Dickens’s faculty of self-comprehension were of course by no means rare in the late nineteenth century,⁵² and it may appear that Machen is here merely reiterating the hackneyed if enduring cliché of Dickens as a childish naïf or an idiot savant who succeeded despite himself. But just as the flaws we earlier saw Waite enumerate in the penny dreadful did not negate his sense of its mystical value, so too these apparent insults do not detract from the ecstatic accomplishment of *Pickwick*; on the contrary, the occult framing of *Hieroglyphics* transforms this critique into praise. For Machen, the loss of self-consciousness facilitated by a withdrawal from common life was almost always a good thing, as

⁵⁰ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, pp. 109-110.

⁵¹ B.W. Matz, ‘Charles Dickens and Reform’, *The Bookman* (November 1910), 79-86, (p. 79); George Gissing, *Charles Dickens* (London: Blackie and Sons, 1899), p. 215.

⁵² See for example Walter Frewen Lord, ‘Charles Dickens’, *Nineteenth Century* (November 1903), 765-81.

exemplified by *Pickwick*'s bacchanalian inebriates. To say that Dickens 'understood very little what he was doing' (111) was, from this vantage point, to underline his kinship with the finest writers in the Western tradition. '[A]rt is not' Machen concludes, 'in the ordinary acceptation of the term, a conscious product' (118). Rejecting the nascent terminology of continental psychoanalysis, he substitutes for the briefly considered terms 'unconscious' and 'subconscious' the more occult option of '“the Shadowy Companion,” the invisible companion attendant who walks all the way beside us, though his feet are in the Other World [. . .] who whispers to us his ineffable secrets, which we clumsily endeavor to set down in mortal language' (118). A version of Socrates's daemon, this version of the human imagination is thus lodged firmly in the Western occult tradition; it acts not as a Freudian repository for repressed desires, but rather as a channel to a numinous realm which dictates the esoteric narrative forms and symbols that will always appeal widely to the populace.

III. *Conclusion*

As Machen's *Hieroglyphics* demonstrates, one of the key effects of occult literary criticism was an alchemical one: it transformed dross into metaphysical gold. The blundering obfuscations and boasts of the popular author are salvaged as symptoms of a desirable authorial unconsciousness; the vulgar, ephemeral, and potentially obscene periodical fiction of a past era becomes a lodestone for spiritual transformation. 'I am a citizen, holding the freedom of all the worlds of Romance', affirmed Waite in *Shadows of Life and Thought*, 'because in early boyhood I read as much as I could find of "dangerous rubbish".'⁵³ His emphasis on citizenship here highlights a fiercely democratic tendency in the model of occult hermeneutics he advances, one which is all the more fascinating for its general absence in both his own

⁵³ A.E. Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought*, p. 34.

and Machen's personal political beliefs. Machen was a staunch imperialist and anti-socialist who believed that women should not have the vote;⁵⁴ Waite, although less overtly conservative, criticized the great French magus Eliphas Lévi and William Morris for their subscription to what he viewed as the false ideology of socialism.⁵⁵ At the turn of the twentieth century, Machen and Waite were certainly no progressives or democrats. Yet their sympathies seem to change when they write of the fiction beloved by the *demos*, a body of texts that rightfully draws power from its extensive circulation. 'The Byways have produced', Waite notes in 'Dealings in Bibliomania', 'on a moderate estimate, six hundred million copies of books innumerable, not one of which makes for greatness, while most are irretrievably bad as literature. But they are the kind of badness which is entertaining, wonderful, strange, bizarre, unthought of.'⁵⁶ With the byways of literature so prolific, and so effective, what need had any readers for the main thoroughfares? What need for anxious inscription and management of social problems? For Machen and Waite, it was not the social world with which popular fiction concerned itself, but rather the Unknown one. Portals into this numinous space were omnipresent, in railway book

⁵⁴ For an example of these views, see Machen's ham-handed satire on socialism and feminism in his other piece of early twentieth-century Pickwickiana, *Dr Stiggins: His Views and His Principles* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1906). As Machen's contribution to the 1937 pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War* (1937) makes clear, his staunch anti-socialism did not falter in later life; here he is one of only 5 out of 152 solicited contributors to express his support for Franco's fascists. See *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War* (London: New Left Review, 1937).

⁵⁵ A.E. Waite, 'Biographical Sketch', *Transcendental Magic*, by Eliphas Lévi, v-xx, (p. xi). Equally indicative of Waite's *fin de siècle* political sensibilities is his dismissal, in 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature II,' of G.W.M. Reynolds's radical serial stories for their propensity to 'pand[er] to the appetites of the lower classes' through a 'political tendency [. . .] too well known to need directer reference,' pp. 65-6.

⁵⁶ A.E. Waite, 'Dealings in Bibliomania', p. 406.

kiosks, cheap newsagents, and lending libraries. Popular fiction offered not an incomplete cure for the public's nagging symptoms or recurrent anxieties, but the possibility of sheer spiritual bliss and occult citizenship.

Despite its lofty ambitions, one might be tempted to conclude that the two men's experiment in critical occult populism was a failure by virtue of its complete omission from the historiography of popular fiction studies. Certainly, if Waite really was the first person ever to take penny dreadfuls seriously as an object of study, as he repeatedly claimed, he has never had his due. Perhaps the mode of occult criticism Machen and Waite proposed was too targeted on an ineffable reception experience, too resistant to the hermeneutic suspicion that continues to pervade Victorian Studies, to fit into established historiographies of popular culture studies. Yet there remain important reasons to remember, even champion, this mode despite its eccentricity and arguable obsolescence. The occultic, ecstatic criticism practiced by Machen and Waite reminds us that the reading and collection of popular fiction had real spiritual value to (some) Victorian readers beyond, or indeed in direct opposition, to any social containment function it offered. More, Machen's and Waite's meditations on the Unknown World of the popular text challenge prevailing characterizations of the late Victorian occult revival as furtive, secretive, elitist, and hierarchical in nature, emphasizing instead British occulture's long-running dependency on popular literary forms and investment in mass-mediated as well as individuated forms of spiritual experience.⁵⁷ Despite the myriad of supernaturally-adept villains, from Svengali to Dracula, who litter the pages of late Victorian popular fiction, the occult text as recognized at the *fin de siècle* need not always traffic in illicit threat and anxiety—

⁵⁷ For an example of this tendency to emphasize the secretive and hierarchical nature of the occult revival at the expense of its more democratic and popular tendencies, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 2, 5.

need not always, in the case of *Pickwick*, be *about* the occult at all— but could instead, through its serialized rhythms and grotesque excesses, be a superlative vehicle for ecstatic communion between mass audiences and the divine.