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<th>A New Series from Britain: Arkana</th>
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A NEW SERIES FROM BRITAIN:
“ARKANA”


Routledge and Kegan Paul, a major London publisher, has just launched a new series of paperback books called “Arkana” described as “Timeless Wisdom for Today”. Some of the books in the series are reprints, e.g. of the Wallis-Budge translation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Others are too popular, or too exclusively Oriental, to be reviewed here. There remains a core of new publications on the Western esoteric tradition, reflecting timeless wisdom, it is true, but also bearing the stamp of current interests in the British Isles.

Two of these books, those by Caitlin and John Matthews and by R.J. Stewart, come out of the British magical tradition, best known in the past through the activities of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, and now largely through the work of Gareth Knight, whose books on Qabalah have been translated into French and whose guidance these authors acknowledge. The Matthews say that “most modern esoteric schools trace their descent from the Golden Dawn, and through it, knowingly or not, make contact with both the Rosicrucian impulse and the great Classical and pre-classical foundations” (II, 46). One can recognize here the influence of the Qabalistic “pathworking” technique practised by
this school, some of whose exercises are published for the first time in *The Western Way*.

These authors — and such is clearly the intention of the Arkana Series as a whole — have all taken on the formidable task of combining rational and factual discourse with the findings of intuition and inspiration. In *The Western Way*, historical and analytic chapters alternate with meditative exercises in which the reader is invited to penetrate through active imagination to the living reality of the ideas just expounded. These are inner journeys and visualizations which, though based on traditional symbolism, leave room for the person to make his or her own encounters on the “Inner Plane”. Such practices, characteristic of many more or less closed schools, are here deliberately offered to people without such allegiance, in the belief that they may thereby “connect [...] to the infinite worlds around us, [...] bring back the wisdom of the otherworld to our own dimension and make it a lasting part of our own eternal becoming” (II, 236). The Matthews, fully aware of the possible dangers of unsupervised dabbling in the occult, hedge their methods around with all possible safeguards, warnings, and protections. At the last resort, they say, one can go to them for help! This is a weighty responsibility, but I am certain that it has been taken on with the sanction of whatever guides, inner and outer, preside over this phase of British occultism.

The Matthews conceive of the Western tradition as a dual one, and this is how they describe its origins:

> Once, there was no purely “Native” or “Hermetic” tradition; only a universal response by the Firstborn to the Earth-lore and Star-magic of their shamanic priests. Later, as the single religious impulse of the Foretime split into separate cults, these two approaches, which we may think of as chthonic (earthly) and stellar, grew further apart, until the beginnings of the Hermetic traditions were seeded in Egypt and the Hellenic world, while in Europe the Native tradition remained more or less grounded in the magic earth. (II, 16).

These two approaches are:

The Native Tradition, more intuitive, earth-conscious, Goddess-oriented; and the Hermetic Tradition, with its emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge, oneness with the godhead, superconsciousness. Together they balance each other out: the one probing deeper into the first mysteries of human awareness; the other seeking to utilize this inner understanding in a clearer, expository way [...] The Hermetic Way is grounded in the perennial philosophy; the Native Tradition in the Otherworld. (I, 3)

Volume I is dedicated to the exploration of this Otherworld, variously called “earthly paradise, heaven, happy hunting ground, hell, the land of faery, the astral plane, heightened consciousness and the collective unconscious” (I, 104). The material is folktale and tradition from Celtic, Arthurian and other British sources (including Breton), culled from an
impressive breadth of reading and brought alive through the pathworkings. On the intellectual level alone, it is a remarkable integration of the mythical, the popular, the ancient and the modern threads in the native British tradition. The introductory chapter gives a real insider’s view of the current condition of British esoterism, and there is no doubt that the Matthews know from experience the Otherworld of which they write and to which they provide the means of entry. With their devotion to the chthonic gods and goddesses, the Genii Locorum, semi-mythic heroes, folklore and ceremony, they are leaders in the current movement which seeks to revitalize Britain and, accepting its temporal decline, to make it instead the spiritual leader of the world. Pilgrimages to Glastonbury and rites at stone circles, the plotting of ley-lines, Celtic folk music, alternative lifestyles, veneration of the Goddess: these are manifestations of the longing for a New Age when King Arthur shall awaken and the Wasteland of the West bloom again. Far from being a marginal subculture of hippies and the like, this trend has attracted some very influential people in Britain. Its social and psychological effects can only be positive.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to equate such “mesoterism” with the Sophia Perennis. One hopes that not too many people will put down the first volume of The Western Way without taking up the second. To my mind, it would have been preferable — whatever the historical sequence, and even of that I am not convinced — to have reversed the order of volumes, so that the Hermetic Tradition with its metaphysical principles could have acted as a base from which to approach, and control, the atavistic energies of the Native one.

Volume II of The Western Way is a fascinating and persuasive account of the Gnostic, Rosicrucian and Qabalistic tradition, up to its present incarnations. The purpose of the exercises in this volume is to enable the practitioner to make contact with an “Inner Teacher” — assuming that an outer one has not already been found. It responds to the yearning so often felt by those setting out on the spiritual quest, and so often met halfway by various impostors and maniacs. The authors feel confident that this kind of deception will not occur in Inner Plane work carried on according to their directions. I wish I could be as sanguine. A glance at the annals of occultism is sufficient to show that there is as much opportunity for deception in the “Inner” as in the outer world. There is especially the danger of universalizing one's own experience, and of becoming inextricably attached to a particular occult energy-complex. The higher Tantric schools, whose practices are in some ways similar, guard against this, and also against the philosophical dualism that is its inevitable consequence, by constantly stressing that all the gods and demons one could possibly meet in the inner world are no more than projections, only as real (and as temporally useful) as one’s own ego. Even the cloudcapp’s towers of the Mundus Imaginalis must ultimately dissolve in the
Formless, taking with them all the awesome personalities that one is invited to meet there, from Abaris to Jesus, from Krishna to Zeus.

These reservations apart, I find The Western Way a delight to read, stimulating and full of historical and analytical insights from two of the most lively and poetic minds active in the field. Here is one passage among many that gives one food for thought:

Cut off from each other by cultural and religious boundaries, as though by the corridor of time, Catholic and Protestant Europe developed in totally different ways. The speculative Rosicrucianism of Northern Europe countered the much symbolically – curtailed Christianity which Protestantism represented: robbed of the sacramental liturgy, the esoterically unfulfilled turned to the transmutations of alchemy; deprived of the Virgin Mother, alchemists invoked Pan Sophia, the World Soul, the White Queen of the alchemical union. Meanwhile in the Catholic South, where liturgical business went on as usual, philosophy and physics took on the pallor associated with Northern skies: the ascetic thinking of Descartes and Pascal countered the overblown superstitions of a world-order with which science had no accord (II, 218-9).

The Matthews pay much attention to the situation of today, and of tomorrow, in which they feel that certain “Inner alignments” with past periods are being activated. The very publication of their book is evidence of this, after all. But whereas in the past, the Mystery schools were defined in membership and closed to outsiders, now they see a new pattern forming:

For many the mysteries are now best taught in open court, in small groups and seminars where the mysteries are discussed and practically engaged on by gatherings of interested people. Both the authors can testify to the remarkably powerful and effective nature of this kind of work, where seemingly random combinations of people are brought together by the Inner to do some specific piece of work and then separate again, sometimes not to meet for long periods. [...] the solitary worker or the small dedicated band of workers can be just as effective as a fully fledged school -- especially once Inner contact is established. (II, 51-2)

What may surprise many readers is the scant attention paid here to Christianity, which most Gnostics, Alchemists and Rosicrucians considered an indispensable framework for their “Western Ways”. The authors think that there is little hope for Christianity as an institution, yet they are fully in sympathy with the Christian mystics, with the current revaluation of the Feminine in the Church (rare as this is), and of course with the symbolic interpretation of the New Testament. At one point they do let slip the sentence: “What Christ has done changes the laws on the created world for ever afterwards” (II, 226), yet soon afterwards they pass without comment the statement that “None of the gods of heaven will ever quit heaven, and pass its boundary, and come down to earth; but man ascends even to heaven, and measures it... without quitting the earth” (II, 236, quotes from
Western esotericists do divide quite sharply into those for whom Jesus Christ is central and unique, and those for whom he is not. The Matthew's mentor, Gareth Knight, is in the first category; they themselves, it seems, do not wish to decide the matter in this book. Their management of the question is skilful, and, given the context, wise. It is worth mentioning that several of the loose ends in *The Western Way* are taken further in John Matthews' two books on the Grail: *The Grail: Quest for the Eternal* (Thames and Hudson, 1981; French translation forthcoming) and the anthology *At the Table of the Grail* (Routledge and kegan Paul, 1984), as well as in Caitlin Matthews essays. Being still only in their thirties, one can expect them to produce much more of value.

R.J. Stewart is cited in *The Western Way* as one who has "explored the British Underworld tradition by means of shamanic entry-meditation over the course of many years" (I, 105). His own book on *The Prophecies of Merlin* uses his discoveries to illuminate the enigmatic prophecies that were incorporated by Geoffrey of Monmouth into his *History of the Kings of Britain* (circa 1150). Stewart regards these prophecies, which have always been a puzzle to medievalists, as an adaptation by Geoffrey of a body of oral tradition whose historical origins are lost, but whose source is a spiritual impulse ("Merlin") whose reality and undiminished energy cannot be gainsaid.

Stewart combines systematic diagrams with suggestive interpretations, essay with vision, in an effort to unite the two worlds of the head and the heart. The result is a book full of brilliant ideas and insights, for clearly Stewart knows the reality of "Merlin" perhaps more intimately than anyone alive; but this reality is not always best served by trying to form national systems around it. At one point, by a rather forced, and, as he admits, tentative, fitting of the Prophecies to historical events, he reduces them to the level of that perennial time-waster, Nostradamus. Much more valuable is his exploration of their symbolic content, aided by a wide knowledge of the "Western Way" both Native and Hermetic. Here, as in the Matthews' first volume, the legends and myths of Britain are presented as a living source for self-knowledge and self-transformation, and as evidence for a very ancient initiatic tradition that can be rediscovered and reactivated by deliberate inner work.

Stewart's book is also a meditation on history itself. He surveys the Prophecies with a vision that soars past our own time to the very end of the Solar System, and concludes with an Appendix on "The Creation of the World". Another provocative chapter identifies "genuine 'esoteric' or prophetic and visionary consciousness" as "the origin of the fundamental left-wing in modern politics" that reappears in every century, from Merlin's to our own, in order to bring about transformative change. Finally, his explanation of the destiny of those who pass "beyond the Goddess" to the annihilation of the ego shows a familiarity with Tibetan and Zen Buddhism,
to which (rather than to Christianity) he likens the native Western system of inner development.

The Cult of the Black Virgin, by a well-known Jungian analyst, connects in several ways with the preceding books. The British esoteric tradition has, on the whole, welcomed the archetypal psychology of C.G. Jung, who is seen to have explored independently much the same Otherworld of psychic and occult reality, and to have given the West a new exoteric vocabulary for approaching it. It is of course the Gnostic and visionary Jung rather than the clinician and the scientist that appeals here. In current practice, teachers and work bases on archetypal and transpersonal psychology shade indistinguishably into those with qabalistic and Hermetic allegiances, and Begg’s work seems to reflect this synthesis.

The thesis of The Cult of the Black Virgin is that the black cult statues, in which France is particularly rich, “represent a continuation of pagan goddess-worship and [...] some may once have been idols consecrated to Isis of other deities” (p. 130). Thus the ancient devotion was, and is, perpetuated in the very heart of Christendom, sometimes to the embarrassment of the Church (just how embarrassing may be judged from the title of one of the chapters, “The Whore Wisdom in the Christian Era”). Obviously an inveterate Francophile, Beggs has toured many of the sites where Black Virgins are to be found, and he remarks on the contrast between the popular devotion to them and the uneasiness of their clerical proprietors. A lot of them have been stolen lately. Thus he explains their attraction:

The first glimpse of an ancient statue of the Black Virgin shocks and surprises. Five minutes in contemplation of her suffice to convince that one is in the presence not of some antique doll, but of a great power, the mana of the age-old goddess of life, death and rebirth... Against the frenzied fashion for denying, defeating and transcending nature, the Black Virgin stands for the healing power of nature, the alchemical principle that the work against nature can only proceed in and through nature (pp. 130-1).

Such a theory cannot but delight Jungians and other who deplore the devaluation of the Feminine in official Christianity and in the Western culture formed by it. But Begg goes much further than this. Asking “Is the Black Virgin a symbol of the hidden Church and of the underground stream?”, he associates her with the persistence of Gnosticism, with the Cathars and Templars, and with the whole web of speculation and conspiracy theory spun by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln in their book The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail (Jonathan Cape, 1982). Begg expounds all this, and much more, in a hundred pages of breathless information in which one has the uneasy feeling of reading his card-index. Only in the last chapter, “The Symbolic Meaning of the Black Virgins”, does he relax and allow his intuition to speak. Even then he
does not touch on the deeper levels of this figure, of which Frithjof Schuon has written: “La couleur sombre [...] se réfère à la non-manifestation divine, dont la Vierge est le support en sa qualité de mère du Verbe.” (Etudes traditionnelles, 1940, p. 188). For many people the chief value of the book will be the Gazetteer that fills its second half: a descriptive list of about 450 Black Virgin (302 of them in France), which must be the most up-to-date and comprehensive treatment in any language.

The Arkana Series has an integrity and a practical purpose that deserve to meet with success. Even its mundane (and doubtless better-selling) titles such as How to Stop Smoking encourage elementary steps on the path of deliberate work on oneself. But unfortunately these first books bear all the marks of hasty editing and careless proofreading. The ones by Stewart and Begg could have been much improved if a good editor had done a little reorganizing and a lot of rephrasing, while the Bibliography of The Western Way is crammed with misprints, missing accents, and inconsistencies of style. Such neglect of standards which certain “New Agers” doubtless regard as pedantic and outmoded only makes it harder for those who are trying — as in the present periodical — to build bridges between esoterism and the Academy. One cannot expect the Academy to take works of symbolism and Hermetism seriously if the etiquette of humanistic scholarship in spurned on the other side.

Joscelyn GODWIN