

An Eco-Alchemical Vision:
Hermetic Writing in Twentieth-Century British Literature

Laura Van Dyke

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Department of English
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

Abstract

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examines the intersection of alchemical thinking with contemporary green discourses. This project focuses on four writers from the last century: W. B. Yeats, Charles Williams, Lindsay Clarke, and Patrick Harpur. It considers a wide selection of their writing across literary genres, including the novel, the short story, the essay and poetry. While each of the texts under consideration figures the relationship between the human and the nonhuman world in different ways, reading them alongside one another reveals a shared preoccupation with the status of the material world. For these writers, the alchemical tradition offers a way of both speaking and thinking about physical phenomena that affirms our complex entanglement with materiality. Like the medieval and Renaissance alchemists, all four writers seek to disrupt the rigidity of the boundaries often erected between what dominant modes of thinking in the Western philosophic tradition have categorized as organic and inorganic. My analysis of each writer will draw out how the material is represented in their literary work, and what we might gain from reading their work ecocritically. There are thus three converging lines of inquiry that will frame this project: first, how does this minor current of what I am describing as “eco-alchemical” fiction and poetry fit within larger movements in twentieth-century British literature; second, how do these four figures recuperate alchemical thinking for twentieth-century and contemporary audiences; and third, what does this contribute to the current field of ecocriticism.

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Introduction

At a literary symposium held in Poznań, Poland in 2007, British novelist Lindsay Clarke delivered a speech entitled “The Alchemy of Imagination.” In it, he argued that there are a significant number of twentieth-century British writers—including poets like W. B. Yeats and Ted Hughes and novelists like James Joyce, Malcolm Lowry, John Cowper Powys, Patrick White and Doris Lessing—who, like him, “have all drawn deeply on hermetic modes of thought in order to articulate in [literature] their experience of the world” (1). Clarke follows many hermeticists in seeing alchemy as the fullest manifestation of these “hermetic modes of thought”; as both a philosophical system and as a protoscience, medieval alchemy has its roots in a worldview that Clarke believes maintains “contemporary relevance,” especially when it comes to the environmental issues we face today (11). Clarke is joined in this belief by Patrick Harpur, a friend and fellow novelist who shares Clarke’s conviction that beneath the strange and arcane metaphors and language of the alchemists lie important insights into how we can better relate to the natural world, insights that can inform our present-day conversations about how we might achieve more ecologically-sustainable ways of dwelling on our planet.

Clarke and Harpur are not alone in pointing out the relationship between literature and alchemy. In recent years, literary scholars have increasingly noticed the many authors in English literature who find in the vocabulary, symbology and imagery of the alchemists resources for their own writing. Elmar Schenkel’s 1998 essay “Exploring Unity in Contradiction: The Return of Alchemy in Contemporary British Writing,” for instance, argues that while literature and alchemy “have a long standing relationship, both fertile and critical” and “writers have always taken a critical interest in the subject of alchemy,” literary interest appears to be increasing among contemporary writers (213). He further claims that since its “central idea is

transformation or transmutation, alchemy has become the symbolic field for all kinds of writing that explore or celebrate processes of individual, social or spiritual change” (215). In *Hermetic Fictions: Alchemy and Irony in the Modern Novel* (1995), a critical study of alchemy that explores the nature of the fascination alchemy holds for many so writers, David Meakin lists over a dozen novelists who draw on imagery and concepts from the alchemical tradition, including Gustav Meyrink, Lindsay Clarke, Marguerite Yourcenar, Umberto Eco, Michel Butor, and Amanda Quick. Meakin argues that one of the reasons alchemy has returned as a viable source of symbology for modern writers is that the pejorative and dismissive view of alchemy that became mainstream in the modern scientific era was overturned by twentieth-century thinkers, such as Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and Gaston Bachelard, who each challenged reductionist interpretations of alchemy by taking seriously the insights of the alchemical tradition. Similarly, Timothy Materer’s *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (1995) opens by declaring that his interest lies in how the inclusion of alchemical themes and motifs by various poets “reveals a modern recovery of discarded beliefs and modes of thought” (xiv). Materer examines the influence of alchemy upon the imagination of twentieth-century poets specifically, such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle, Robert Duncan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and James Merrill; he argues persuasively that while each of these writers engages with the alchemical tradition in different ways and for different reasons, alchemy is among those aspects of hermeticism that have most inspired and informed the poetry of the last century.

Although Clarke and Harpur share many of the same concerns as these writers who want to recover some of the psychological and spiritual wisdom embedded in alchemical texts, they differ in the way they attempt to apply the insights of the alchemical tradition to the current environmental conversation. Clarke makes the same argument that ecocritic Kate Rigby does in

Topographies of the Sacred (2004), namely, that “the alchemists prefigure the emergence of deep ecological thought in our own time,” given how many of the key assumptions underlying various “green” ways of thinking can be found in the writings of the alchemists (11). The most basic of these assumptions is, simply, that the earth is alive;¹ as Rigby points out, because one of the central tenets of alchemy was the idea that base metals grew in “the womb of the earth,” until they were gradually refined into increasingly precious ones—until they became, eventually, gold—alchemy “thus assumes a living earth” (145). Far pre-dating James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, then, the medieval and renaissance alchemists intuited an earth that was somehow animate, and consequently responsive to human interaction with it. The earth as a whole, as well as the material entities that make up the structure of the planet—the rocks, minerals, and metals that are often considered inert and lifeless by post-Cartesian science—were regarded by the alchemists as sharing in the same vitality and life force that animates vegetative life and human and animal bodies. A second fundamental assumption that the alchemists made about the earth that anticipated the kind of ecological thinking that gained ground in the early days of the environmental movement was what they referred to as the doctrine of correspondences: that everything is interconnected and linked into a unified whole, or that each part of the whole corresponds to another part. Thus in the alchemical worldview, what the alchemist performs externally upon metals in his laboratory he also performs upon his internal self; in Harpur’s words, alchemy “requires the ultimate translation: that of the absolutely other, the non-human

¹As English biologist Rupert Sheldrake notes in *The Rebirth of Nature*, what we mean when we say something is “alive” is as speculative, scientifically speaking, as what we mean by “dead.” The shifting vocabulary different eras and cultures have used to express life—be it “the life-force, the breath, the spirit, the soul, the subtle body, the vital factor, or the organizing principle” or, today, often simply “energy” (97-98)—is indicative of our inability to come to a consensus about what, exactly, constitutes life. However, here and throughout I will follow Jane Bennett in using “alive” as a way to refer to the sense in which all matter is in-process, or involved or entangled in webs of relationship and interaction. It’s also worth noting here, though, Bennett’s reminder that “alive” does not simplistically mean “good”—for instance, garbage dumps and viruses are alive, by most definitions of the word (3-5).

(inorganic matter) into terms of ourselves” (*Mercurius* 383). Both Clarke and Harpur believe this idea of a correspondence or translation between nonhuman and human has implications for ecological discourse, given that so many of our environmental crises can be traced back to our species’ failure to consider the nonhuman.

While neither author has so far received attention from ecocritics, I will suggest that their work is worth taking the time to read ecocritically. What I am calling their “eco-alchemical” vision opens up a new and potentially promising avenue of discussion for literary scholars seeking to examine the relationship between literature and the environment. While ecocritics have found fruitful many other currents of thought in European intellectual history, such as Romanticism or process philosophy, the alchemical tradition has not yet been seriously considered in the same way. This project will therefore ask what the alchemical tradition might have to offer ecocriticism, and why these authors look to it rather than to some of these other ways of thinking about our relationship to the natural world. It will also argue that reading the texts included in this project with an eco-alchemical lens opens them up in a way that has so far not been explored seriously by literary critics.

In recent years, the number of ecocritics calling for a reorientation towards the material world has grown. Many of the voices involved advocate looking to marginal or forgotten ways of understanding the human relationship to the earth, and mining these traditions of thought for resources when it comes to framing our conversations in the environmental humanities. Thus both Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood, for instance, have found in Australian indigenous cultures valuable insights that sometimes overlap with what in the Western philosophical tradition might be described as panpsychism or animism. One of the early works of ecocriticism to call for a recovery of German phenomenology, David Abrams’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*

(1996), advocates for a reconsideration of the animistic assumption that other beings who make up the more-than-human-world share sentience with us, a perspective that he argues is grounded in the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Similarly, Tim Ingold and Nurit Bird-David both use anthropological arguments to ground their conviction that animism is worth critical reassessment today, and highlight the ways in which many animistic modes of relating to the nonhuman world do not assume the divide between human and environment that many dominant models do today. The new materialism, which is often described as a “return” to matter, recuperates the work of philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and Pierre-Félix Guattari, in order to encourage a re-evaluation of the ways in which we conceive of the agency of nonhuman actants, which include both biological entities like bodies, plants, bacteria and viruses, as well as non-biological ones like weather systems, metals, information networks, and chemical elements. New materialists such as Jane Bennett also draw on the vitalist tradition, represented in the writing of figures like Alfred North Whitehead, to argue for a liveliness or vitality embedded within the nonhuman material entities that we are entangled together with in complex networks of reciprocity. And finally, many ecocritics, such as Kate Rigby and Jonathan Bate, find in the European Romantic movement currents of thought that can be fruitfully applied to our conversations about nature writing and literary texts that represent the physical environment. What this project proposes is that, like these other traditions of thought, medieval and Renaissance alchemy too has something to offer ecocriticism. Especially as it comes to consciousness in the work of Clarke and Harpur as an ecologically-inflected form of alchemy, ecocritical approaches to the twentieth-century British novel could be enriched by considering how this recovered alchemical view of the material world might speak to current conversations in the environmental humanities.

In order to give a context to Clarke and Harpur's writing, I will situate their work both historically and literarily; in other words, I will provide an overview of the medieval alchemists' beliefs, as well as trace Clarke and Harpur's literary precedents. This introductory chapter will therefore explain what the alchemists believed about the nature of the world, what they were attempting to accomplish in "the Great Work," why their way of thinking died out, and how it was eventually brought back—albeit in a different form—by the occult revival of the early twentieth century. The second and third chapters will analyze two important literary forerunners to Clarke and Harpur's contemporary fiction: W. B. Yeats and Charles Williams. Yeats and Williams were both invested members of hermetic orders, through which they gained extensive knowledge about hermetic ideas generally and about alchemy, specifically. Both writers are notable for their deep engagement with alchemical content in their literature. Although neither Yeats nor Williams ever spoke directly to the kind of environmental issues that chapters four and five argue Clarke and Harpur do, their writing foregrounds many of the issues with which later, more ecologically-conscious writers, engage. Furthermore, they both function not only as important influences on Clarke and Harpur's writing, but also as models for how to synthesize creatively their own personal commitments with some of the central tenets of the alchemical worldview.

i. Historical Backgrounds and Methodological Approach

Before we look at the literary texts produced by Yeats, Williams, Clarke or Harpur, it is important to first establish the historical and theoretical framework to what these writers, situated in what I am calling an eco-alchemical tradition, are trying to do in their work. This will include

both an overview of what medieval alchemy entailed and a discussion of how it was incorporated into twentieth-century occultism, primarily through hermetic organizations like the Order of the Golden Dawn. Because it was this Order that most profoundly influenced the literary culture of the last century, it is worth analyzing its beliefs and teachings in detail, as well as considering the background to its doctrines and practices.

Although its golden age occurred during the early Renaissance, alchemy arrived in Europe during the medieval period. Occult historian James Webb notes that medieval culture embraced alchemy, in part, because it appeared one of the “more spectacular symptoms” of hermeticism (135). Hermetic philosophy may be roughly defined as a set of esoteric teachings grounded in the exoteric practices of the occult: these include, but are not limited to, astrology, magic, the Tarot, the Cabala, and alchemy. Although alchemical traditions appear within ancient cultures from the Indian subcontinent and eastern Asia, the mythical origins of what became medieval European alchemy lie in Hellenistic Egypt, when supposedly the god Hermes imparted divine secrets to humanity in a collection of writings, later gathered under the rubric *Hermetica*. A. E. Waite writes that the general consensus among “Hermetic authorities” is that the first alchemist was an early-medieval era scholar from the Islamic world named Abou Moussah Djafar al Sofi, a man who is remembered today only as Geber² (*Alchemists* 44). From the ninth to the twelfth centuries, alchemy was primarily practiced by successive Arab alchemists, the most famous of whom was the Persian philosopher Avicenna. After the rediscovery of Greek philosophy by European scholars in the twelfth century, the body of literature produced by these Islamic alchemists was translated and gained relatively exalted status, James Webb claims, partly “because of the association of the *Hermetica* with Neo-Platonic currents of thought which carried

² It is Geber who gave us the word “gibberish”—a reference to the purposefully arcane language through which he communicated alchemical secrets. Later alchemists would follow in the tradition of linguistic circumlocution he began.

with them the intellectual prestige of Greek antiquity” (135). Alchemy is often labelled “the hermetic art”—that is, the foremost manifestation of a system of thought hermeticists incorporated into Western culture.

In the cultural memory of the West, however, only one aim of medieval alchemy has survived: the transformation of lead into gold (Lembert 35). Although it is true that many alchemists practiced physical alchemy—the exoteric side of the art—this practice had a larger purpose than the mere material acquisition of wealth. The esoteric side of alchemy was always concerned with the inner transmutation of the adept, or the process of changing the human soul from a lower to a higher state. What especially Clarke and Harpur draw attention to in their novels is how remarkable it was that the alchemists seemed to have believed that the two processes were inextricably related—that the material and the nonmaterial were so closely bound together that to speak of the one was to include the other. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant makes a strong case that in the centuries after mechanistic science replaced holistic ways of seeing the world, such as the one we find in the alchemical worldview, an “incredible transformation” took place, wherein “[l]iving animate nature died, while dead inanimate money was endowed with life. Increasingly capital and the market would assume the organic attributes of growth, strength, activity, pregnancy, weakness, decay, and collapse” (288). In the same way that once the alchemists spoke of stones and minerals as having agency, vitality, and a life-cycle, so now today it has become common to speak of “liquid” currency, the “growth” of investments, and the way money “circulates” in the economy, like blood circulates in the human body. Because of their resemblance to the sun, and their association with the divine—gold coins were minted in the temple of Juno Moneta in ancient Rome, from which we get the words *money* and *monetary*—monetary gold has always been an evocative symbol, but modern money is even

more alive today: “filled with a breathlike spirit, subject to inflation and deflation. . . . Money is a human creation, and so is the economy that generates it, but it has taken on a life of its own. Economic forces rather than natural forces have come to dominate our lives” (Sheldrake 32). It is not surprising that in this kind of context, the experiments of the alchemists to produce gold would be interpreted simply as the attempt to achieve material wealth. However, before carbon-fuelled capitalism became the backdrop to modern life, the idea that the “gold” of the alchemists might have signified more than just economic assets was well-established by the medieval European and English alchemists.

The first English alchemist, Waite claims, was Roger Bacon, a Franciscan friar who was born sometime in the early-thirteenth century (Waite 65). Bacon had a profound influence on the development of European alchemy—after studying at Oxford, he took up a lectureship at the University of Paris, working alongside Albertus Magnus, another leading alchemist of the day, who would go on to tutor Thomas Aquinas. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, a large enough body of writing had emerged for medieval alchemists to confidently proclaim a general consensus on their major propositions: namely, that the transformation of the human from a lower to a higher order of existence was possible, and that this transformation could occur by the transmutation of metals (13). To this end, the alchemists explored in their laboratories what Waite calls “a comprehensive theory of organic and inorganic development” (180-1), as a way to understand not only their own ontological makeup, but also that of metallic elements.

For the alchemists, the line that separated the organic from the inorganic was fluid, thin, and perpetually subject to change and flux. Their writings make it clear that the alchemical worldview rests on the maxim *as above so below*; this foundational assumption, encoded in what

they called The Emerald Tablet,³ captures the alchemists' sense of the interrelatedness of all reality, or the unity of self and other, spirit and matter, and human and nonhuman nature. Thus, what the alchemist performs in the laboratory, he also performs upon his soul. The changing, or in alchemical language the transmutation, of base metals into gold corresponds to the transmutation of the human soul from an imperfect to a perfect state. The alchemist's goal is therefore to redeem, or perfect, both matter and spirit. Swiss historian Titus Burckhardt, a leading expert on the history of alchemy, gestures towards its spiritual significance when he defines it as "the art of the transmutations of the soul" (23). He continues:

In saying this I am not seeking to deny that alchemists also knew and practised metallurgical procedures such as the purification and alloying of metals; their real work, however, for which all these operational procedures were merely the outward supports or 'operational symbols,' was the transmutation of the soul. The testimony of the alchemists on this point is unanimous. (23)

Although the medieval alchemists were concerned primarily with the transmutation of their own individual selves, there are also hints throughout some of their writing that a secondary interest was the transformation, too, of the larger society. The alchemist John Dee, for instance, who worked as an advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, was a key figure in shaping the politics of the Elizabethan Age, and in establishing the imperial aims of what he was the first to call the "British Empire" (G. Williams 124). While it was never the main emphasis for them, the twentieth-century appropriators of their thinking, I will show in the following chapters, are heavily invested in extending the language of transmutation from the spiritual to the material world, or from the internal to the public sphere.

³ Otherwise known as the Smaragdine Tablet, this was an anonymously authored piece of writing that the alchemists attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, and which thus functioned in their thinking as divinely-sourced wisdom.

The alchemists named the process of transmutation the *magnum opus*, or the Great Work. Necessary to this work was the *prima materia*, or first matter, a substance without which the work could not progress. The nature of the *prima materia* was one of the most closely guarded secrets of the alchemists; described variously as a mixture of salt, sulphur, iron, lead, mercury, or sulphur, or referred to by indecipherable synonyms like “dragon” or “serpent,” the first matter went by “a thousand names,” none of which conclusively reveal its formal substance (Harpur *Mercurius* 14). As in many branches of hermeticism, secrecy was vital to the alchemists. Not only did their enclosed and self-referential language protect from the uninitiated what they saw as a sacred mystery, but the metaphoric and symbolic grammar they used was the most appropriate way to communicate the deep truths of the art. Leon Surette notes that the “problematic nature of the communicability of occult knowledge—of wisdom or gnosis—is one key to an understanding of the relation between the occult and literature, because it makes a hermeneutic or theory of interpretation an invariable component of occultism” (27). Indeed, necessary to any “occult” hermeneutic is a recognition of the shifting and slippery nature of alchemical language; while this often deters readers today from engaging with alchemical texts, it also allows writers and artists the freedom to appropriate those texts in their own distinct ways. What the alchemists are explicit about, however, is that the work operates through three main stages. In the first *nigredo*, or black stage, the elements undergo a chaos of dissolution and separation; in this stage, the elements blacken and the soul descends into what the alchemists interpret as a kind of death. In the *albedo*, or white stage, the elements are purified and the soul achieves illumination or enlightenment. The final stage of the work is the reddening, or perfecting, of the soul during the *rubedo* process. Each of the three stages depends upon the repeated separation and re-unification of the materials, or what the alchemists term *solve et*

coagula. The ultimate unification that completes the work is imaged as a “marriage” of elements, alternatively paired as above and below, sun and moon, mercury and sulphur, fire and water, air and earth, or king and queen. The successful completion of the work, the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage, is indicated by the achievement of the *lapis philosophorum*, the Philosopher’s Stone.

With the Philosopher’s Stone, the alchemists believed they could not only produce the *elixir vitae* that bestows immortality, but also change base metals into gold. The achievement of the Stone thus corresponds to the successful transmutation or perfection of the alchemist’s internal self. Many alchemists Christianized this process, interpreting the transmutation of metals as a cipher for the sanctification of sinners. Nevertheless, while alchemy found a place in the medieval period alongside Christianity, it remained in the margins of theological orthodoxy. Alchemy emerged as a blend of Gnostic and hermetic myths, which often complemented but also challenged some of the claims of Christianity. According to James Webb, the most obvious of these is that while Christian theology insists fallen humanity can only hope to be saved through God’s grace, hermetic philosophy claims humanity can attain salvation apart from divine intervention (226). More precisely, hermeticism puts a greater emphasis than Christianity on the human ability to access the divine immanent within the self. Furthermore, even those alchemists who acknowledged Christ had redeemed humanity believed he had neglected to redeem the created world—a task they felt invited to continue (Harpur *Secret* 148). In the alchemical worldview, the unity between matter and spirit, and between internal and external, means the alchemist has the responsibility to perfect not only himself, but the material world. Thus, while many churchmen did appropriate alchemy as a spiritual metaphor for the process of sanctification, it also elicited the opposition of the established church, especially the post-Reformational church.

It was not the church, however, but the emergence of modern science that dealt the greatest blow to alchemy. Once the modern scientific method was born, the physical practice of alchemy was tested according to the empirical method, refuted by post-Enlightenment scientists, and “excluded from the canon of the newly established natural sciences” (Lembert 21). However, the ideas of the medieval alchemists persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the form of an esoteric mysticism that, while no longer seen as a serious scientific discipline, remained an underground resource for many artists and writers who found creative inspiration in its language, imagery, and symbolism. In Mark Morrisson’s *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (2007) he provides compelling evidence that the alchemical tradition never wholly disappeared from the cultural surface, and even functioned as an important touchstone in the early development of physics as a discrete scientific discipline; in the early years of the twentieth century, for instance, following Rutherford and Soddy’s 1902 publication about radioactivity, many members not only of the public but also of the scientific establishment began using the language of alchemy once again, and even wondering whether radium might be, after all, the Philosopher’s Stone of the alchemists⁴ (12). The existence of organizations such as the Alchemical Society of London—founded in 1912 and including a mix of both respected scientists and occultists, such as A. E. Waite, on its council—reveal, Morrisson claims, that there was a productive reciprocity between the occult and the physical sciences devoted to investigating the nature of matter (29).

⁴ Morrisson writes, for instance, about Frederick Soddy and Ernest Rutherford’s experiments in their lab at McGill University in 1901, when they discovered radioactive thorium was turning into an inert gas; as the report goes, Soddy called out “Rutherford, this is transmutation!” to which Rutherford replied “For Mike’s sake, Soddy, don’t call it *transmutation*—they’ll have our heads off as alchemists!” (4). It’s interesting that Rutherford, however, eventually gave in to what the public insisted was indeed a kind of “modern” alchemy, even to the point of titling his last book, published in 1937, *The Newer Alchemy* (5).

That scientists began using alchemical language to describe what was happening in atomic physics is not surprising, given that this era coincided with the early years of the occult revival—a movement that brought alchemy back into the purview of Western culture. As Wilson Leigh comments in the opening to *Modernism and Magic*, that “the period encompassing the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century experienced an occult revival is now well established” (1). Just when the so called “Age of Reason” seemed to be gaining cultural momentum, “there was an unexpected reaction” against its methods and governing assumptions, and a return to traditional forms of belief many had thought buried (Webb x). As has been well-documented by numerous cultural and intellectual historians, by the beginning of the twentieth century, secret societies and occult orders had sprung up all across Western Europe, the United States, and, especially, across Britain.

The most important of these was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. As Gerald Yorke writes in his foreword to *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, it was “the crowning glory of the occult revival” that began in the late nineteenth century and has persistently influenced Western culture to this day (ix). Three texts, which remain among the most authoritative accounts of the history and practices of the Golden Dawn—namely, R.A. Gilbert’s *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians* (1983), Israel Regardie’s *The Golden Dawn: An Account of the Teachings, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn* (1970) and Francis King’s *Ritual Magic in England: 1887 to the Present Day* (1970)—all demonstrate conclusively that the Golden Dawn was a greater influence on twentieth-century occultism than any other hermetic order. More importantly, for this project, is the large number of artists, thinkers and novelists who were members of the Golden Dawn, including W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Maud Gonne, Mina Bergson, Algernon Blackwood, Aleister Crowley, Edith Nesbit, and Evelyn Underhill, to

name a few of the more well-known members. The involvement of these figures helped both the Golden Dawn and the ideas it advocated to gain a far higher profile in the literary world than they would have otherwise.

The Golden Dawn was formed in 1888 by three members of the Rosicrucian Society: W.R. Woodman, Samuel Liddell Mathers, and William Wynn Wescott. Their intention in forming an occult order together was to synthesize the different streams of Western esotericism into one organized system. They believed initiates of the Order would thus be equipped to embark on a path of spiritual transformation and ascent to the divine. Members of the Golden Dawn performed rituals and participated in elaborate ceremonies that were intended to bring the individual into a higher state of consciousness and attain spiritual perfection; fittingly then, one of the most frequently-found metaphors in Golden Dawn liturgies is that of alchemical transmutation. While these liturgies are arcane and often difficult to make sense of, as Ellic Howe observes, “in their strange way these texts belong to the minor literature” of this period (59). One of the secondary goals of this project is to begin the process of recovering some of these texts and reconsidering their place in the formation and development of twentieth-century British literature.

Although the Golden Dawn flourished from its inception until the beginning years of the twentieth century, by 1903 a prominent member of the Order, A. E. Waite, had taken control of the London Temple. Waite strongly objected to the Order not only condoning but also often promoting the use of practical magic, and wanted to replace the magical tradition inherited from the Order’s founders with Rosicrucian mysticism (King 95-96). Gavin Ashenden states that this insistence upon “the priority of the mystical over the phenomenal” was a serious issue in esoteric English culture, and the primary reason for the schisms that began to plague the Golden Dawn

around this time (*Alchemy* 8). When the Golden Dawn split, it broke apart into two main splinter groups: one was led by Waite, and the other by Yeats. Waite and Yeats thus represent two different positions on the hermetic spectrum. For instance, Yeats' response to the schism was the publication of a pamphlet titled "Is the Order of R.R. and A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?"—a rhetorical question he answered with a resounding "yes." Conversely, Waite used the opportunity to direct the future of the Golden Dawn by asserting the inward spiritual quest of the adept. In a lecture entitled "The Interior Life from the Standpoint of the Mystics," Waite championed "the superiority of the 'transcendental,' the inner experiences of the mystic, over the 'phenomenal,' including all magical phenomena (Ashenden 7). In the next chapter, I will consider what the implications of this divide between the material and the "transcendental" are for our understanding of Yeats' work, since it is here that his appropriation of the alchemical tradition becomes most relevant to ecological questions.

ii. W. B. Yeats

Although the Golden Dawn is central to the hermetically-informed literature with which this project will engage, nevertheless, as Ellic Howe observes in *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, "[p]ossibly the only people who have ever taken the trouble" to read the rituals and histories of the Golden Dawn, apart from occultists, are "those who have a special interest in W. B. Yeats" (59). And indeed, in many ways Yeats is the major conduit of hermeticism in twentieth-century English literature. Because his work is therefore so foundational to this project—in different ways and to varying degrees, he influenced the work of the three other writers with which this thesis will engage—I will treat him first. Graham Hough argues

convincingly that the need to accommodate Yeats' work into the mainstream of modern literature "played the largest part in bringing the idea of an occult tradition into the literary consciousness" (6). In other words, because critics could not ignore the hermetic elements in the Yeats canon, they were forced to engage in the kind of discussion that Thornton Weldon suggests they might otherwise have ignored, given how alien to many Western modes of thought it is (64). Critics could not dismiss Yeats' hermeticism because even a cursory look at his biography reveals an enduring, deep-seated preoccupation with the occult.

Chapter one will consider Yeats' contributions to hermetic literature, as both a pioneer and as a participant in what I am describing as a small but important literary movement. Although Yeats is today categorized as an Anglo-Irish rather than a British writer, because the majority of works this chapter analyzes were written before 1921, or before Ireland gained national independence, they can arguably be understood as part of British literature as well as part of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. More importantly, perhaps, Yeats' influence upon subsequent British writers, especially upon hermetically-informed writers, places him at the forefront of a distinctly British movement in literature, which justifies examining his work in this context. Williams was an editor and enthusiastic reader of Yeats' literature, and closely connected to him through their shared association with A. E. Waite. References to Yeats are scattered throughout Clarke's writing—he frequently acknowledges Yeats as a major influence, and goes so far as to situate a fictionalized "Willie Yeats" inside his novel *The Chymical Wedding*, where he functions as a mouthpiece to promote the alchemical worldview. Similarly, Patrick Harpur has stated that he (like many other writers) came at hermeticism first via Yeats' work (Interview). Yeats' particular understanding of alchemy, largely learned from the Golden Dawn, thus made a significant impact on both writers.

Something both Clarke and Harpur seem to have taken from Yeats is an emphasis on the need to balance the claims of the internal and the external, or the spiritual and the material, in their conceptualization of the alchemical transmutation. That Yeats would be a model for this reconciliation between what are often construed by hermeticists as polarities might appear surprising, since, as William O'Donnell rightly points out, all the occult systems Yeats was involved in were fundamentally antimaterial; one of the aims of Theosophy, for example, was to oppose the materialism of modern science, and, in a kind of Gnostic redemption of the soul, to free the self from the confines of material existence, and liturgies used in the ceremonies of the Golden Dawn frequently instructed its members to “quit the material and seek the spiritual” (58). And indeed, much of Yeats' poetry—especially his early work, written during the height of his involvement in the Golden Dawn—evokes a longing to escape the limitations of a physical existence and an accompanying attraction to the disembodied, spiritual life that was, for Yeats, represented by the world of faery.⁵ This preference for the mystical at the expense of the phenomenal is likely the main reason why ecocritics have not yet paid real attention to Yeats' work,⁶ despite the fact that those of his poems which celebrate the Irish landscape could be read as a kind of nature writing; in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” for instance, Yeats “bemoans the loss of the nature of his youth within the confines of a paved civilization,” in much the same way that Wordsworth and other Romantic poets do in their nature poetry (Wenzell *Emerald* 2).

⁵ See, for instance, some of his best-known early poems such as “The Stolen Child” (from *Crossways* 1889), “A Faery Song” and “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (from *The Rose* 1893), or “Aedh Hears the Cry of the Sedge” (from *The Wind Among the Reeds* 1899).

⁶ Tim Wenzell points out in his article “Ecocriticism, Early Irish Nature Writing, and the Irish Landscape Today” that this lack of attention is not exclusive to Yeats' work, but that ecocriticism up until the time his article was published (2009) had neglected most Irish literature. Eóin Flannery makes the same point in “Ireland and Ecocriticism: An Introduction” (2013) although she lists several works published more recently, including Christine Cusick's edited volume *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010); Donna Pott's work *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (2012); and Eamonn Wall's *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (2011).

Thus while it is true that Yeats does often appear quick to dismiss the phenomenal, his writing also reveals, at times, an equally strong pull towards the material world. It is significant that his first published volume of poems, *Crossways* (1889), begins with a lament that “The woods of Arcady are dead, / And over is their antique joy” (ll.1-2), in the collections’ opening poem, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd.” This concern with Ireland’s receding forests is picked up thematically throughout this volume, and reappears in later poems, such as “The Two Trees,” where the speaker mourns the “barrenness” that causes “broken boughs, and blackened leaves” (l.26). Yeats’ poems are filled with references to images derived from the natural world, like trees and roses and streams, which are intended both to function as signifiers of actual phenomena and to gesture towards a corresponding spiritual reality they contain. Although there are times when this tactic is dismissive to the material, it also allows Yeats, at other times, to elevate nonhuman nature beyond the realm of inanimateness and instrumentalization to which it is often consigned. Thus those poems that envision the Irish landscape as the home of the Tuath Dé Danaan and the Sidhe and describe the sacred trees and living streams that make up their realm participate, in their own way, in what ecophilosopher Val Plumwood terms the “re-enspiriting of the realm designated material,” a project that “includes reclaiming agency and intentionality for matter” (18).

In the next chapter, I will read Yeats’ writing through a lens that is focused on the status of the material world in his work, and show how his hermeticism interacts with his often-vacillating approach to the question of how the phenomenal and the transcendent relate to each other. My analysis will include a wide selection of poetry from the early, middle, and late periods of Yeats’ life, as well as a less-commonly read short story, titled “Rosa Alchemica.” When considered in the context of Yeats’ connection to the teachings of the Golden Dawn, this

story—which deals with members of a hermetic society attempting to co-exist with the other inhabitants of their village—reveals Yeats’ anxiety about the current form of the occult; his concern that hermeticism may not offer a real solution to the world’s problems is embodied in the narrator’s final rejection of its doctrines. What the hermetic adepts’ failure to co-exist with the townspeople demonstrates is that the esoteric principles of their hermeticism are not easily applied to external realities. Given his commitment to Irish politics, this was often a source of uneasiness for Yeats, and much of his writing reveals a life-long attempt to resolve this conflict.

Yeats seems to want the teachings of the Golden Dawn and his own alchemical doctrines to effect change in the social and political realms, but this hope is often accompanied by a suspicion that his esoteric beliefs do not, after all, extend to the external world. Thus in the sequel to “Rosa Achemica,” Yeats’ companion story “The Tables of the Law,” the protagonist—the same unnamed narrator—explicitly admits his fear that “the Order of the Alchemical Rose [is] not of this earth,” and that continued association with it would result in all his remaining ties to the “social order” being “burnt up and [his] soul left naked and shivering among the winds that blow from beyond this world” (211). In other words, the alchemical vision the Order offers, Yeats suggests, risks turning adepts into people “whose inner life had soaked up the outer life” (208), people who lose their connection to external social realities. Although one of the reasons Yeats initially joined the Golden Dawn was that he saw it as “force for the changing of society” (Gilbert *Secret Texts* 303), he often vacillates between wanting alchemy to be relevant in the public realm, and yet at the same time worrying that its application might be only private and internal. Because both Clarke and Harpur populate their novels with characters who resemble Yeats in this respect, I will take seriously Yeats’ struggle to balance the claims of the inner, mystical life with that of the socially-conscious, outward-looking hermeticist. Although Yeats

scholars are increasingly attending to the hermetic concerns evident in his work, in this chapter I want to connect his hermeticism—and particularly his alchemical interests—with his political and social concerns, because I believe it is here that he offers writers like Clarke and Harpur a template for how alchemical thinking might be brought to bear on social issues like environmentalism.

iii. Charles Williams

In 1937, Yeats stated that Charles Williams was the only reviewer of his final major work, *A Vision*, to see “the greatness and terror” of the reality he explored (*Vision* 228 n.61). Williams was indeed a sympathetic reviewer, and reader, of Yeats’ writing. He had long been an admirer of Yeats prior to working with him on the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, an anthology of contemporary poetry that Yeats edited for the Oxford University Press, where Williams was a senior editor for most of his adult life. In addition to working together on this collection, Williams and Yeats also shared a mutual friendship with A. E. Waite and a joint association with the community of hermeticists Waite gathered around himself. Where Williams and Yeats found the most common ground, though, was in their mutual fascination with alchemy, and their shared conviction that it, and the wider hermetic tradition in which it is embedded, could challenge the reductive scientific materialism they both believed was dominating British culture during the early part of the twentieth century.

Like Yeats, Williams was certain that the alchemists’ vision of the world, or what he calls the “old alchemical wisdoms in which Mr. Yeats found interest” (*Poetry* 63), had enduring value. As Gavin Ashenden points out, running throughout Williams’ fiction and poetry are

consistent references “to the language and concepts of alchemy and transmutation, embedded in the wider tradition of related magic” (72). Although both Williams’ biography and his literature reveal a deep-seated and enduring interest in hermeticism,⁷ this aspect of his work has been habitually downplayed by Williams critics. In this chapter, however, I will read both Williams’ fiction and poetry through an interpretive lens that takes seriously his hermetic commitments. Moreover, this chapter will demonstrate that Williams’ use of alchemical language and symbology opens his work up to ecocriticism. Although Williams has not yet been read this way, I will argue that there are good reasons to consider what his writing has to say about the nonhuman world and about our relationship to it. That Williams’ critics have so far not given attention to the ecological aspects of his work is understandable; he certainly appears, on the surface, an odd figure to include in an ecocritical project. A decisively urban poet, Williams’ writing demonstrates such little interest in the rural countryside to ensure he will never be categorized as a nature poet, at least not in the way most ecocritics define the term; in writing his poem “Taliessin in the Rose Garden,” for instance, Williams’ botanical ignorance meant he went to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for information about English roses, rather than the outdoor world in which he was never as at home as when he was walking the streets of London (Lindop 316). Nevertheless, Williams’ writing does, I will argue, offer the potential for ecocritical engagement.

Reading Williams ecocritically, however, requires enlarging the boundaries around some definitions of ecocriticism. Though it is commonly regarded as a field of study that, in Cheryl Glotfelty’s often-cited definition, means simply “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xix), in recent years the number of ecocritics calling for a

⁷ A committed member for much of his adult life, beginning in 1917, of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross—a splinter group of the Golden Dawn run by Waite—Williams oversaw the leadership of the London Temple for Waite during a period in the mid-twenties, functioning as the Magister Templi (Gilbert 76-77).

broader understanding of what we mean by “environment” has been increasing. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace’s collection *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, for instance, arose out of their conviction that the “depth and breadth” of texts that ecocriticism might address in future testifies to “how elastic and permeable the boundaries of this field can be” (8). Similarly, Steven Rosendale argues that although the promotion of the nature-writing genre remains an important goal for ecocritics, it also has to be “recognized that our received nature-writing canon and the relatively small arsenal of critical approaches that have been applied to it have been too narrowly limited,” and that, consequently, a “growing number of scholars are clearly interested in expanding the purview of ecological practice by widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation” (xxvii, xvii). In my analysis of Williams’ work, I will join these scholars in the attempt to use the tools and methodologies of ecocriticism to interrogate a “nature” that signifies more than simply landscape. I will thus follow Greg Garrard in adopting “the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism,” which, he asserts, is “the study of the relationship between human and nonhuman, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (5).

Where Williams’ writing most clearly invites ecocritical analysis is in his formulization of what he names “coinherence.” When he began using the term, coinherence was an obscure word that Williams mined from patristic theology, meaning to inhere, or the act of inhering together. Williams uses it, throughout his writing, to signify the essential interrelatedness of all reality. It could be argued—and has been, by many Williams scholars—that coinherence, and the related idea of substitution, or exchange⁸—is the central concern of all his writing. The language of coinherence and interrelatedness that Williams uses shares many points of reference with

⁸ Substitution and exchange, or the act of putting oneself in another’s place, can be defined as the methods by which coinherence operates in the world. Although the language through which Williams formulates this idea is primarily theological, it also has echoes of alchemical thinking.

other systems of thought that emphasize holism or organicism, such as process philosophy and ecological science. Like both of these, coinherence as Williams formulates it challenges the kind of mechanistic and reductive science that seeks to break reality down into its constitutive parts and treat those parts as separate units.

A recently-published biography of Williams by Grevel Lindop offers new insight into much of his life and work. In *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (2015), Lindop argues persuasively that it is time for literary critics to re-evaluate Williams' place in twentieth-century literature, especially in British poetry. I will thus devote the majority of my discussion of Williams to his two major collection of poems, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944), poems that together comprise his Arthuriad—Williams' fullest attempt to give voice to his vision of a coinherent world and his understanding of what that might mean for human and for nonhuman life. Like Waite, Williams believed that the Grail myth, culminating in the attainment of the Grail by Galahad—whom Williams names “the alchemical Infant” (“The Last Voyage” l.34), born so that the unity of the “organic body” can be regained (“The Vision of the Empire” l.1)—was among the richest myths in Western literature to evoke the process not only of private, inner transmutation (or what we might now, in a psychotherapeutic culture, call individuation or actualization) but also of public, communal transformation. In Williams' version of this myth, one of the controlling themes, as Gavin Ashenden notes, is the relationship between the social order established in Arthur's Camelot and “the stricken land” beyond it (99). The effect of the Dolorous Blow on the ravaged countryside parallels what happens inside the walls of Camelot, which becomes its own kind of wasteland. Williams' commentary on the poems makes it clear that this correspondence between inside/outside or urban/rural or civilization/nature is intended to evoke his idea of coinherence,

where the Grail quest is undertaken as much to reinstate order in Camelot as it is to “restore fertility to the land outside the castle” (*Figure 251*). This chapter will explore the ways in which Williams’ writing about coinherence resembles the kind of ecological thinking that questions rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman categories. It will also demonstrate, however, that while he lays the groundwork for a world-affirming ecology predicated on alchemical principles, Williams does not take the next step of applying his vision—rather, it is writers in the following generation who much more intentionally use alchemically-inflected writing to speak into environmental issues.

iv. Lindsay Clarke and Patrick Harpur

The last chapters of this thesis will treat two contemporary writers, Lindsay Clarke (1939-) and Patrick Harpur (1950-), who are part of the next generation of writers. Both Clarke and Harpur write fiction that is clearly indebted to the hermetic tradition engaged with by Yeats and Williams, but they invest this tradition with a new kind of ecological significance; for both Clarke and Harpur, alchemy is valuable primarily because it contains insights into the nature of matter and our relationship to the phenomenal world. They thus believe it is vital to recover aspects of this tradition of thought. Clarke and Harpur’s novels are written against the backdrop of environmental crisis, and they read far more politically than the texts of the previous writers. Unlike the other writers treated in this thesis, neither Clarke nor Harpur are members of any occult orders (at least they have not yet publically admitted this). Rather, they represent a different generation of writers, one that comes at hermeticism second-hand; both show a

familiarity with the *Golden Dawn* in their fiction, and both are heavily indebted especially to Yeats' work, but these interests are political more than they are spiritual.

In "The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism," Astrid Bracke rightly notes that the late twentieth and twenty-first century English novel has been largely bypassed by ecocritics, despite the fact that it offers numerous possibilities for ecocritical analysis (423). This lack of engagement is at least partly due to issues of genre: since its inception, the novel has primarily been concerned with the inner psychological life of its narrators and protagonists, and this focus on characterization at the expense of the external world has caused many ecocritics to prefer poetry, especially lyric poetry that engages explicitly with the natural environment. Furthermore, as Dominic Head suggests, unlike nature writing or environmentally-applicable poetry, the novel—and especially the contemporary novel—is "a mode of discourse which speaks to an increasingly urbanized population whose concerns appear to have no immediate connection with the non-human environment" ("Problems" 66). However, Head's argument rests on the assumption that the urban and suburban spaces in which these readers dwell are disconnected from the natural world, a supposition that only holds true if nature is seen to operate exclusively in spaces untouched by the human. What the two contemporary novelists included in this project show is that this dichotomy between the nonhuman and the human can, and should, be challenged—and that we have a model for how to do so in the writings of the medieval alchemists.

While it would be possible to fit any one of Clarke's novels into a study of eco-alchemy, this chapter will consider only *The Chymical Wedding* (1990) in detail, given that in this novel Clarke not only most explicitly engages with, but also deliberately promotes, the alchemical tradition. In what he describes as "a kind of alchemical text for our time presented as fiction"

(“Alchemy” 10), Clarke both draws on the language and underlying structures of medieval alchemy and presents readers with an apologia for its continuing relevance. The novel is a dual setting text, where the story shifts back and forth between a Victorian and a contemporary timeframe. In the nineteenth-century setting, a hermetic adept named Louisa Agnew is working on completing a study of spiritual alchemy.⁹ Her story increasingly overlaps with the story in the contemporary timeline, where Alex Darkin is attempting to make sense of a recent divorce. He is aided on what the novel describes as a journey towards wholeness by Edward Nesbit, an aged and bitter poet, and his young American lover Laura, a graduate student of parapsychology and a kind of clairvoyant with a psychic connection to Louisa. In this timeline, Edward and Laura are busy researching and reconstructing the life of Louisa in order to learn what caused her to destroy her research. As Edward explains to Alex: “We’re trying to find out as much as we can about [what happened to Louisa] because we think it matters. We think it has a bearing on things that have gone badly wrong in the world . . . that it might offer some hope of a way through” (157). Much of the novel’s plot revolves around different characters asking why we have the kind of environmental problems today that we do—where “forests die . . . the seas are fouled, [and] we can no longer trust the air” (167), and what we might do about it.

For Edward and Alex, arriving at satisfying answers to these questions involves gaining greater awareness about the history of hermeticism. The novel suggests that when the modernist

⁹ Louisa is closely modelled after Mary Anne Atwood, a real nineteenth-century hermeticist who, because of the unusual and mysterious circumstances surrounding her life, has been a source of interest for occultists since her publication of *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (1850). In the very early days of the nineteenth-century esoteric revival, Atwood published a prose treatise on the spiritual significance of alchemy. Upon reading it, her father, Thomas South, decided that she had revealed far too much about the secrets of alchemy than he believed was permissible. Although several copies had already been sold, South bought up as many remaining copies of her book as he could and burnt them. Historians have put forward several theories both about his motivation for and her response to this extreme action, but their story remains a mystery. As Mark Morrison points out, because Waite was among the many hermeticists in the twentieth-century who was influenced by Atwood’s rendering of alchemy as a purely spiritualized discipline, Atwood’s story and beliefs became incorporated into many Golden Dawn teachings (43).

project produced the kind of reductive scientific materialism that has dominated mainstream Western culture since the Enlightenment era, there was a way of thinking about the material world that went underground. This hermetic tradition—which has inhabited culturally marginal areas of society ever since—did centuries ago what the environmental movement is doing today, namely, challenge many of the key assumptions that characterize scientific materialism. One of these assumptions is that the material world is other than and detached from us, and can thus be used instrumentally with no negative consequences to our own species' health. As one of Clarke's characters in the novel claims, it is this "perception of the nature of matter" that alchemical thinking, which insists on the correspondence between matter and spirit, or human and nonhuman, forcefully challenges (166).

Harpur agrees with Clarke that writers and artists are in the best position to help cultivate a more ecologically mindful perspective, and that recovering some of the insights that alchemy offers about the nature of our relationship to the nonhuman world is an important part of this process. This chapter will primarily look at his 1990 novel *Mercurius*, a text that showcases Harpur's understanding of the alchemical tradition and depth of engagement with its vision of the world. In a recent interview, Harpur credits his time at Cambridge with introducing him to hermeticism, where his supervisor was a Yeats scholar who shared with him "rare books from the Order of the Golden Dawn" that resonated with his sense of the non-material world (Interview). *Mercurius*, like *The Chymical Wedding*, is a dual-setting text that, while located in the same geographical space, alternates between two different time periods. In one timeline, the vicar of a small church in the English countryside is consumed with the alchemical experiments he is secretly undergoing in his basement. In the present day, a woman named Eileen leaves her hectic London life to find sanctuary in this same village, taking up residence in the now run-

down vicarage. There, she discovers the alchemical diary of “John Smith” and begins piecing together what happened to him and the other townspeople as he attempted the “Great Work.” As she discovers more about her home’s former owner, she too becomes allured by the dream of the alchemists. Like Clarke, Harpur uses alchemy to highlight what he sees as the most pressing problems of our time. Both are preoccupied with the fissive and contradictory aspects of contemporary existence, which manifest themselves first as an estrangement of the self from itself, and second as a disruption between the self and the other. The characters who populate these and Clarke and Harpur’s other novels are invariably damaged by their experience of life and isolated within their own fractured consciousness.

In addition to using hermeticism to address the split within the modern self and between self and other, Clarke and Harpur’s novels demonstrate how alchemical imagery can also reveal how fractured our relationship is from our environment. In *The Chymical Wedding*, Clarke makes the atomic bomb the ultimate a symbol of the fissiveness of our world, where matter and spirit are not only estranged but also in conflict. For the medieval alchemists, the external and material process of physically working in the alchemical laboratory corresponded to the internal and spiritual process of transmuting one’s soul from an imperfect to a perfect state; the outer transmutation is interchangeable and interdependent with the inner one, affirming the essential unity of matter and spirit. With the atomic bomb, however, this unity between the internal and the external is violated. As Smith argues in *Mercurius*, “When we exploit matter, as if it had no spirit, the latter will reflect this and, obligingly, manifest itself as material power. For example, the atom bomb” (109).

Although they are more interested in applying hermeticism to actual social and environmental problems than either Yeats or Williams were, in several important ways, Clarke

and Harpur are inheritors of the same vision that their predecessors communicate in their alchemically-informed writing. By considering these writers alongside one another, I will be able to show that, rather than existing as isolated figures within twentieth-century British literature, they form part of a small but significant literary current that merits more critical engagement than it has so far been given. More importantly, I will show that while it is an as yet unexplored area of literary scholarship, the intersection of ecocriticism and this alchemically-informed literature offers a new way of thinking about the natural environment and its relation to English poetry and prose of the last century. Given the unsustainable trajectory we are currently on, ecocritic Kate Rigby urges scholars in the humanities “to explore ways of proceeding otherwise,” and “to reconsider paths not taken in order to demonstrate that even in the West a different passage to modernity might have been possible: one that could provide some pointers as we seek to move toward an alternative modernity” (259). As one of these “paths not taken,” the alchemical tradition might help us discover resources we have previously overlooked.

CHAPTER II
W. B. YEATS AND THE “THINGS BELOW”

*“Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed. . . .
 For things below are copies, the Great Smargadine Tablet said”*
 ~ W. B. Yeats, “Ribh denounces Patrick”

*“Man has wooed and won the world, and has fallen weary, and not, I think, for a time, but with a
 weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like
 withered leaves. He grew weary when he said, ‘These things that I touch and see and hear are
 alone real,’ for he saw them without illusion at last, and found them but air and dust and
 moisture”*
 ~ W. B. Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body”

William Butler Yeats is generally regarded as one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century. Born in 1865 and an active poet, playwright and hermeticist until his death in 1939, Yeats also stands at the forefront of a literary tradition that can be described as “hermetic”: his lifelong interest in occult belief systems, and his determination to promote these systems in his writing, make his work critical in any discussion of hermeticism in the twentieth century. More specifically, Yeats’ embrace of alchemical language and concepts in his poetry and fiction make his work crucial to this project; not only Charles Williams, but also Lindsay Clarke and Patrick Harpur directly respond to Yeats’ appropriation of the alchemical tradition, in part because Yeats is, arguably, the first writer in the twentieth century to engage at such length and in such explicit detail with alchemy. An important aspect of Yeats’ legacy is that he offers an example of how alchemical and more broadly hermetic themes might enrich modern literature. As Timothy Materer argues in *Modernist Alchemy*, Yeats is “the major source of occultism in modern poetry in English,” and an inspiration to many subsequent hermetic writers (21).

However, although Yeats is probably the most well-known figure in the last century to incorporate alchemy into his writing—his work certainly has a wider audience and has been

given more critical attention than the other writers included in this project—because he so often equivocates on what the nature of the distinction between the material and non-material worlds is, his appropriation of alchemy is often hesitant. On the one hand, Yeats was interested in the spiritual transmutation of the human self, a goal that put him in line with the medieval alchemical tradition. On the other hand, many of his writings demonstrate his fear that pursuing adeptship would untether him from the phenomenal world. As a result, Yeats' work can oscillate between a kind of antimaterialist flight to what the medieval alchemists called the "above," and a contrasting embrace of the concrete, physical matter that constitutes the "below." This chapter will argue that these two impulses that compete in Yeats' writing should not disqualify him from ecocritical consideration: rather, by wrestling with the antimaterialism that so often accompanies hermetic systems of thought that are lifted into post-Enlightenment contexts, Yeats laid some of the groundwork for later, more environmentally-conscious writers to re-imagine alchemical thinking and adapt it to form explicit ecological arguments. It is on this basis that Yeats' work can productively be read as proto-ecological.

The questions at the heart of this analysis of Yeats, therefore, follow two lines of inquiry: first, how does he understand the nature of the relationship between the material and the nonmaterial, and second, how does that understanding contribute to his literary treatment of the physical world? Engaging these two questions will require a brief analysis of Yeats' time in the Golden Dawn, since in many ways it was his involvement in this hermetic society that impacted his perspective on how the phenomenal world and the nonmaterial world—or the world of faery—relate to each other. I will then consider a selection of Yeats' poetry, which demonstrate both his attraction to hermeticism and his fear of what involvement in the transcendent world might entail. The text I will then focus my discussion upon is his short story "Rosa Alchemica,"

an explicitly alchemical treatment of the place of human agency in a world ordered by spiritual forces.

i. W. B. Yeats: biographical backgrounds

As Graham Hough points out, the presence of Yeats' writing in modern literature has, more than anything else, brought the idea of an "occult tradition" into literary consciousness (6). In other words, because critics could not ignore the hermetic elements in the Yeats canon, they were forced to engage in the kind of discussion that James Webb notes academics tend to avoid on account of its presumed "intellectual unrespectability" (v). The reason why critics could not dismiss Yeats' hermeticism is because even a cursory look at his biography reveals an enduring, deep-seated preoccupation with the occult.¹⁰ Biographer Richard Ellmann traces Yeats' hermeticism to an early interest in Theosophy, which Yeats encountered while still a young student; in 1885 at age nineteen, Yeats read A. P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, both of which excited him, and, arguably, initiated a life-long interest in hermeticism (63). In 1887, Yeats met Madame Blavatsky, who made a great impression on his mind; when she formed a special Esoteric Section for those Theosophists who wanted extra instruction, Yeats eagerly and quickly joined (66). Though he was asked to resign his membership after only a few years in the society, the experience was a crucial step in his intellectual journey.

¹⁰ In addition to Ellmann's work, other significant studies in the area of Yeats' personal involvement with hermeticism include Virginia Moore's *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* (1952); George Mills Harper's *Yeats's Golden Dawn: The Influence of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn on the Life and Art of W.B. Yeats* (1974); Mary Catherine Flannery's *Yeats and Magic: The Earlier Works* (1977); James Olney's *The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy—Yeats and Jung* (1980); Graham Hough's *The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats* (1984); and Kathleen Raine's *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W.B. Yeats* (1986).

Yeats was evicted from Blavatsky's Order because he refused to discontinue his experimentations with practical magic. Though Madame Blavatsky strongly disapproved of "black magic" and discouraged her followers from practicing magic at all, Yeats ignored her instruction and attended a spiritualist séance, where he so lost control of himself that he beat his head on the table (Ellmann 65). Following this episode—for which Blavatsky severely scolded him—Yeats pressured her for permission to carry out various occult experiments, which included, in one instance, attempting to resurrect a flower from its ashes and, in another, trying to move a needle in a glass case through psychokinesis (Materer 27). When she finally lost patience with his continued involvement in practical, or theurgic, magic, Yeats was effectively excommunicated from the Theosophical Society. That Yeats was willing to give up his membership in what was, at the time, a respected and influential organization¹¹ indicates how seriously he took this issue of theurgic practice; for the rest of his life, Yeats would continue to pursue the kind of magic that he believed would provide him with power over the phenomenal world.

It is therefore not surprising that on March 7, 1890, Yeats was initiated into the Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society that offered him not only the resources to supplement his already growing knowledge of hermeticism, but provided him with greater opportunities to explore the boundaries between the mystical and phenomenal realms. The Golden Dawn "replaced the passivity of spiritualism and respectable public-spiritedness of the Theosophical Society with the excitement of magical power," providing "an irresistible lure" to the young Yeats (M. M. Harpur 154). The opportunity for practical experimentation that the Golden Dawn provided, Ellmann claims—in the form of magic demonstrations, rituals and ceremonies—

¹¹ Margaret Mills Harper points out, for instance, that because of its innovative mixture of Eastern mysticism and Western science, The Theosophical Society was "a magnet for disaffected members of the educated public," and attracted many upper class and wealthy members (153-4).

satisfied Yeats' longing for a mystical yet non-confining religion (96), and he would remain committed to many of its teachings for the rest of his life. Yeats' formal induction into the Golden Dawn began in 1890, when he officially bound himself to the Order in an initiation ceremony. In every Golden Dawn initiation, the candidate, who was addressed as an "Inheritor of a Dying World,"¹² was asked, "Why seekest thou admission to our Order?"; Yeats' response, like every neophyte who joined the Golden Dawn, was "My soul wanders in Darkness and seeks the Light of the Hidden Knowledge, and I believe that in this Order Knowledge of that Light may be obtained" (Regardie 21). In addition to this ritual answer, Yeats also recited an oath in which he promised to devote himself to his inner transmutation:

I, Demon Est Deus Inversus,¹³ do bind myself that I will to the uttermost lead a pure and unselfish life, and will prove myself a faithful and devoted servant of the Order. . . . I further solemnly promise and swear that with the Divine permission I will from this day forward apply myself unto the GREAT WORK which is so to purify and exalt my spiritual nature that with the Divine Aid I may at length attain to be more than human, and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my Magus and Divine Genius, and that in this event I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me. (qtd. in Ellmann 99, emphasis in original)

Yeats would have taken seriously the explicitly alchemical language here of "the Great Work." Although Golden Dawn liturgies are peppered with references to the alchemical process, James Allen points out that Yeats' interest in alchemy was not just a consequence of his involvement in the Golden Dawn, as critics have often assumed; rather, Yeats derived much his

¹² This title evokes both the *fin de siècle* consciousness of the Golden Dawn during the time of Yeats' initiation, and its anti-materialist approach to what was, according to many members of the Order, only a "dying world," inferior to the world of Spirit.

¹³ Demon Est Deus Inversus, or "a demon is an inverted god," was Yeats' name in the Order.

alchemical knowledge from his own reading, which included nearly all of A. E. Waite's alchemical texts: *The Mysteries of Magic: A Digest of the Writings of Eliphas Levi* (1886); *The Real History of the Rosicrucians* (1887); *Lives of the Alchemists* (1888); and *The Hermetic Museum* (1893) (17). In other words, Yeats was obviously motivated enough by personal interest to pursue this area of knowledge, apart from the Golden Dawn. This is important, because it means that Yeats was not only taking in the Golden Dawn's frequently antimaterialist interpretation of alchemy, but reading the alchemists themselves, who inhabited a very different world from that of the Victorian and Edwardian hermeticists. He also would have taken seriously the reference in the initiation oath to "be more than human"; at this point in his life, Yeats was excited by what hermeticism claimed to offer, namely, the transmutation of the self into a wholly spiritualized being. Although they would eventually evolve, Yeats' alchemical views during the 1890's and early years of the 1900's closely aligned with the Golden Dawn's instruction to "quit the material and seek the spiritual," what Israel Regardie describes as a kind of motto to which members of the Golden Dawn would have adhered (73).

However, although Yeats' writings consistently demonstrate a strong attraction to spiritual realities, he always holds his typically hermetic antimaterialism in tension with a resolve not to abandon the physical world entirely. Williams O'Donnell's essay "Yeats as Adept and Artist" portrays this tension as a conflict between the contradictory demands of art (or poetry) and hermetic adeptship (59). Although antimaterialism was a fundamental tenet of all the occult systems Yeats would have known, O'Donnell argues, Yeats was painfully aware that the spiritual loyalties of a magus conflicted with a poet's necessary ties to the material world; to be a poet, Yeats had to have some allegiance to the physical world that provided him with the

materials he required to communicate to his readers (68, 59). Much of Yeats' work reveals his life-long attempt to resolve this conflict.

It is unsurprising that these two competing impulses are evident throughout Yeats' writing, since the history of the Golden Dawn's tumultuous existence reveals a similar, ongoing conflict between those members who, on the one hand, wanted to pursue magical experimentation and apply the teachings of the Order to the social or political realms, and those, on the other hand, who wanted the Order instead to emphasize the mystical life. The conflict between these two factions, which had existed since the Order's inception, finally culminated in 1903, when A. E. Waite, who had become increasingly influential within the Golden Dawn, effectively attempted a takeover. Waite, who had always been more of a mystic than an occultist, wanted the Golden Dawn to dispense with all practical magic and physical experimentation. Although one of the things which had attracted Yeats to the Golden Dawn in the first place was its openness to this kind of experimentation, he was nevertheless also sympathetic to Waite's desire to embrace more deeply the mystical potential of the Order. George Mills Harper notes that Yeats thus attempted to mediate between the two factions (*Golden Dawn* 124), a role that he would have been a natural fit for given his own ambivalence about the issue.

Despite Yeats' attempt to arbitrate a reconciliation, the result of Waite's coup was that a splinter group, named the Independent and Rectified Rite,¹⁴ came into being by the end of the year. Yeats remained in the Golden Dawn, now renamed the Stella Matutina, until 1921, but he had lost much of his early enthusiasm, and began to distance himself from formal association with it (M. M. Harper 156). However, the questions that prompted the schism continued to preoccupy Yeats. His writing, especially during the years when his involvement in the Golden

¹⁴ It was from this Rite that the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross eventually emerged, the Order of which Charles Williams was a member.

Dawn was at its height, reveals how uncertain he was about the competing claims of the material and nonmaterial worlds.

Yeats was personally drawn to the idea that he could himself undergo a sort of internal process of alchemical transmutation, something that Ellmann believes was due to his deep dissatisfaction with himself, and his eagerness to be born anew a different man—one without his customary awkwardness or shyness (96). As he writes in “The Autumn of the Body,” an essay from 1898, “certain of us are looking everywhere for the perfect alembic that no silver or golden drop may escape” (193), a reference to the fact that he was, at this point, eager to experience the process of change or rebirth that alchemical thinking promoted. It was not only himself, however, that Yeats wanted to remake: he was also invested in the idea that society at large could undergo a process of transmutation, something that the Stella Matutina faction of the Golden Dawn emphasized. As Ellmann explains:

From the attempt to achieve personal transmutation it was only a brief step to the attempt to achieve a more general transmutation. The order taught that its doctrines should affect daily life. Many members of the Golden Dawn felt that they had the additional obligation of becoming ‘a perfect instrument for the regeneration of the world.’ As Florence Farr said, the true ideal of the adept is ‘to choose a life that shall bring him in touch with the sorrows of his race rather than accept the Nirvana open to him; and like other Saviours of the world, to remain manifested as a living link between the supernal and terrestrial natures.’ Thus the golden dawn of the individual’s transmutation was closely associated with that of the world’s rebirth. (97)

For Yeats, especially as his interest in Irish politics increased, this link between personal and social transmutation was incredibly attractive. It also, however, presented difficulties for him,

because despite how much he desired to be transmuted into something “more than human,” he worried about what he might lose in the process. This anxiety is at the heart of many of Yeats’ early poems, especially, and it is the basis of his short story “Rosa Alchemica,” an explicitly hermetic treatment of the question that long preoccupied Yeats’ mind, namely, whether or not participation in the world “above” is worth giving up the “below” for.

ii. Critical Overview

From the beginning of Yeats scholarship, critics have been uncomfortable with the overt hermeticism apparent in his writing. One notorious protest against Yeats’ occult involvement comes from W. H. Auden, who wrote in 1948,

However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to all that occult is, I fancy, the same: How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats’s gifts take such nonsense seriously? . . . How could Yeats . . . take up something so essentially lower-middle-class—or should I say Southern Californian. . . . Mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient—*how* embarrassing (“Yeats” 188).

Though certainly not as definitively antagonistic to the occult elements in Yeats’ work, T.S. Eliot too found it a source of embarrassment.¹⁵ In “A Foreign Mind,” for instance, his claim that Yeats’ “mind is a mind in some ways independent of experience” is meant to underline the non-empirical nature of Yeats’ philosophic assumptions; according to Thornton Weldon, “Yeats’s

¹⁵ It is worth noting that while both Auden and Eliot responded negatively to the hermetic aspects of Yeats’ work, they both unreservedly praised Charles Williams’ writing, as Chapter Three will show, despite how entrenched much of Williams’ work is in very similar hermetic ideas. While I can only offer guesses as to why Auden and Eliot reacted this way, it likely has something to do with how high-profile Yeats was, in the occult culture of the time, as opposed to Williams’ much more secretive involvement with his own occult order.

openness to a range of experiences beyond what Eliot could admit generated only baffled amusement in the more austere and orthodox intellectual” (69). This is not to say that neither Auden nor Eliot admired Yeats, because they clearly did¹⁶—however, their admiration was always held in check by their conviction that his involvement in the occult weakened rather than strengthened his verse. Though Yeats was to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, when C. S. Lewis described visiting Yeats in 1917 to a friend, he wrote, “I am often surprised to find how utterly ignored Yeats is among the men I have met: perhaps his appeal is purely Irish—if so, then thank the gods that I am Irish”¹⁷ (*Letters* 342).

One of the reasons why literary culture did not recognize Yeats’ significance earlier was because many readers found, and continue to find, his involvement in the occult unsettling. Thus following Yeats’ death, critics tended to align themselves with the reaction of his literary contemporaries. Despite the overwhelming mass of hermetic references, allusions, and imagery in Yeats’ writing, critics often prefer to focus on other sources of creative inspiration or on other biographical influences to interpret his texts. Yeats’ status as a hermetic writer, much less as an alchemical writer, is therefore often overlooked. In Warren Wedin’s meticulously researched catalogue of secondary criticism on Yeats, for instance, he lists over four hundred articles alone, written between 1966 and 2002. Of these, only a handful treat hermeticism even generally, and the ones that do often focus on the Tarot or astrology. Although there are more books that discuss Yeats in relation to the hermetic tradition, few directly address his use of alchemy, despite how often and how deliberately Yeats alludes to the alchemical tradition or works with

¹⁶ In Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*, for instance, the poems’ speaker refers to Yeats as his “master,” while Auden’s eulogy “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” makes it clear that while Auden had some reservations about what was “silly” regarding Yeats himself, he nevertheless admired Yeats’ poetic “gift” that “survived it all” (2.1)

¹⁷ Lewis wrote of his two visits to Yeats in 1921 in separate letters to his father, his friend Arthur Greeves, and his brother Warnie; he offers the most details in his letter to Warnie, where he enthusiastically describes Yeats’ conversation as full of “magic and cabbalism and ‘the Hermetic knowledge’” (*Letters* 531).

either implicit or explicit alchemical themes in his writing. Thornton Weldon argues that this aspect of Yeats' work has been so persistently ignored, and sometimes denigrated, by critics because "it is so alien to received Western modes of thought—and not simply to our explicit ideas, but to our presuppositions and to the underlying attitudes and investments of values these reflect" (64). Weldon further points out that Yeats discomfits critics by effectively setting himself in diametric opposition to some of the defining traits of the modern Western mind, most notably its privileging of scientific empiricism: "what we have in fact cultivated in our intellectual tradition, largely under the impetus of the scientific methodology and of the British empiricist philosophers, is a highly selective stance toward the world" (65), a stance which excludes many of the experiences Yeats saw as most significant in human life.

In 1971, Robert Schuler published "W. B. Yeats: Artist Or Alchemist?" which at the time was the self-declared first "serious attempt" by a Yeats scholar to elucidate the range of meaning contained in Yeats' use of alchemical symbols and doctrines (37). Previous to this article, Shuler claims, only Thomas Parkinson's "The Sun and the Moon in Yeats's Early Poetry" (1952) and Thomas Whitaker's "Yeats's Alembic" (1960) investigated Yeats' use of alchemy, and those only as preliminary studies.¹⁸ Though he does not acknowledge that Virginia Moore's *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* (1954) includes a brief discussion of alchemy in its chapter on Rosicrucian doctrine, or, as James Allen points out, that F. A.C. Wilson also treated certain Yeats texts alchemically already in the late fifties (20), Schuler's article nevertheless was ground-breaking for emphasizing the fruitfulness of analyzing especially Yeats' poetry alchemically. In 1975, Yeats' son and executor made previously unpublished material

¹⁸ James Allen argues that Shuler's claim to be the first to read the alchemical symbolism in Yeats' work also ignores Allen R. Grossman's *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats* (1969) and A. Norman Jeffares' *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1968), two full-length studies published prior to Shuler's article that treat some of the alchemical imagery and motifs in Yeats' poetry (20).

available to the National Library of Ireland and the State University of New York. One of the consequences of Michael Yeats' decision was William O'Donnell's publication one year later of *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats' only (unfinished) attempt at the novel form (Allen 21). Evident in each of the drafts O'Donnell included in his edition is Yeats' persistent attempt to clarify and more precisely define his alchemical philosophy. Though the novel has limited appeal outside of Yeats scholarship,¹⁹ it is important because it reveals how seriously Yeats took alchemy, not only early in his life but also as he matured as a writer.

Although Yeats deals with alchemy more explicitly elsewhere in his work, given the excitement surrounding its publication it is not surprising that *The Speckled Bird* generated a new critical interest in Yeats' relationship to alchemy. Unfortunately, because most critics lacked the necessary background (and likely interest) in the alchemical tradition, much of this scholarship relies upon an over-use of Jungian concepts and language. James Allen's essay "Life as Art: Yeats and the Alchemical Quest" (1981) rightly complains about this dependence on psychoanalytical categories; he points out that though "the fact is now generally acknowledged that there was no influence upon Yeats from Jung nor allusion to Jung by Yeats," there are still critics who read Yeats' use of alchemy only through Jungian theory (22). While Jung's work on alchemy is important and often helpful,²⁰ when literary critics access the alchemical tradition exclusively through a Jungian lens, they risk ignoring or even misreading important aspects of

¹⁹ This is a generous assessment, as even many Yeats scholars dismiss the novel on any other grounds than biographical interest. Awkward dialogue and Yeats' clumsy handling of the plot make *The Speckled Bird*, though unique in the Yeats canon, largely an artistic failure.

²⁰ Jung's two primary works on alchemy are *Psychology and Alchemy* (1940) and *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy* (1963), both of which interpret alchemical archetypes in light of what Jung envisioned as the process of individualization. Jung's intent in both works is to show that alchemy does not, as he famously declared in the forward to the latter, "belong to the rubbish heap of the past, but stands in a very real and living relationship to our most recent discoveries concerning the psychology of the unconscious" (18).

Yeats' thinking.²¹ The critic who has, arguably, most fully considered Yeats' relation to the alchemical tradition is William Gorski. In *Yeats and Alchemy* (1996), Gorski argues convincingly that alchemy provided Yeats with a flexible metaphor to illustrate the human quest toward the divine, one that Yeats returned to throughout his life. Gorski builds from William O'Donnell's argument in "Yeats as Adept and Artist: *The Speckled Bird*, *The Secret Rose*, and the *Wind among the Reeds*" (1976) to demonstrate effectively that one of the central tensions in Yeats' writing—a tension that he attempted to resolve using the language and symbols of alchemy—is his desire for personal transcendence and his simultaneous fear that this transcendence might threaten his material existence.

While a small number of scholars, then, have considered the alchemical aspects of Yeats' work, none of the critics mentioned above have directly related Yeats' use of alchemy to ecocriticism. This is to be expected, since very few studies have examined Yeats' work in general within an ecocritical framework. Two essays that do briefly read Yeats' writing with a view to ecocritical concerns are Oona Frawley's *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth Century Irish Literature* (2005), and Eamonn Wall's chapter in *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010), a volume edited by Christine Cusick. Frawley's essay focuses on Yeats' transition from the idealized pastoralism he embraced as a young writer to his later deconstruction of the romanticized Ireland which he had helped to create, while Wall's discussion of Yeats centers on his participation in the Celtic Twilight movement, and critiques the way in which Yeats and the other members of the movement idealized (and thus objectified) Irish rural life. Both Frawley and Wall are among a small but growing number of critics within Irish literary and cultural studies who have begun applying ecocritical theory and methodology

²¹ Notable studies which address the Jungian parallels in Yeats' work include James Olney's *The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy—Yeats and Jung* (1980) and Ciaran Murray's "The Holy Tree: Alchemy and Arbor Philosophica in the Work of W. B. Yeats" (2000).

to Irish literature. John Wilson Foster points out that if ecocriticism is a synonym of “Green Studies,” as Laurence Coupe suggested in his *Green Studies Reader*, then in many ways Ireland, a country “famously green from abundant moisture,” would seem a natural home for ecocriticism (1-2). Yet, in fact, only lately has the literature of the Emerald Isle been given attention by ecocritics.²²

That critics have not yet given sustained attention to the green, or what this project is calling the “proto-ecological,” content of Yeats’ literature is therefore understandable. As the field of Irish-focused ecocriticism grows, however, Yeats’ work deserves to be a part of the conversation. Although Yeats is one of those authors who has a large enough body of critical scholarship devoted to his work that the attempt to say anything new about him can be daunting, by considering how his treatment of alchemy might open up his work to ecocritical analysis, in what follows, I will show that Yeats’ writing is rich enough and flexible enough, over a century later, to sustain new interpretive approaches.

iii. Representations of (super)Nature in Yeats’ Poetry

Although ecocritics have yet to attend closely to the “green” concerns in Yeats’ poetry, his first published collection, *Crossways* (1889), opens with a lament that “The woods of Arcady are dead, / And over is their antique joy” (ll 1-2), signalling that the loss of the pastoral dream would be one of his ongoing themes.²³ Yeats took care to distance himself from what he later described as those “young English poets” who were “determined to express the factory, the

²² Interestingly, Yeats found the association between greenness and Ireland (especially when it came to Irish politics) so overused that he prohibited his publishers from using the colour green on the covers and bindings of his books (Vendler 24).

²³ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Yeats’ poetry are from Richard J. Finneran’s 1983 edition of *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*.

metropolis” (“General Introduction” 525); unlike those modern urban poets, Yeats was always a resolutely rural writer. It was the physical landscape of the Irish countryside that formed the backdrop against which so many of his poems are set, and it was the rhythms of agricultural life and the shifts of the seasons on which he anchored his portrayals of ordinary human existence. The importance of the rural economy for Yeats is apparent in a politically-inflected speech he gave in New York in 1904:

What is this nationality we are trying to preserve, this thing that we are fighting English influence to preserve? It is not merely our pride. It is certainly not any national vanity that stirs us on to activity. If you examine to the root a contest between two peoples, two nations, you will always find that it is really a war between two civilizations, two ideals of life. First of all, we Irish do not desire, like the English, to build up a nation where there shall be a very rich class and a very poor class. Ireland will always be in the main an agricultural country. Industries we may have, but we will not have, as England has, a very rich class nor whole districts blackened with smoke like what they call in England their “Black Country.” I think that the best ideal for our people, an ideal very generally accepted among us, is that Ireland is going to become a country where, if there are few rich, there shall be nobody very poor. Wherever men have tried to imagine a perfect life, they have imagined a place where men plow and sow and reap, not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke. Ireland will always be a country where men plow and sow and reap. (qtd. in Ellmann 113)

Yeats' anti-industrialism is clear here, as is the valorizing of agrarian life he inherited from his Romantic predecessors. Although, as John Foster justly notes, by current standards the Ireland of Yeats' time was predominantly rural, with sixty-three percent of the population still living in the countryside by the 1930's (2), from Yeats' perspective the scale of the urbanization he had experienced in his own lifetime was cause for alarm. It is thus not surprising that many of his lyrical poems mourn the loss of pre-Industrial Age landscapes, as in "Ephemera" when the speaker walks with his lover among "faded leaves" (l.10), alone but for "A rabbit old and lame [that] limped down the path; / Autumn was over him" (ll.15-16). The image Yeats evokes here—of a nature grown tired, inhabited only by weary creatures—is one he returns to often, especially when he wants to convey an equivalent personal weariness or disillusionment. So in "Words," the speaker questions the value of human existence in "a blind bitter land" where he has grown "weary of the sun" (ll.4-5), and in "My House" nature is represented by "stony ground" and "Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable" (ll.3,5). Similarly, in "The Two Trees," the image of "broken boughs and blackened leaves" (l.28) and hungry ravens perched upon "broken branches" (l.33) corresponds to the "outer weariness" that the speaker feels when he looks upon the world (l.31).

Yeats so often blends the state of the natural world with the concerns of human life because he saw them as entangled with one another. As he writes, tellingly, in "Ribh denounces Patrick," "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed. . . . / For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said" (ll.5,7). This allusion to the Smaragdine Tablet, or the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, makes it clear that when Yeats asserts the interconnection between natural and supernatural here, he is grounding it in hermetic philosophy. The Emerald Tablet was the basis for medieval alchemy's governing dictum, *as above so below*; in other words, that

macrocosm and microcosm are inverts of each other. However, the legacy left by some of the medieval alchemists—especially as interpreted by the Golden Dawn—is not just that these two substrates of reality are interconnected, but that the “higher” level governs the “lower.” So Yeats declares the “things below” to be copies of the things above, a sentiment in line with that stream of hermeticism that blended medieval alchemy with Neoplatonic philosophy.

In much of Yeats’ writing, nature is therefore most celebrated when it “copies,” or reflects, the above. The poems that express this kind of “supernature” include works as wide-ranging as “Into the Twilight,” where he describes “the mystical brotherhood / Of sun and moon and hollow and wood / And river and stream” (ll.10-13), and “Her Vision in the Wood,” where the speaker stands “At wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood” (l.2). This apparent privileging of the realm Yeats designates as spirit over that of matter is likely part of what has so far excluded him from sustained ecocritical consideration. However, what initially looks like simple antimaterialism in Yeats’ literature is, in fact, more accurately categorized as a blend of antimaterialist leanings and Celtic-flavoured animism. For Yeats, the natural world is a “mystical brotherhood” of disparate elements, both material and nonmaterial, in large part because while the inhabitants of faery might belong to the above, they frequently visit and have dealings with the below. In an important passage worth citing in full from an essay entitled “The Celtic Element in Literature” (1902), Yeats explains that belief in this kind of animic world was once commonplace:

Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among the shadows; and that deer, and ravens and foxes, and wolves and bears, and clouds and pools, almost all things under the sun and moon, and the sun and moon, were not less divine and

changeable. They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water-jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels; and when a sudden flight of wild ducks, or of crows, passed over their heads, they thought they were gazing at the dead hastening to their rest; while they dreamed of so great a mystery in little things that they believed the waving of a hand, or of a sacred bough, enough to trouble far-off hearts, or hood the moon with darkness. All old literatures are full of these or of like imaginations, and all the poets of races who have not lost this way of looking at things could have said of themselves, as the poet of the *Kalevala* said of himself, “I have learned my songs from the music of many birds, and from the music of many waters.” (174-5)

For Yeats, an essential feature of the Celtic imagination is that it is a part of this kind of animistic tradition of making “trees, and beasts, and dead things talk with human voices” (175). Thus the Maginogion stories of “natural magic,” as when Gwydion and Math make a woman out of flower blossoms and then baptize and name her, reveal “an ancient worship of Nature” and also a “troubled ecstasy before her” (176), because if the natural world is forever in flux, continually shifting into new forms, and essentially unstable, our relationship to it, too, is uncertain.

In Sinéad Garrigan Mattar’s essay “Yeats, Fairies, and the New Animism,” she astutely observes that there is a “remarkable consonance” between what she regards as Yeats’s “vision of fairy-human-environmental relations” and the recent redefinition of “animism” by contemporary anthropologists like Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, or Nurit Bird-David (138). In his collections of Irish folklore, Mattar argues, Yeats’ “refusal to belittle folk belief as primitive” allies him with these “new animists” (147), who likewise insist that the pejorative dismissal of animic beliefs

that became commonplace in the Victorian era is grounded on a reductive definition of what animism actually entails. In Tim Ingold's words, animism is best understood not as an outmoded, prescientific system of beliefs that imputes life, or spirit, to objects that are in fact inert, but

as a condition of being alive to the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next. Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather . . . it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation. ("Rethinking" 10).

Yeats consistently writes of a world in flux, and of beings who dwell within what Ingold refers to as "a domain of entanglement" (14). The land of faery, as Yeats represents it, does share aspects of the "above" envisioned by his fellow hermeticists, but as a distinctly Irish hermeticist Yeats maintained the close interrelationship between faery and human. The stories he collected from his journeys across the Irish countryside, which he published in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), feature beings who exist alongside humans, and who interact with them almost casually.²⁴ James Pethica notes in "Yeats, folklore, and Irish legend" that Yeats believed the "visionary" knowledge offered in

²⁴ It should be noted that Yeats' valorizing of an Irish peasantry—of which he was not himself a part—involved some unintended implications, not the least of which was that the rural population was more primitive and superstitious than their urban counterparts. See Alison Lacivita's argument in "Wild Dublin: nature versus culture in Irish Literature" (2013) for a more detailed discussion of the impact the writers of the Celtic literary revival had on the future of environmentalism in Ireland.

these stories was alive among the Irish peasantry, though it had been lost to “people of the cities” (*Prefaces* 3-5, qtd in Pethica 131). In other words, it was only those humans who lived, according to Yeats, in harmony with the cycles of an animate nature who existed in relationships of “entanglement” with the beings of faery.

That Yeats was fascinated by the idea of an animate nature is apparent in works like “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” a poem from *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) that imagines a woman born not from flower blossoms, as in the story from the *Mabignogian*, but from a lake trout. When the speaker catches a “little silver trout” (l.8), it immediately transforms into a woman:

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And some one called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air. (ll.9-16)

It is very likely that Yeats is alluding to the same story from the *Maginogion* he references in “The Celtic Element in Literature,” given the closely-related subject matter and mention of the apple blossoms in the trout-maiden’s hair; however, it is significant that here Yeats inflects the metamorphosis with alchemical overtones. By including overt alchemical imagery²⁵ in the

²⁵ Some of the other alchemical symbols that recur throughout Yeats’ poetry include, apart from silver and gold or the sun and the moon, the four elements (especially fire); roses or lilies; the cross (or any other quaternity); images of upwards-movement, such as ladders, stairs, or towers; emblems of cleansing or refreshment, such as wells and

poems' final lines, "The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun" (ll.23-24), he casts the change from trout to girl not just as transformation or rebirth, but as transmutation. She is re-made, through a "hazel wand" (l.3) and a "fire aflame" (l.10) into something wholly other, a poetic image of what Yeats saw as a defining feature of both the Celtic folklore tradition and the alchemical process—namely, the boundless capacity for change. In the same essay, Yeats writes that the early Celts "lived in a world where anything might flow and change, and become any other thing" (178). The sense of possibility Yeats evokes in this statement gets at the heart of what attracted him to both traditions: if even material objects are not stable and fixed, but can transform into something other, or something new, then what was preventing him from changing into a wholly different version of himself?

However, although Yeats was undeniably attracted to the idea of personal transmutation, he also recognized that it came with a cost. By becoming a girl, the trout-maiden lost whatever joy was bound to her piscine existence: the pleasure of moving effortlessly through water, the simplicity of nonhuman consciousness, and the freedom from human pain. Put another way, Yeats worried that transmutation would "refine" his physical self out of existence: "since transcendence of the physical world entailed an erasure of the body and its attendant psychology, [Yeats] fretted that becoming pure consciousness would obliterate his reference points for receiving the physical world, and thereby silence poetic speech" (Gorski 31-32). This anxiety did not lessen Yeats' attraction to the idea of alchemical transmutation, but it did cause him to reflect deeply on questions regarding the nature of the relationship between change and permanence.

Perhaps the poem that most memorably expresses this tension is "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats' first poem from *The Tower* (1928) and today one of his best-known works. The central

fountains, and images that evoke passage from one state to another, such as thresholds, gates, or gaps in walls (Weldon 28).

conflict in the poem is the speaker's quest for meaningful permanence, something the final two stanzas suggest cannot be gained without giving up one's material existence:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.²⁶

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (ll.17-31)

What the poem's speaker is giving voice to here is a preference for the world of pure art, or spirit, over the world of material phenomena; the speaker consequently hopes that the sages imaged in Byzantium's gold mosaics will "consume" his body, or his "dying animal" (l.22), and

²⁶ The phrase "artifice of eternity" is re-used from "The Tables of the Law," a companion piece to "Rosa Alchemica," suggesting that these works were linked in Yeats' mind.

allow him to share in their existence outside of time and thereby free him from the relentless cycle of merely natural life that is “begotten, born, and dies” (l.6). This embrace of the world of “eternity” over the temporal has prompted many critics, including Harold Bloom, to read the conclusion of the poem as a “repudiation of nature” (*Yeats* 345). Bloom cites as part of his evidence for this reading an earlier draft of the poem, where one cancelled line reads, “I fly from nature to Byzantium” (346). Although Yeats later chose to express the dichotomy between matter and spirit that he establishes in the poem less explicitly, his preference for the latter remains clear. The imagery of fire and of gold that Yeats draws upon throughout the poem invites readers to see the speaker’s hoped-for alteration from man to golden bird as alchemical transmutation. Here again, transmutation for Yeats necessitates the material, temporal world be left behind.

While this is unequivocally the position the completed text of “Sailing to Byzantium” takes, the fact that Yeats viewed the poem as unfinished enough to require a sequel, of sorts, in “Byzantium” (1933) suggests that he was likely unsatisfied with this conclusion. What these two companion poems reveal, when they are examined alongside one another, is that when Yeats imagines personal transmutation, he cannot help vacillating between his desire to be re-made, and his fear that in the process of re-making he will cease to be recognizable as himself. While “Sailing to Byzantium” charts out a future journey, “Byzantium” describes the speaker’s arrival to the city. The golden bird that was only imagined in the first poem is present here, in the second poem, in actuality: “bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork, / Planted on the starlit golden bough” (l.17-19). However, faced with the golden bird itself, the speaker is now uncertain: the final lines of stanza three ask whether it crows “like the cocks of Hades,” or if “by the moon embittered” it

scorn[s] aloud

In glory of changeless metal

Common bird or petal

And all complexities of mire and blood" (ll.20-24).

Although the symbology Yeats draws upon in "Byzantium" is puzzling to the point of being frustratingly cryptic, in the estimation of many readers (likely because it was influenced by the arcane system he was working out at the time for *A Vision*), what seems to be implied by these lines is that Yeats wants to qualify the one-sided enthusiasm of "Sailing to Byzantium" to be removed from the processes of embodied biological life and taken "out of nature" (l.25). While he had there determined never to take "bodily form from any natural thing" (l.26) but to instead become something metallic, inorganic, and motionless, in "Byzantium" Yeats concedes that this dream of becoming "changeless metal" (l.21) might not, in fact, provide the kind of fulfillment for which he was searching.

Although both poems were written during the last phase of Yeats' literary career, his earliest works show that he was already preoccupied with the same issues at the start of his life as a published writer. That he consistently devoted time and energy to exploring the questions alchemy raised for him shows how seriously he took problems like hermetic antimaterialism, or the complex and often intersecting relationship between material and nonmaterial realities. In his analysis of the Byzantium poems, Giorgio Melchiori argues that the question they address is the same as the one Yeats presents readers with in the *Rosa Alchemica*, written over two decades prior: namely, the nature of the alchemical quest (224).

iv. “Rosa Alchemica” and the search for a world made “wholly of essences”

“Rosa Alchemica” was first published in *The Savoy* in 1896, and later anthologized in *The Secret Rose* (1897), a compilation of Yeats’ short stories that treat two millennia of Irish history. “Rosa Alchemica” comes near the end of the collection, included in the section where Yeats treats the contemporary era of history, which he believed marked the conclusion of the Christian era, a distinct historical cycle whose end would signal a universal apocalypse. Nevertheless, his concern in this story is less the fate of the external world than the inner spiritual journey of his narrator. In what William O’Donnell calls “Yeats’ best achievement in prose fiction” (73), Yeats demonstrates, perhaps more explicitly than in any of his other fictional writing, the ongoing tension in his work between his consistent attraction to the supernatural world and his accompanying suspicion that participation in that world might mean loss of self. The story’s plot centres on the narrator’s search for a means of spiritual transformation that will neither threaten his bodily existence nor exclude him from the supernatural realities he longs to experience. That Yeats chooses to communicate this spiritual quest using alchemical language and imagery indicates that, already as a young writer, alchemy offered him aesthetic resources and a philosophic system through which to articulate his conflicting feelings about the relationship between the material and nonmaterial worlds. Because the story is so rarely included even in anthologies of Yeats’ short fiction, it is among the least known of his work. That many readers find it difficult to access the primary text makes it worth summarizing in detail.

Yeats structures “Rosa Alchemica” into five sections, all of which use first person narration. The speaker of the short story is an unnamed Irishman, living in the last decade of the *fin de siècle* period, who is both entranced by and afraid of the hermetic arts. He relays in the

opening section of the story that in the course of his hermetic research, he had discovered that the alchemists' doctrine

was no mere chemical phantasy [sic], but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements and to man himself; and that they sought to fashion gold out of the common metals merely as part of an universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance. (180)

His discovery that alchemy is not just a “chemical phantasy,” or a physical science, leads to his publication of a work on the alchemists itself entitled (somewhat confusingly) *Rosa Alchemica*. In this book, the narrator claims he expresses his desire for “a world made wholly of essences” (180), or, in other words, for a purely spiritual world. Yeats here gives voice to the kind of antimaterialist hermeticism that he encountered through the Golden Dawn—a hermeticism that he, like the narrator, found alluring but also disquieting. The alchemists' writings, the text claims, reveal their “consuming thirst for destruction,” for “an essence which would dissolve all mortal things,” or physical matter, and leave them entirely exposed to spiritual forces (182). The story consistently emphasizes those aspects of the alchemical tradition that most align with an entirely mystical and spiritualized perspective; the “supreme dream of the alchemist,” here, is not the transmutation of the world or the redemption of matter, but simply “the transmutation of the weary heart into a weariless spirit” (182). In other words, the sort of alchemical process envisioned in this text is largely individualized, and primarily focused on the inner life of the adept.

However, in the timeline of the story, it has now been ten years since the narrator wrote *Rosa Alchemica* and studied hermetic philosophy, and when we are first introduced to him he appears to have abandoned this dream of inner transmutation. Though he had once participated

in an occult order, he soon left it out of religious fear, choosing instead the seemingly less heterodox path to spiritual transformation of aestheticism. The narrator's house in Dublin is filled with expensive artworks, tapestries and books. Substituting religious devotion for aesthetic indulgence, in the narrator's opinion, allows him to experience "all a Christian's ecstasy without his slavery to rule and custom," and, at the same time, to achieve "a pagan's delight" in beauty "without his terror at sleepless destiny" (181). Believing he thus has the best of both worlds, the narrator is initially resistant when his former hermetic master, Michael Robartes, arrives on his doorstep and attempts to convince him to join the Order of the Alchemical Rose (a thinly disguised stand-in for the Golden Dawn), and thereby to return to his occult past. Although he is clearly still sympathetic to many of Robartes' beliefs, the narrator initially responds negatively to his proposal, accusing Robartes of trying to "sweep [him] away into an indefinite world which fills [him] with terror" (186). This "indefinite world," or a world made of essences rather than phenomena, frightens the narrator because he, unlike Robartes, is not willing to abandon his bodily existence in the physical world.

This is among Robartes' earliest appearances in Yeats' writing, though he frequently reappears in later poetry and fiction as an alchemist. Most critics see both Robartes and Owen Aherne, whom he is usually paired with, as "self-projections" of Yeats (Hemling 167), and believe they are "obviously a persona or mask for one side of Yeats's life" (Weldon 34). However, in Yeats' notes in *The Collected Poems* (1933), he writes that though he considers Robartes a man who has "thought out much [hermetic] philosophy," Robartes' opinions and beliefs sometimes contradict Yeats' own; he states that Robartes' function is to help him "explain [his own] philosophy of life and death" (604). In his preface to the second edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1918) Yeats states that Robartes and Aherne are characters "through

which [he] can alone express [his] convictions about the world” (qtd. in Hemling 167). Both seem to function for Yeats as necessary reference points whenever he needs to clarify significant points in his thinking. That Robartes plays such a crucial role in “Rosa Alchemica” indicates Yeats is here struggling to communicate something that was important to him.

When Robartes attempts to persuade the narrator to re-embrace hermeticism, he initially refuses, asking, “Even if I grant that I need a spiritual belief and some form of worship, why should I go to Eleusis²⁷ and not to Calvary?” (185). Robartes’ response to the narrator’s half-hearted allegiance to Christian orthodoxy is to cast him into a hypnotic, dream-like reverie and impress upon both his mind and senses the force of hermetic doctrine: he insists that even though most people believe “humanity made [the] divinities, and that it can unmake them again,” what the hermetic arts reveal is that it is, in fact, the gods and spirits who dwell among us who “are always making and unmaking humanity” (185). As in poems like “Leda and the Swan” and “The Mermaid,” Yeats here emphasizes the passivity of humanity vis-à-vis the transcendent; Robartes’ advice to the narrator is that when faced with the overwhelming power of the supernatural world, the only appropriate response is immediate and total submission. The narrator thus surrenders control and enters into a trance, where he passes into “that Death which is Beauty herself, and into that Loneliness which all the multitudes desire,” a kind of *nigredo* experience that illuminates for him what the next stage in his spiritual journey must be: he tells Robartes, “I will go wherever you will . . . and do whatever you bid me, for I have been with eternal things” (187). Robartes bids the narrator go with him to the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, on the remote west coast of Ireland.

²⁷ The Greek village of Eleusis was the site of the Eleusinian rites, through which initiates were said to lose the fear of death. According to G.J. Watson, the Eleusinian rites were practiced for more than a thousand years (257 ft. 15). Given that these rites were among the most important and well-known in the classical world, Yeats likely intends that the reader will recognize he is using “Eleusis” as shorthand to refer to hermeticism more generally, as many of the rites of the Golden Dawn did. (See, for instance, Regardie 34).

The narrator's experience in the Temple comprises sections three to five of the story. To prepare for his initiation ceremony, he fasts and reads alchemical works by Morienus, Avicenna, Alfarabi, Lully, and Flamel, alchemists that Yeats learned about from Waite's *Alchemists Through The Ages* (Gorski 93). This preparation culminates in a dance he is, again, passively "swept" into, "neither consenting nor refusing," with a partner—one of the immortal divinities present—who initially seems to him both wise and beautiful ("Rosa" 196). However, in a typically Yeatsian fashion, no sooner has the narrator begun to enjoy his encounter with the supernatural than he experiences the dread which for Yeats is always held in balance with the attraction: he understands, "with a great horror," that he "danced with one who was more or less than human, and who was drinking up [his] soul as an ox drinks up a way-side pool" (197). This disturbing yet haunting image marks an abrupt shift in tone. Yeats forces the reader to consider seriously, for the first time in the story, the perils of the supernatural world rather than simply its attractions. Though the narrator's alchemical research began, and largely remained, abstractly speculative, this encounter pushes him beyond the safety of scholarly theorizing into the realm of actual experience. When he passes out after realizing that his partner is somehow consuming his "soul," he comes close to experiencing the material dissolution he had feared would accompany alchemical transmutation.

Upon awaking, however, the narrator discovers that it is not himself but the Temple of the Alchemical Rose that will be destroyed. Suspicious of their rituals and threatened by their beliefs, the fishermen and neighbouring townspeople form an angry mob and approach the Temple to tear it down and stone the worshipers. Though the narrator flees the scene before this happens, he intimates that Robartes is one of the mob's victims. However, as William Gorski notes, Yeats invests the death of the adepts with sacral rather than tragic significance, since he

presents the closing scene in the context of Robartes' earlier statement that "when we [the alchemical adepts] die it shall be the consummation of the supreme work" (190); just as Christ's death initiated the Christian dispensation, so Robartes' death will usher in a new era, replacing the master narrative of Christianity with a new, polytheistic narrative with pagan and alchemical referents (105-6). That Yeats places "Rosa Alchemica" at the end of *The Secret Rose* suggests that this new era will conclude the two thousand year cycle that began with Christ's birth and correspond with the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁸

The final paragraph of "Rosa Alchemica" functions as a post-script to the story; the narrator, now looking back on the events he has described, defends his return to orthodox Christianity. He admits he now wears a rosary around his neck, and finds refuge in it when the voices of "the indefinite world" attempt to regain their mastery over his heart and intellect (196). He associates the adepts' divinities with demonic forces, and asserts his renewed trust in the Christian God. Although he still feels the pull of his old alchemical beliefs, admitting they have only "half lost" their power over him, he concludes his narration by insisting that when he is tempted to give in to the seductive "beauty" of the hermetic arts, he remembers God, "and then the war that rages within [him] at other times is still, and [he] is at peace" (196).

Since Yeats first published "Rosa Alchemica," critics have failed to achieve a consensus when it comes to interpreting the story's conclusion. While most Yeats scholars acknowledge, as G.J. Watson does, that Yeats here directly treats the "perilous attractions of heterodoxy and the conflicting claims of orthodoxy" (xxx), they do not agree either on what Yeats' intentions were or on what the text suggests about this conflict. Critics frequently use a biographical hermeneutic

²⁸ Yeats details these cycles, or "gyres," most fully in his notes for *A Vision*, where he describes Christ as the First Master, who reigned over the age of monotheism. The Second Master, who Yeats was preparing the way for, would usher in a new age of philosophy and imagination, so that the Third (and final) Master could begin the age of polytheism, thereby uniting all races, religions and cultures (Notes 292 fn. 12).

to make sense of the conclusion; given the similarities between the two men, many readers see the narrator as a disguised Yeats. Both are writers, aesthetes, occultists, and Irishmen, and both share a preoccupation with reconciling their dual attraction to the material and spiritual worlds. Furthermore, both the first-person narration and Yeats' withholding of the speaker's name make it easy simply to dissolve the narrator's identity into Yeats' own. Steven Hemling, for instance, insists the story's speaker "is not readily distinguishable" from its author (166), while William Gorski believes the narrator's aestheticism and conservatism especially "are clear endowments from Yeats's own character" (69).

Conflating the narrator with Yeats allows some critics to read the conclusion as Yeats' attempt to reassert his commitment to traditional Christianity, despite the attraction hermeticism still held for him. However, it is difficult to argue convincingly that Yeats was still harbouring reservations about abandoning Christian orthodoxy at this point in his life.²⁹ If there was room for an orthodox Christology in Yeats' thinking, it was only for what he called "a Christ posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism" ("General Introduction" 518); in other words, for a Christ selectively incorporated into an existing hermetic framework. Conversely, others critics, such as William O'Donnell, interpret the conclusion as Yeats' final condemnation of the narrator's timidity and his reluctance to commit himself fully to adeptship (74); in this reading, Yeats clearly distances himself from the narrator, who functions then more as a foil than as a stand-in for himself. However, by emphasizing either Yeats' suspicion of the occult or his

²⁹ While there have been some critics in the past who have argued that Yeats' hermetic beliefs remained compatible with Christian orthodoxy (most notably Virginia Moore, whose 1954 work *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* attempts to make a case for his allegiance to Christianity), very few critics today find evidence to support this reading. Yeats' relationship to Christianity is perhaps best summed up by his terse statement in *A Vision* that since the advent of the modern era, it has been clear that God simply "no longer sufficed" (163); Yeats was not hostile to Christianity—in the same work, he comments that he has always been "indulgent" to the Christian "prejudice" (194)—but he viewed it as an incomplete system that needed to be supplemented and reworked.

attraction to it, many critics miss the evident tension between these two that Yeats negotiates in “Rosa Alchemica.”

When read in the context of Yeats’ alchemical interests, “Rosa Alchemica” reveals Yeats’ anxiety about the status of the material world and his own relationship to it. Like the narrator, he is allured by the dream of a world made “wholly of essences,” and yet also like the narrator, he is reluctant to abandon his material existence. By giving voice to the tension between these two impulses, the text underscores what Yeats understood to be the central problem at the heart of the alchemical quest: namely, if matter becomes transmuted into spirit, it thereby ceases to be matter. This was not a problem for many of the hermeticists who mapped Neoplatonic, quasi-Gnostic thinking onto their appropriation of alchemical thinking; however, for Yeats, as it would become for later twentieth-century figures, it was a dilemma with which he wrestled seriously. When his literary treatment of alchemical transmutation is analyzed closely, Yeats’ proto-ecological leanings become apparent; unlike so many of his hermetic predecessors, Yeats refuses to adopt a wholly antimaterialist appropriation of alchemy. Consequently, he lays the groundwork for following generations of writers to interpret the alchemical tradition in new and world-affirming ways.

Chapter III: Charles Williams and Coinherent Ecology

*"All is significant that undergoes
process and transmutation"*

~ Charles Williams, *The Chaste Wanton*

"We have . . . lost proper comprehension of matter by an apostasy in spirit"

~ Charles Williams, "Natural Goodness"

Charles Williams was born in 1886 and died in 1945, only a few years after Yeats. Much of his work is thus contemporaneous with Yeats' writing, and treats closely related ideas; as Gavin Ashenden observes, there are "some clear and striking parallels" between Williams and Yeats and between their bodies of work (25). Their most important point of commonality, in terms of this project, is their shared fascination with hermeticism, and their insistence that this tradition offered a means to challenge the scientific rationalism dominating British culture during the early part of the twentieth century. In the same way that the Golden Dawn provided Yeats with a space to explore his hermetic interests, so too the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross gave Williams a ceremonial language and a philosophical structure that allowed him to organize and clarify his thinking. Also as with Yeats, Williams' involvement in a hermetic Order contributed to his knowledge of alchemy and likely reinforced his interest in it.

Williams' *Poetry at Present* (1930), a work of literary criticism on the major English poets of the time, includes a chapter on Yeats. In it, he highlights Yeats' commitment to "the true alchemy," which according to Williams invests Yeats' work with rich spiritual significance (63). He argues that the "old alchemical wisdoms in which Mr. Yeats found interest" contain great poetic value because they not only suggest possibilities other than those "the normal mind is conscious of" (63), but also articulate "the sense of great interior possibilities" (69). Like Yeats, Williams remained preoccupied with the "interior" potential of the self throughout his literary

career. When he uses alchemy in his work, it most often describes the spiritual journey of the individual self from the perspective of the individual being transmuted. Williams' interpretation of the Great Work thus finds literary expression primarily in the transmutation of his characters' inner selves—like Yeats, both his personality and his philosophical tendencies gravitate towards the interior or mystical life, rather than the exterior or social life.

That being said, there is a crucial difference between how Yeats conceptualizes the alchemical process and how Williams does. While Williams may be more personally drawn to the interior life, he is also adamant that the internal and external worlds are integrated into the same whole; for Williams, the inner is coinherent with the outer, in the same way that for the medieval alchemists, the below always corresponds to the above. Williams grounds this conviction in his strongly incarnational theology. His Christology insists the material world be taken seriously, a concern he thematizes in many of his essay and non-fiction works.

Nevertheless, though Williams accepts the integration of internal and external worlds as a fact, it is not always apparent in his fiction and imaginative literature; there, his personal preference for the interior life often overshadows his theoretical (or theological) beliefs. This is apparent in both *Shadows of Ecstasy* and *The Chaste Wanton*, two early works that implicitly assume rather than explicitly state that the successful transmutation of the individual is understood as effecting the transmutation of the collective. However, in his Arthurian poetry, Williams moves in the direction of a proto-ecological position, one that sees human transmutation as bound up with “mineral, vegetable, and animal” life (“Notes” 177). The majority of this chapter will therefore focus on the Arthuriad, and consider how Williams' later poetry might be read as offering a surprisingly ecological perspective.

i. Biographical backgrounds

Poet, playwright, critic and novelist Charles Williams (1886-1945) often appears an incongruous figure in twentieth-century British literature. One of the results of his dense writing style and sometimes obfuscating prose is that both readers and critics have often ignored or misread his body of work. Labelled a figure of “pure singularity” by his first biographer (Hadfield 3), Williams is admittedly an idiosyncratic writer whose work can pose interpretive challenges; however, his writing is also deeply rewarding, and holds a unique place in twentieth-century fiction and poetry, especially in the alchemical movement in British literature. Williams was born in London and raised in the nearby town of St. Albans, in a literary but working class family. Due to financial restrictions, he was unable to complete a university degree, and instead began working at the London branch of the Oxford University Press when he was in his early twenties, a position he kept until his death. It was not long after beginning work at the OUP that Williams was promoted to a senior editor position, which resulted in him forming close contacts with many of the major literary figures of the day. He was also encouraged to pursue his literary aspirations there; over the course of his career, the Oxford Press contracted Williams to both edit and write many historical biographies, works of literary criticism, and theological texts, resulting in a large body of work to which he added novels, poetry, and numerous book reviews on his own time.

One of the anthologies Williams helped oversee was *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1917), an important work in the history of literary hermeticism that brought together a number of modern occultists associated with the Order of the Golden Dawn, including Aleister Crowley, Evelyn Underhill, A.E. Waite, Edwin Ellis, Arthur Machen, and of course W.B. Yeats (Lindop 54). One of the jobs Williams was tasked with was getting permission from

various authors to reprint the poems included in the anthology; thus began Williams' correspondence with the leading hermeticists of his day (Lindop 55). A result of working on this project was that Waite became a friend and mentor, and Williams enthusiastically agreed to join Waite's newly-formed Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, becoming an initiate of the Order in 1917, shortly after his marriage to Florence Conway (Ashenden 5). The year 1917 was a momentous one for Williams, since it was also the year two of his closest friends, Ernest Nottingham and Harold Evers, were killed in the First World War; because of his poor eyesight and a neurological issue that seems to have caused a life-long hand tremor, Williams was unfit for military service (Lindop 47). However, the loss of his friends profoundly affected Williams. For the rest of his life, he had the sense that they and the many other young men and women of his generation had died in his place, and that what he called this "exchange," or substitution, of one being for another was an aspect of existence that too often went unacknowledged.³⁰ The reality of exchange meant, for Williams, that we all—human and other-than-human—live within networks of reciprocity and interrelationship, so that all of us are part of a greater whole. The way in which Williams theorizes these networks has ecological overtones, which become especially apparent in his later poetic work, the various Arthurian-themed poetry collected together as his *Arthuriad*.

Nevertheless, on first glance the work of Charles Williams does not appear to invite ecocritical analysis. Many of his early works, in particular, are preoccupied with the interior life of his characters, and when he does treat the exterior world, like Yeats he often demonstrates a far greater interest in its nonmaterial aspects. Williams' lack of focus upon the physical environment around him was, somewhat ironically, likely a consequence of limitations in his

³⁰ See Alice Mary Hadfield's discussion in *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work* (32-33), and also Williams' WWI poems in his collections *Poems of Conformity* (1917) and *Divorce* (1920).

own physical capabilities. Williams wrote in 1931, “Physically I have always been most maddeningly hampered (a) by short sight (b) by a nervous trouble which a childish illness left with me; and both these things have interfered with a proper apprehension of the external world” (Lindop 191). This illness he refers to was measles, which he contracted when he was only five years old and which damaged his eyes, resulting in an almost complete loss of distant vision;³¹ as his biographer concludes, this meant that for the rest of his life, Williams’ “world would consist increasingly of words: books, stories, conversation, ideas, poems—and the images they evoked. The physical world would always be, for him, a little unreal” (Lindop 5).

Given this lack of “proper apprehension” of the physical world around him, it is all the more striking that Williams’ writing, especially as he matured, makes such a strong case for the intimate connection between humans and their environment. Williams’ idiosyncratic blend of Christian theology and hermetic thinking generates a unique kind of proto-ecology that foregrounds some of what later ecologically-conscious writers expand upon. This is most evident in his writing in the different ways Williams conceptualizes processes of change; already in his earliest writing, he reveals how fascinated he was by states of alteration, or by one thing becoming another thing.³² One of the attractions of hermeticism for Williams was, arguably, that it gave him a language to express this—because the transmutation of one element into another is at the heart of the alchemical project, or the Great Work, ideas about change, flux, and transformation are essential to hermetic thought.

³¹ Williams’ limited eyesight likely informed the argument he makes in his essay “Sound and Variations,” which he contributed to *Time and Tide* in 1938. In this essay, he objects to the “tyranny of the eye” that he claims has dominated English culture, and resulted in an aesthetic climate where only “[t]he eyes have been encouraged and the other senses depressed” (51-52). It is thus likely intentional that many of Williams’ characters sense the world around them in a wide variety of ways—they smell and hear and feel and taste often more than they see what is occurring outside of themselves.

³² See, for instance, his use of “transmute”(l.10) in a poem like “Night Poems” from *Windows of Night* (1925), one of his earlier poetic works, to describe the radical change in perspective that eros effects in the lover.

Although it is only relatively recently in Williams scholarship that critics are attending to the hermetic themes in his writing, it is only a slight exaggeration to say, as Francis King does, that hermeticism—especially as it was mediated to Williams via A. E. Waite—is “the key without which the deepest and inmost meaningfulness of Williams can never be unlocked” (112). Williams was a committed member for much of his adult life of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, the splinter group of the Golden Dawn led by Waite. Williams was not only an active participant in this group but one of its leaders, since during a period in the mid-twenties, as a favour to Waite, he oversaw the leadership of the London Temple, functioning as the Magister Templi (Gilbert 76-77). Williams’ active involvement with the F.R.C. lasted until 1927, after which he no longer participated in rituals, though he remained an inactive member of the order; he also kept in regular contact with Waite, and retained his ceremonial robes until the end of his life, when Joan Wallis, one of Williams’ “disciples,” carried out his wishes by burying his regalia in the garden after his death (Ashenden 6, 238 n.32). That he took his commitment to the F.R.C. so seriously, even at the end of his life, indicates that critics cannot simply dismiss his hermeticism as an immature interest he soon outgrew. Both Williams’ biography and his literary work reveal a life-long preoccupation with the kind of philosophic issues that arose from his involvement in the F.R.C.

ii. Critical Overview

Charles Williams is, today, an undeniably minor figure in twentieth-century British literature. However, especially during the last decade of his life, he was not only an important participant in but also an influence upon English literary culture of the 30’s and 40’s. Because of

the contacts he formed through his work at the Oxford University Press, Williams befriended many of the major literary figures of the day. During the Second World War, Williams moved from the London office, where he had been stationed since he began his career with the Press, to their Oxford offices. It was there that Williams became one of the “Inklings,” an informal group of writers that included the (now) more-famous C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. While Williams owes much of his popularity today, such as it is, to his association with the Inklings, it is important to note that Williams spent only the last several years of his life in their company; he came to Oxford with his imagination fully formed, and arguably influenced his fellow Inklings far more than they influenced him. The younger Lewis, especially, regarded Williams’ writing with a reverence that suggests their friendship included an aspect of mentorship; as he once told Williams, “I begin to suspect that we are living in the ‘age of Williams,’ and our friendship with you will be our only passport to fame” (qtd. in Jacobs 197).

Before his move to Oxford, Williams was an established figure in London literary circles—more established than has been previously acknowledged by many critics. In his 2015 biography, Grevel Lindop provides new details about some of the relationships Williams had with a number of prominent writers, including Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, younger poets like John Heath-Stubbs, Drummond Allison, and Sidney Keyes, who both wrote Arthurian poetry inspired by Williams’ *Arthuriad*, as well as Dylan Thomas, who attended some of the evening lectures Williams taught for the London County Council (364-5, 215). It was his cycle of Arthurian poetry, more so than his novels, that brought him admiration from these younger poets and a certain measure of acclaim from critics, including an early reviewer of *Taliessin Through Logres* who appraised the cycle alongside T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a comparison that shocked Williams (*Letters* 488). Williams does not appear to have known exactly what to do

with the acclaim he began to receive in his last years of life; he remarked once that it was “odd how some of the young read me,” and showed surprise that Ian Davis “casually” referred to “the epic tradition of *Taliessin*” (*Letters* 382). Despite his surprise, however, his relationships with these poets “made Williams feel he was contributing to the future of English poetry: ‘I was told the other day, quite gravely,’ he wrote to [Raymond] Hunt, ‘that I had done the pioneer work for the young poets. Most gratifying, and possibly true’” (Lindop 365).

This same feeling that he was somehow making an impact on literary culture is apparent in many of the letters Williams’ wrote (almost daily) while he was in Oxford to his wife, who had stayed behind in their London home during the war. In March of 1940 he told her that he had just received an “extraordinarily-moving note” from W. H. Auden, who wanted to convey to him how much he admired his work; Williams concludes, after relaying Auden’s remarks, that “it does seem you and I have not been without a result” (*Letters* 118). A similar sentiment appears in a letter dated Oct 16 1940, when Williams quotes Auden as saying he has begun “composing verse under [Williams’] influence,” a claim that prompts Williams to note that while Auden is “only 33; still he is a good poet and a well-known [one]. Thus we—you and I—‘move the minds that move the world.’ Like what Macaulay said of Francis Bacon” (217). His friendship with Auden was, professionally speaking, a beneficial one for Williams, although it expanded his reputation in America more widely than it did in his own country; another letter from Auden, writing from the United States, declares that “[t]here is already in this country a little band (little but enthusiastic) of C.W.-ites” (478).

In England, it was his friendship with T.S. Eliot that would prove most significant for Williams’ literary reputation. Faber and Faber, under Eliot’s editorship, was responsible for putting several of Williams’ major works into print, including his last two novels, *Descent into*

Hell (1937) and *All Hallows' Eve* (1945), his study of the occult tradition, *Witchcraft* (1941), and his most notable work of Dante scholarship, *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), the last three of which Eliot directly commissioned for Faber and Faber, causing him to see himself as Williams' "patron" (Carpenter 172, 179, 193). Williams, in turn, was a positive reviewer of Eliot's work, causing Jed Esty to observe in *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* that while Williams is "now relegated to the margins of literary history," during his lifetime he was actively "engaged in a relationship of reciprocal sponsorship" with T.S. Eliot (118). Their relationship began as a professional one, but quickly deepened into an intimate friendship; Williams once called Eliot "the only male love of my life since Nicholson died" (Lindop 301), and he confessed to his wife that, apart from her, Eliot was among a handful of people to whom he could properly express himself (*Letters* 654). One of the few detailed analyses of their relationship is found in Sebastian Knowles' *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (1990), where Knowles argues that "one cannot discuss Eliot and Williams in terms of influence," because "the two poets are writing in the same key" (156). For Knowles, one of the "common note[s]" that sound throughout the work of both Eliot and Williams is the occult (156), or more specifically that tradition of thought which modern British culture had inherited from hermetic philosophy. In "The Significance of Charles Williams," a tribute essay published shortly after Williams' sudden death in 1945, Eliot states that Williams was "a man of unusual genius," and that he "regard[s] his work as important," but he acknowledges that its importance is "of a kind not easy to explain" (894).

One of the reasons why even a critic like Eliot, who not only understood but also shared so many of Williams' convictions, struggled to define the precise significance of Williams' writing is because "occult" literature often sits uneasily in the twentieth century. F.R. Leavis, for

instance, forcefully condemned what he saw as Williams' regrettable interest in the occult, insisting that readers

Can hardly fail to see that Williams' preoccupation with [it] is evidence of an arrest at the schoolboy (and –girl) stage rather than of spiritual maturity, and that his dealings in “myth,” mystery, the occult, and the supernatural belong essentially to the ethos of the thriller. To pass off his writing as spiritually edifying is to promote the opposite of spiritual health. (253)

It is difficult to overstate Leavis' importance to the literary culture of England especially in the generation immediately following Williams. He functioned as the gatekeeper of the British literary canon, effectively deciding who was in and who was outside. Leavis believed there was no place intellectually for the kind of supernaturalism or hermeticism that writers like Williams engaged with in their fiction. Thus after the forties and fifties, largely due to the influence of Leavis and members of the critical establishment who shared his attitude, the kind of writing that Williams produced became part of a current within British literature that was, for many decades, forced underground, re-emerging only when the critical attitude that had pushed it to the margins was itself overturned.

Part of the intention of this chapter is to argue that Williams' writing is worth critical reconsideration. Although there are literary flaws that are evident across his body of work, especially in his earlier writing, Williams remains worth reading because many of his literary texts remain unique within the twentieth century. His writing holds particular value now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as we face urgent questions about the viability of continuing our current treatment of our planet. The seriousness of the environmental concerns that we as a species are currently dealing with means that every potential resource available to us

should be considered. Williams' ideas about coinherence and about the connection between the processes humans experience and what the nonhuman, external world undergoes are worth taking the time to consider, because they are one of these potential resources.

iii. Shadows of Ecstasy

Shadows of Ecstasy was Williams' first attempt at the novel form. Though not published until 1933, Williams began the novel, originally (and unfortunately) titled "The Black Bastard," in the mid 1920's (Hadfield 45); among his earliest works, it represents certain ambiguities in his thinking that he later worked through. Though Williams admitted once to his publisher, Victor Gollancz, that it was not his favourite work, he also emphasized its importance in his body of writing: "I don't care for this as much as the others—except that it was the first, the first of all the ideas in them" (qtd. in Hadfield 92). *Shadows of Ecstasy* is therefore critical in the Williams canon, because it prefigures so many of the issues he later re-visits and re-works. However, of all Williams' published work, *Shadows of Ecstasy* has probably garnered the most severe criticism. Many critics who otherwise praise Williams' writing find it confusing and disappointing: Glen Cavaliero, for instance, dismisses it as "the least of the novels," a "confused, inchoate affair" (63), while Patricia Meyers Spacks complains it is the "poorest" of Williams' novels and Kathleen Spencer judges it the "most puzzling and least satisfactory" (39). They are not alone—of Williams' seven novels, *Shadows of Ecstasy* is by far the most ignored, and when critics do discuss the novel it is rarely to commend it.

The focus of most of this negative criticism is Nigel Considine, the hermetic mage and alchemical master in the novel. According to Thomas Howard, Considine is a "diabolical"

character, comparable to Milton's Satan (45,49), who casts a "shadowy presence" over the novel (48), and according to John Heath-Stubbs his project to change the world order makes him a figure analogous to Adolf Hitler (30). Similarly (though less extremely), Elizabeth Wright refers to him as the "sinister Considine" (19), and Roma King speaks for many critics when he describes him, along with Gregory Persimmons, Sir Giles Tumulty, and Simon LeClerc as one of Williams' "villains" (172). Based on the overtly hermetic belief system Considine endorses, the majority of critics share this reaction to him. They also object to what they see as Williams' confusing handling of his character—in many readers' opinion, Williams would have done better to cast Considine more clearly as the novel's antagonist.

A careful reading of the text, however, reveals that Williams disagrees with those critics who consider Considine a villain. Despite—or because of—his close association with hermetic ideals, Considine is more accurately categorized as the story's hero. Williams structures the plot of each of his first five novels around a central image or governing motif: in *War in Heaven* (1930) this is the Graal; in *Many Dimensions* (1931), the Stone; in *The Place of the Lion* (1931), the Platonic Archetypes; and, in *The Greater Trumps* (1932), the Tarot pack. *Shadows of Ecstasy* is unique in that Considine himself functions as this central point around which the plot and the other characters revolve and define themselves. Considine thus replaces the kind of supernatural and esoteric objects that are so important to the other novels, and which Williams seems to have deliberately left out of *Shadows of Ecstasy*.

Most tellingly, however, is that both the novel's narrator and Roger Ingram—the character who is clearly closest to Williams' consciousness in the novel—affirm Considine's hermetic gospel. An early introduction of Considine to the reader demonstrates the narrator's approval:

a figure in hieratic dress, motionless, expectant, attentive, having power to give or to withhold, as if an Emperor of Byzantium awaited between East and West the approach of petitions he only could fulfill. . . . It was Man that stood there, man conscious of himself and of his powers, man powerful and victorious, bold and serene, a culmination and a prophecy. Time and space hung behind him, his background and his possession. . . death itself might well have been lying at those feet. (81)

This description of Considine establishes several of his key characteristics, and reveals Williams' attitude towards him. The reference to the Emperor of Byzantium is less an allusion to Yeats than to Williams' own Arthurian poetry, wherein Byzantium functions as a kind of Edenic realization of human potential. The references to Considine's mastery of "time and space" signal his ultimate hermetic achievement: his power over death.

One of the most important aspects of Considine is the extent to which he overcomes the limitations of temporal and corporal existence. In a letter he wrote to the novel's publisher, Victor Gollancz, Williams wondered "whether lots of people won't like it more [than the other four novels] . . . there isn't anything as obscure and supernatural in this as might put them off. After all, it could be done" (qtd. in Hadfield 92). What Williams believed "could be done" is Considine's achievement of virtual immortality: he has succeeded in transmuting his physical energies into internal power, so that he has lived for well over a century and shows no visible signs of aging. Considine is therefore the consummate alchemist in the Williams canon, in the sense that his defiance of death is a victory over temporality. The forging of an indestructible existence effectively puts him above time, allowing him to achieve what Mircea Eliade describes as the alchemists' dream of becoming "master of Time" (174). What first alerts both the reader

and the other characters to Considine's power is a photograph taken of Sir Bernard's grandfather, in which Considine bears an exact likeness to the other man in the picture; though Sir Bernard half-jokingly wonders whether the explanation for this seeming impossibility is that "[p]erhaps he's found the elixir of life" (*Shadows* 20), underlying the humour is Williams' seriousness about the practical viability of the alchemical process.

The entire rest of the plot revolves around the various characters' responses to what Considine offers—the transmutation of the self and world. In a novel where the word "transmutation" occurs, in different forms, over sixteen times, Williams highlights what was one of his central concerns at this time in his life, for as Stephen Dunning points out the novel was written during the height of Williams' involvement in the F.R.C. (26). Williams embeds his exploration of the self's potential in a somewhat bizarre, unlikely plot: Considine, impatient with the passionless and cerebral stasis of Europe, proposes a new political order based on an African-derived doctrine whereby, through an ecstatic embrace of the spiritual potential of the self and a participation in "the transmuting Way," the entire human species can spiritually evolve and so collectively achieve "the conquest of death" (40-1). Although the political and military backdrop is important to the plot, it is clear from how quickly Williams glosses over these details when he does interrupt the main narrative to provide them that he is eager to return to where his real interest lies: Considine, the "Master of Death," and the hermetic gospel he preaches (152). As Gareth Knight observes, "this is not a 'political' novel; Charles Williams is no George Orwell. The nub of Considine's revolution is not merely political, it is based upon the idea of individuals being able to raise their personal powers to the ultimate degree" (156). Even the First World War, in the novel, enters the discussion only as an occasion to highlight the interior drama with which both Considine and Williams are fascinated (*Shadows* 110).

Considine's hermetic power is most clearly manifested in his transcendence over the material world. He dismisses both "the stomach [and] the mind," preferring passion and ecstasy to either physical or intellectual sustenance (31). The success of his spiritual discipline has drawn followers to him, towards whom he acts as a hermetic mage; Williams is very deliberate in using words such as "master," "adept," and "initiate" when he describes Considine and the community that surrounds him (176). Considine directly ties alchemy to his project when he names it one of the "visions of the truth" that the medieval mind grasped better than twentieth-century culture did, visions that need to be recovered and re-applied to the withered Western mind (73). However, though Considine also speaks of the "high laboratories" of the hermetic art (154), it is not to reference the actual forges and crucibles of the alchemists, but the human self, which for him is the true alchemical laboratory. Similarly, rather than base metals, it is passion, art, and beauty that act as the *prima materia* which generates the Great Work.

As an alchemist, Considine has ostensibly achieved successful transmutation. Williams thus associates him with red or crimson imagery, an indicator of the *rubedo* stage. When Roger sees Considine's untouched glass of wine next to him, for instance, he perceives that it "glowed in its glass, as [Considine's] own spirit seemed to glow in the purged and consummate flesh that held it" (74). His transmutation, however, is isolated to his internal self. Although Considine's gospel promises that others may also experience what he has achieved, sharing what he has learned with his initiates is the extent of his interest in looking outward. He explicitly states that "[b]irds and bees, trees and flowers, all kinds of non-human life" all are very well and good, but the real concern of the hermetic project is "the human life" (10). As he later instructs Roger and his friends, "You waste yourselves, all of you, looking outwards; you give yourselves to the world. But the business of man is to assume the world into himself" (72).

Shadows of Ecstasy is a novel that puts many of the beliefs that Williams held at the time into dialogue with each other. Although it is not a novel that achieves resolution to all the competing ideas it presents (Dunning 27), it foregrounds what Williams' concerns would be throughout the rest of his literary career. What Considine names the self's "interior enlargement" (215) is a project that would continue to preoccupy Williams; however, as his writing matured he became increasingly dissatisfied with the kind of myopic perspective that limited transmutation only to the human self. Already in *The Chaste Wanton*, a verse drama which Williams published in 1931 that presents readers with what is probably his most unequivocal treatment of the alchemical process, he implies that the Great Work is a process meant to be undergone in community, rather than in isolation. The character Vincenzo—a "learned alchemist" (78) whose reputation rivals even that of the famed Nicholas Flamel "who twice achieved the work" (79)—travels to an Italian town and falls in love with the play's protagonist, the Duchess of Mantua. She adjures him to stay at her palace and practice his craft not upon metals but upon her interior self, since she is "in need of change" (88). Working together, they achieve "perfection at the Red" (125), or successful completion of the *rubedo* stage. Williams describes transmutation in *The Chaste Wanton* as a process that alchemist and initiate undergo together, and suggests that what the Duchess experiences is inseparable from what the Mantuan court consequently also undergoes. Her people are bound up with her transmutation, even though this connection remains implicit.

Thus what *The Chaste Wanton* presents readers with is already quite a different take on transmutation than the one Considine offers. The progression in Williams' thinking here culminates in his *Arthuriad*, a cycle of poems which feature the last of Williams' three fictional alchemists. Whereas Considine is interested only in the interior application of the alchemical

process, and Vincenzo demonstrates some movement toward extending transmutation to a larger collective, the Arthuriad's Taliessin opens up transmutation for Arthur's entire realm, both human and non-human participants of it. Although these three works—novel, drama, and poem—might appear to have only tenuous connections to each other, despite the differences in genre and subject, they do in fact share some of the same thematic concerns. It is significant, for instance, that Williams himself invites readers to see *The Chaste Wanton* in light of the Arthuriad by placing “Taliessin's Song of the Byzantion”³³ at the beginning of the play. A blend of introduction and epigraph, this four page verse poem deals with, Williams claims in a prefatory note, essentially the same content as “an attempted and unfinished cycle” of his (vi)—namely, what would several years later become *Taliessin Through Logres*.

iv. The Arthuriad and Williams' Protoecological Vision

Most critics agree that Williams' Arthuriad—that is, *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944)—is his greatest literary accomplishment. Williams himself considered it his magnum opus; it was the work he repeatedly returned to, throughout his literary career, to revisit and revise, and it was the work on which he believed his reputation would hinge. It is also his final published work, and his culminating statement on the role of the “alchemist” and the process of transmutation. The Arthuriad's central concern is with the doctrine of coinherence, or the idea that all of reality is enmeshed in a web of interconnection. Although in recent years a growing number of critics have begun to attend to the hermetic content of Williams' writing, there has not yet been a sustained study of the connection between

³³ This is an earlier spelling of what Williams would later call “Byzantium”; although it is unclear why he originally chose this spelling, one possibility is that he wanted to differentiate his Byzantine Empire from Yeats'.

this hermeticism and the ecological implications of Williams' emphasis on interconnectivity. In the conclusion to *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration*, one of the few in-depth treatments of Williams' use of alchemy, Gavin Ashenden states that where future critics of Williams might fruitfully look is to the application of his theory of coinherence to contemporary green ways of thinking; in his estimation,

Williams is a visionary who, far from being secluded in a hermetic subculture, becomes a prophet of potent social and political significance. He gave us early warning of the postmodern appreciation of our interdependence and in particular a pattern for ecological ways of thinking about the world and the way it connects with human perceptions and activity (234).

This "pattern for ecological ways of thinking" is Williams' idea of coinherence. This final section of chapter three will explore the ways in which coinherence manifests in the *Arthuriad*, and will also consider the ways in which coinherence might function as an idea with protoecological significance.

In Anne Ridler's 1958 critical introduction to *The Image of the City*, a collection of Williams' essays, she (likely unwittingly) paved the way for later Williams scholars to bypass the ecological themes in his work. Although the Taliessin poems include more descriptions of the natural world than any of his other writing, Ridler devotes a section of her discussion of the *Arthuriad* to pointing out that very little of Williams' nature imagery was derived from first-hand encounters with the natural world. Instead, she argues, "natural images in Charles Williams have almost always been mediated through books" (lxvii). She offers as an example the poem "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden," where Taliessin

walked among the queen's roses . . .
 making verse, putting distance into verse,
 cutting and trimming verse as the gardeners the roses.
 He turned, at a path's end, between two bushes
 of cabbage-roses, scions of Caucasia, *cenifoliae*,
 hearts folded strong in a hundred meanings. (139)

In a letter written to her in 1939, Williams excitedly explained that “the Encyclopaedia Britannica” was of great help in teaching him that there is a kind of cabbage-rose, derived from a district of the Caucasus, that has a dark red colour “and, unlike most roses, it has a heart under its petals!” (lxvii). This fact made this particular rose tremendously appealing to Williams, since he could then use it in this poem to symbolize the veiled love between Blanchefleur and Taliessin. Another example of this second-hand knowledge of the natural world is some lines in “The Departure of Merlin,” which Williams was inspired to write, according to Ridler, after hearing from someone that lime trees allow light to filter through their leaves, while beech trees block light (lxvii):

grace ungrieved,
 floating through gold-leaved lime or banked behind beech
 to opaque green (94)

Ridler notes that she is uncertain whether Williams “could have distinguished between an actual lime and beech,” and that this observation about the different leaves was likely inaccurate; nevertheless, she concludes, the point is that Williams used “the eyes of his imagination” to see both trees, rather than his physical eyes (lxvii).

Although Ridler is right to point out how mediated Williams' knowledge of the natural world is in his poetry, the majority of (especially British) ecocritics no longer view that as a reason to exclude writers from ecocritical consideration. One of the foundational texts of British ecocriticism is Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), a text which, together with many of his other published works, exposes the pastoral ideal of untouched or pure "nature" as a dangerous illusion. It is dangerous, he argues persuasively, because nostalgically idealizing England's pastoral or agrarian past ignores how inseparable the processes of rural life are from the labour economy—an economy that Raymond Williams describes as an ethically compromised site of privilege and exploitation. Although American ecocriticism sometimes still struggles to define itself apart from the prevailing wilderness myth that has dominated so much of green discourse in the past, the influence of Raymond Williams on ecocritics in Britain has generated a strong trend towards green cultural materialism, one that insists on taking seriously the connection between culture and ecology. It is this close connection that Donna Haraway, for instance, evokes when she uses the term "natureculture" in her work. As Susan Rowland explains, although we are a part of nature, "nature" is often used to mean "other" to culture:

Indeed, we often define what constitutes human culture as that which falls outside nature. Trees are nature; the ships made from them are culture. This either/or construction of nature versus culture is an important survival of a very fundamental tendency to structure human society in oppositions. It is a basic structuring principle that has been built into the architecture of modern Western society. Unsurprisingly, ecocriticism interrogates the binary thinking that designates nature as 'other' to culture. (*Ecocritical* 5)

Thus, the fact that Charles Williams' Arthurian poetry contains nature imagery that is derived from books rather than from immediate experience only serves to underscore the reality that human culture is always involved in any representation of nature.

It is not, in any case, Williams' depictions of roses or beech trees that invite ecocritical readings of his poetry. Although the Arthurian poems are set against a quasi-medieval backdrop, and as such do include frequent references to what many readers might regard as a kind of pristine, untouched nature, Williams is far more interested in exploring the relationship between human nature(s) and this "nature" than in portraying the natural world as a subject in and of itself. More specifically, Williams explores in these poems what the process of transmutation looks like in a coinherent world: if material and nonmaterial participants in this world are inseparably connected to one another, does what happens "alchemically" to the one affect change in the other? And if so, Williams asks, what do we do with the implication of this idea—namely, that the world around us is then just as prone to change and alteration, or just as "alive," as we are?

The governing "plot" of the poems—although it is clear from even a cursory read that Williams prefers to give poetic voice to his favorite ideas than to follow any kind of strict narrative—is the relationship between Britain and "Logres," or what Glen Cavaliero describes as a Platonic concept of Britain similar to the one which William Blake named Albion (99). One of Williams' major contributions to the Arthurian myth is to place the druid-poet Taliessin at the center of the story. While other writers who worked with the Grail material tended to make only passing mention of the bard, Williams elevates him to Arthur's court poet; furthermore, Taliessin is not only the recorder but the shaper of the events that occur in the narrative. Kathleen Spencer points out that Taliessin is ideally suited to this function, given that, "in the first place, as a bard

he is by calling an observer and interpreter, and in the second, he does not figure in any of the major events of the legend. Thus, he serves as a flexible . . . narrator who is both an insider and an outsider” (79). However, Taliessin comes to function as much more than a narrator. Many of the poems suggest that Taliessin is not just a bard or poet, but also a druid or alchemist; he is a hermetic mage, someone who has the power to shape reality as he chooses.

It is in this role as hermetic mage that Taliessin most noticeably resembles Considine. Both “alchemists” have a deep knowledge of hermeticism: Considine because he has spent the equivalent of three normal human lifetimes studying it, and Taliessin because he has been to Byzantium, or to the heart of the Empire, and has had a vision of the entire “organic body” working together (“The Vision of the Empire” 24). It is this vision that Taliessin communicates to Arthur, because it is this organic unity that is meant to inspire the creation of Logres, or Arthur’s own version of Byzantium: as Taliessin puts it, “the dialect of Logres was an aspect of Byzantium” (“The Vision of the Empire” 27). The kind of master/initiate relationship between Taliessin and Arthur parallels the relationships Considine has with his followers, where Considine functions as a the leader of a group of hermetic initiates that take their cue from his teachings. As the *Arthuriad* develops, Taliessin too gathers what he names a growing “household” or “company” of initiates around himself. The hermetic overtones of this group are made explicit in “The Founding of the Company,” where Williams describes in detail three levels of initiation that members of the company attempted to ascend. That “Few—and that hardly—entered on the third / station, where the full salvation of all souls / is seen, and their co-inhering” (157) is a clear indication that although the language is theological, the form this spiritual progression takes is identical to what Williams would have experienced in the F.R.C.,

where members progressed through various hermetic grades in an attempt to achieve the highest level of enlightenment—one that was reserved for an elite few.

Where Considine and Taliessin perhaps most obviously differ is in what they are trying to accomplish through these hermetic societies. Considine's project is, simply put, immortality. However, it is not immortality in the sense of uninterrupted life that he seeks, but immortality following resurrection. As he explains,

To live on—that is well. To live on by the power not of food and drink but of the imagination itself recalling into itself all the powers of desire—that is well too.

But to die and live again—that remains to be done, and will be done. The spirit of a man shall go out from his body and return into his body and revivify it. It may be done any day; perhaps one of you shall do it. (*Shadows* 75)

This is an important distinction, because it reveals the alchemical nature of his project; Considine is not just pursuing life, but a rebirth where his material body is transmuted into something new. Although he is apparently willing to share his insights and techniques with his initiates, his project is restricted to his own and their personal transmutation. Put another way, according to the omniscient narrator of the novel Considine seeks “interior enlargement” (215) first and foremost, and is therefore less concerned with working for exterior change in the world beyond himself.

In contrast, the *Arthuriad* portrays Taliessin as consistently outward-looking even when it comes to the application of his hermetic beliefs. The reason Taliessin is equally concerned about the interior and exterior worlds is that for him, they are so closely connected that to speak of the one is to speak of the other. In his vision of the Empire—the one he communicates to Arthur in order to motivate his establishment of Logres—Taliessin perceives the world to be essentially

interrelated, or a coinherent whole. The repetition of the line “the organic body sang together” in “The Vision of the Empire,” one of the first poems in *Taliessin Through Logres*, alerts readers of the cycle, already early on, to what will be one of the Arthuriad’s principle themes. As Williams asserts in his “Notes on the Arthurian Myth,” the identification of the Empire “with the human organism” is “one of the most important” images in the cycle (181). The poem is organized into subsections, which each correspond to one of the regions of the Empire that Taliessin glimpses in his vision. As Taliessin walks the streets of Byzantium, he imagines the figure of a reclining woman superimposed on the map of Europe, so that different body parts correspond to different regions; for instance, her breasts fall across the region of Gaul, because there humanity was nurtured in the ways of “logic, learning, law,” and her hands align with Rome because there the pope administers the mass, or his “heart-breaking manual acts,” and her womb corresponds with Jerusalem, because there the spiritual life of Christian Europe began. Because this might constitute baffling (or even off-putting) imagery for some readers, it is worth pointing out that Williams is doing here with the female body what kabbalists have long done with the male body, namely, superimposed it onto the Sephiroic Tree. In many kabbalistic configurations of the Sephirah, a vertical male body, with outstretched arms and legs, is overlaid onto the ten Sephirah so that different body parts correspond to different stations. Because of his time in the F.R.C. and through his own reading, Williams was very familiar with this image and with the intricacies of the mystical side of Hasidic philosophy, and it is likely that this hermetic background at least partially inspired his own anthro-geographic poetry.

Williams’ intent here also becomes more clear if the poem is read alongside “The Index of the Body,” an essay he wrote in 1942 for the *Dublin Review*. In this essay, Williams argues that the “structure of the human body is an index to the structure of a greater whole” (81); in

other words, there is a connection between “the microcosm and the macrocosm” (82). Here as elsewhere in his essay writing, Williams draws on the hermetic maxim “[a]s above, so below” (83) to argue that there exists a correspondence between polarities like the interior and the exterior, the human and the nonhuman, or the body and the mind. For this reason, Williams believes, while the tenets of a branch of hermeticism like astrology, for instance, might indeed be grounded on fables, “they are not unworthy fables,” because they often succeed in directing our attention to the philosophic principle undergirding them: that each individual person participates in a complex, reciprocal relationship with the world outside of her or himself (82). This hermetic view of the human body shares some of the same features as the kind of thinking, common to many indigenous cultures around the world, that David Abram describes as having an “incarnate” sense of the natural world as a “living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (65); in other words, the physical phenomena that make up our biosphere are so enmeshed with our own enfleshed bodies that they cannot be separated.

According to this way of thinking, the human body takes on a special significance. Although Williams does point out that the doctrine of correspondences did at times lead “to many absurdities”—there were writers, he says, who made literal equivalencies between the body and the natural world, so that “hair was the grass or the forests; bones were mountains; the sun was the eyes, and so on”—he nevertheless insists that the human body is a metonymy for a larger reality (82). This strong sense of a connection between the human body and the outside world, while not fully clarified in Williams’ writing until his mature work, was present already in *Shadows of Ecstasy*; Gavin Ashenden rightly points out that even in his early writing, Williams uses the human body as an “antidote to dualism” such as when he has Philip gain “metaphysical insight” through the “geography of the body” (170):

But he never understood it as now; suddenly he understood Rosamund's arm when she leant forward to give a plate to her sister; somehow that arm made him think of the Downs against the sky. There was a line, a curved beauty, a thing that spoke to both mind and heart. . . . Well she was only human, she couldn't be perfect; and then she stretched out her arm again and she was perfect, she was more than perfect; the movement of her arm was something frightfully important, and now it was gone. He had seen the verge of a great conclusion of mortal things and then it had vanished. Over that white curve he had looked into incredible space; abysses of intelligence lay beyond it. (*Shadows* 56)

What Philip begins to intuit here is what Taliessin comes to understand fully, namely, that the human body is a material index to a nonmaterial (Williams would say sacred) reality.

While Williams clearly inflects his articulation of the doctrine of correspondence with hermetic overtones, he also blends with it his own idiosyncratic theology so that what emerges is a hermetic-Christian hybrid. Williams' writing reveals a life-long preoccupation with the ontological status of the human body, and like Taliessin, who is "Druid-born and Byzantium trained" ("Taliessin in the Rose Garden" 141), Williams was able to mine poetic and philosophical resources from both the hermetic and the Western Christian tradition in order to explore the nature of the relationship between the physical body and the non-physical self (the soul, or mind, or consciousness), and between the world of material objects with which our only-partly-material body is entangled in a complex and reciprocal web of interaction. Theologically, Williams was most attracted to the kind of Christology that emphasized the capacity for a truly incarnational perspective to overcome the matter/spirit dualism that has continued to plague Western thinking. This is frequently borne out not only in his theological works and published

essays, but also in his fiction, drama and poetry. Because the human body, Williams believed, is “the place where the most serious doctrines of Christendom are experienced” (Ashenden 170), it is not surprising that he often chooses to direct his poetic attention in the *Arthuriad* to anatomical imagery. Thus in “The Vision of the Empire,” it is significant that “Strength articulated itself in morals / of arms, joints, wrists, hands” (27), and that when the “organic body” sings together Williams spends the time to detail the various parts that make up this body, such as “shoulders, elbows, wrists,” and “thumbs and fingers,” and “sockets and balls in knees and ankles. . . hips, thighs, spine”³⁴ (30-31). In Angelika Schneider’s essay “Co-inherent Rhetoric in *Taleissin*,” she points out that when Williams wrote this poem, he would have been unaware of science we know now, such as cell metabolism, intracellular communication, and genetic codes, which give the metaphor of organic unity he uses here an “even greater aptness” (180).

Interestingly, this instance of Williams’ hermetically-derived intuition regarding cell behavior anticipating actual scientific discovery is in keeping with what was happening in British hermetic culture at the time. As Mark Morrison’s book *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (2007) persuasively argues, there was a very thin and permeable boundary line between science and the occult in the first half of the twentieth century, and many people believed that what had previously been categorized as “magic” would soon be given a scientific explanation. So, for instance, the new field of atomic physics was described in alchemical terms and presented to the public—by both scientists and the media of the time—as a kind of re-conceived alchemy. After Rutherford and Soddy’s 1902 publication about radioactivity, Morrison claims,

³⁴ Compare this portrayal of the human body, for instance, with Descartes’ influential description of the body as a machine made up of “bones, nerves, muscles, veins, arteries, stomach, liver, spleen, heart, brain, or any of the other various parts from which this machine [is] composed”; it is thus of the same nature, he asserts, as “clocks, artificial fountains, mills, and other such machines” (99).

Even religious skeptics began to wonder if the alchemists might have understood something about the nature of matter that nineteenth-century scientists had missed. Could radium have been the fabled Philosopher's Stone, capable of causing transmutations, or perhaps the legendary Elixir of Life, which could rejuvenate living tissue and extend life for hundreds or even thousands of years?

(12)

Organizations like the Golden Dawn (and, by extension, the F.R.C.) took many of the advances in physics as confirmation that what they had for so long been promoting was, after all, true: for instance, that one element really could change into another. Morrison sees evidence in Williams' novel *War in Heaven* for this kind of hermetically-inflected science. Williams portrays the Grail, Morrison claims, as if it were a radioactive atom: the novel uses language like "storehouse of power" to describe it, and states that it is "encompassed [by] radiations," with a "material centre" that could be "dissipated"; similarly, descriptions of the occult warfare in the novel as "fine arrows of energy," or "shaft[s] of direct power, "or "streams of energy" would have been "wholly familiar to readers by 1930 as the province of atomic physics" (28).

Far from allowing modern physics to replace his outmoded understanding of the world, however, Williams was instead pointing out that science was at last seeing a reality that he believed the hermetic worldview had always understood. So in the same way that the hermetic and kabbalistic traditions recognized the organic unity of the human body, so too in *War in Heaven* the various characters confronted with the Grail see it for what it is. The Grail is a "storehouse of power" because, as the chalice that contained the blood of Christ, it is forever marked with what for Williams was the ultimate transmutation—dying man into resurrected man, or human into God. The Grail thus operates in much of Williams' writing as a potent

symbol of alchemical transmutation, an idea that he got both from F.R.C. liturgies and directly from Waite's writing. Primarily in *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* and *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy*, Waite insists upon a connection between Eucharistic theology and alchemical transmutation, and claims that the Christian church's failure to understand and preach this connection is the best indication why it, as an institution, "has failed so far . . . in the transmutation of humanity" (*Secret* 478).

Although Williams modified some of Waite's ideas, the significance of the Grail in the process of transmutation is something that he continued to give voice to, from *War in Heaven* to the Arthurian poetry. It is Galahad, whom Taliessin names "the alchemical infant," who achieves the Grail and so functions in the Arthuriad as the locus of coinherence, or the "climax of Logres" ("The Son of Lancelot" 76). It is thus not surprising that "The Son of Lancelot"—a poem that details Galahad's conception and birth—is full of alchemical language and imagery. Williams uses *albedo* and *rubedo* imagery to great effect here, filling the lines with references to whiteness and snow and moonlight, as well as to crimson and blood and redness. "The Son of Lancelot" is one of the more successful poems in the cycle; the language is precise and evocative, and Williams accomplishes a level of clarity he does not always achieve in presenting the poem's central theme: the transmutation of Merlin's vision of Galahad into a flesh-and-blood child, and thus the transmutation of Camelot into Logres. Because his central concern here is with transmutation, it is not only Galahad who "transmutes" from dream to reality, but Blanchelfleur changes from lady to nun, January turns to February, or "the wolf-month" (72), Lancelot himself becomes a feral wolf after mistaking Helayne for Guinevere, the fertile land around Carbonek transforms into a land of famine and scarcity, and Helayne transitions from virgin to mother of Galahad, the alchemical infant. As the poem builds to its climax, Merlin too changes—into a

“white wolf,” running across a “white earth” of “frozen snow” to take the newly born child to Almesbury, home of Blanchefleur and the white nuns (77). Merlin carries Galahad on his back, wrapped in “crimson wool” (79), his cheeks flushed red (80). That Williams wants readers to see the alchemical nature of these transmutations is underscored in the lines that describe Galahad’s arrival to Almesbury:

[Blanchefleur] saw on the clear horizon an atom, moving,
waxing, white in white, speed in snow,
a silver shape in the moonlight *changing to crimson*,
a line of launched glory. (80 emphasis added)

With Galahad’s birth and safe arrival to the convent, the attainment of the Grail moves closer as a possible future for Logres. The “ivory Logres” of the king’s dream at the beginning of the poem can only be the Logres it is meant to be through the achievement of the “red Grail” (73); in other words, if it undergoes the alchemical process of transmutation from the *albedo* to the *rubedo* stage.

That Williams is doing something different here in the *Arthuriad* than he did in *Shadows of Ecstasy* becomes clear if we compare what transmutation looks like in the two works. The transmutation that Considine sought was a process of change that was essentially restricted to his own body; in contrast, the Taliessin poems present transmutation as a process undergone by all of Logres. In his ecocritical study *Forests*, Robert Pogue Harrison states that the reason desertification is among the dominant images in modernist literature is because for so many figures, from Eliot to Joyce to Beckett and to Pound, “soul and habitat are correlates of one another” (149-150). Before the return of the Grail, the land around Camelot looks like one of the wastelands imagined by these literary contemporaries of Williams. However, Galahad’s

attainment of the Grail matters for every member of the Empire, whether human or nonhuman; as Taliessin's vision of the Empire suggests, the point is not only that individual men and women are at peace, but that Camelot has become a land where "the earth flourished, hazel, corn, and vine" ("Prelude" 120). Even though it is not where his primary interest lies, Williams' desire to be consistent when it comes to his idea of coinherence means that, as he comments in his essay "Notes on the Arthurian Myth," with Galahad's achievement of the Grail, "the mineral, vegetable, and animal creation [is] also restored" (177).

What Williams is suggesting here is that all of "nature," including human nature, nonhuman nature, and also "supernature," or those aspects of our reality that manifest non-materially, are inseparably connected because they share in the same processes of change. Environmental historian Donald Worster points out that while the term "ecology" did not enter the vernacular until the latter half of the twentieth-century, "the *idea* of ecology is much older than the name" (xiv). Williams' poetry bears this claim out: although he never used the word, his writing about coinherence evokes, for readers today, an expressly ecological outlook. Williams' writing forcefully opposes the kind of mechanistic perspective on the world that, in Worster's words, produces an "unrestrained individualism" where each person is regarded as an autonomously functioning unit and, consequently, an "atomistic social ethic" prevails (318-9). One of the ideas in the alchemical tradition that most captured Williams' imagination was the view of the human person as a subject who existed in relationships of intimate interconnection with other human subjects, and also with organic vegetation and inorganic elements and metals.

Williams never directly applied his thinking about alchemy or coinherence to the environmental problems of his time. This lack of environmental urgency is something he shared with most other English citizens during the middle decades of the twentieth century; it was not,

for instance, until 1970 that the first Earth Day was celebrated, and it was not until 1973 that the Ecology Party was first founded in England (later re-named the Green Party) (Bramwell 8).

Williams' work can be understood as proto-ecological not because he invested it with any kind of political intention, but because his writing contains the potential for ecological application.

And indeed, there are ideas in Williams that later writers, near the end of the twentieth century, take up; one of these writers, Lindsay Clarke, draws on the same Arthurian material that

Williams found such a rich resource, and another, Patrick Harpur, uses the alchemical tradition to articulate an ecological perspective on the world that closely resembles Williams' idea of coinherence. It is to the work of these two writers that we now turn.

CHAPTER IV.
LINDSAY CLARKE AND THE “VISION OF A GOLDEN WORLD”

“The alchemists prefigure the emergence of deep ecological thought in our own time”
 ~ Lindsay Clarke, *“The Alchemy of Imagination”*

While both Yeats and Williams incorporate alchemical images and ideas into their poetry and fiction often obliquely, most often relying on metaphor or allusion to communicate their alchemical interests, Lindsay Clarke’s literature makes alchemy its explicit subject. *The Chymical Wedding* (1989) is a book about alchemists and alchemy: it features characters who self-identify as alchemical adepts, and it unironically investigates many of the major claims of the alchemical tradition and concludes that they hold up, even in a modern post-scientific world. As with Yeats and Williams, Clarke is most drawn to the ability of alchemical language to evoke processes of change or transformation; like his literary predecessors, he is also interested in how the alchemical worldview conceives of the human relationship to the nonmaterial. However, whereas this project has described the literature of Yeats and Williams as proto-ecological, Clarke’s writing is manifestly concerned with the state of the natural environment, warranting the label eco-alchemical. He is not a nature writer, but his fiction invites ecocritical attention because of how directly he addresses the fact of environmental degradation and considers its root causes.

i. Biographical backgrounds

Lindsay Clarke was born in Halifax, England in August 1939, a month before the Second World War began. In a lecture delivered at a GreenSpirit (formerly the Association for Creative Spirituality in Britain) event that was later published in pamphlet form as “Imagining

Otherwise”³⁵ (2004), he emphasizes that although he grew up in post-WWII England, the most profound shift in national consciousness he observed in his life came not as a consequence of the twentieth-century wars, but of the growing reliance on technology that marks the contemporary era. Clarke sees our cultural infatuation with technocratic power as the apex of the “obvious evils” we now confront on a daily basis: “over-population, environmental degradation and social, political and economic injustice” (1). In his fiction, poetry, and, most recently, in his non-fiction essays and lectures, Clarke directly addresses these problems by turning to the pre-scientific language of the medieval alchemists, who inhabited a worldview very different from the one that defines the modern technological age. He is included in this thesis because he represents one of the strongest voices today in Modern British literature for the recovery of alchemical wisdom. Clarke is an advocate for alchemy in the sense that he believes it offers the contemporary world resources to address pressing social and, especially, environmental concerns. In his writing, especially in his novel *The Chymical Wedding*, Clarke not only extensively draws on the language and underlying structures of medieval alchemy, but also presents readers with an explicit apologia for its continuing relevance.

Clarke claims that since he was six years old, he wanted to be a writer. He admits this desire was motivated by his early experience with fairy tales, which opened for him a landscape “utterly different from that of the dirty industrial world around [him], a landscape that was at once alien and strangely familiar” (2). One of the functions of Clarke’s own literature is to create for his readers a world “utterly different” than the one they encounter in their day to day reality, a reality that is often plagued by environmental anxieties and the problems that attend an overly technological existence. Hoping that a university education would help him achieve his dream of

³⁵ No biography of Clarke’s life exists; thus, biographical details included in this chapter are largely drawn from Clarke’s own comments in this lecture.

becoming a writer, Clarke went up to King's College, Cambridge, to read English as a self-professed "working class nature mystic yearning to be a writer" ("Alchemy" 3). However, because of what he saw as the stultifying academic atmosphere of the sixties, his university experience harmed rather than helped him; he states that he did not know when he entered Cambridge that "the English Faculty was not turning out writers" but critics, "and critics of such ferocious and dismissive intellectuality" that it quickly robbed him of the conviction that he could be a writer (2). It would be another twenty years before Clarke published his first novel, *Sunday Whiteman*; in the meantime, after teaching in Ghana for three years, he made a career in the British education system.

Clarke has written in several places about the breakdown of his first marriage—what he now considers the most significant event of his personal life—during this period. He writes: "in 1970, my embattled ego suffered the massive insult of discovering that my then wife was in love with a friend and my marriage was over. As my brittle world collapsed, I too went through a brief but intense episode of breakdown" (3). He describes this breakdown as a two-day sleepless and frenzied journey or dream quest into the "otherworld" of his own unconscious, which revealed to him how deeply fractured and divided his psyche was. Clarke dramatizes this inner journey in most if not all of his published work, often through Jungian or alchemical language. Though he manifests the encounter with self in different ways, his protagonists invariably experience a similar personal crisis that then generates the process of inner transformation.

When Clarke emerged from this experience of internal division, he claims, using *nigredo* imagery, that "[s]omething had died," something that needed to be destroyed in order for him to mature and move towards wholeness (4). It is telling that *Sunday Whiteman* (1987), which borrows heavily from his own biography, was first titled *Nigredo*, "after that arduous transitional

phase of the alchemical opus in which darkness prevails and everything threatens to go wrong” (“Alchemy”). Clarke describes his subsequent entrance into an *albedo*-like process of illumination and enlightenment; he became interested in new images and ideas derived from authors like Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and Esther Harding. In the years following the breakdown of his marriage, Clarke encountered the Tarot and, like Yeats and Williams,³⁶ found its symbology both rich and meaningful (4). Although Clarke has never admitted to any involvement in occult orders, because of his increasingly wide-ranging reading at this point in his life, by the time he wrote *The Chymical Wedding* his knowledge of hermeticism was—though certainly not as informed as Yeats’ and likely less theologically sophisticated than Williams’—clearly apparent. More particularly, it was through reading the above authors that Clarke, as he puts it, “found [his] way into the rich vocabulary of elements by which alchemy speaks of transformation” (4).

Although Clarke’s interest in alchemy derives from very personal experiences, his fiction makes evident that he nevertheless believes it has implications for a wider audience. While labelling Clarke’s writing style “didactic” would imply overly pejorative connotations, he does clearly aim to instruct; one of the reasons why he fits into this project so well is because he intends his fiction to teach readers about what alchemy, and the worldview in which it is embedded, can offer the world today. While *Alice’s Masque* (1994), Clarke’s next novel after *The Chymical Wedding*, only obliquely engages with alchemical ideas, *Parzival and the Stone From Heaven* (2001) reworks the medieval romance of Parzival in terms of an alchemical narrative in which the Stone, or the Grail, is not the Eucharistic chalice but the Philosopher’s Stone that Parzival achieves only when his own soul has passed through the three stages of the

³⁶ Interestingly, also like Yeats and Williams (as well as T.S. Eliot), of all the figures represented in the Tarot deck, Clarke was most drawn to the figure of the Fool (“Imagining” 4).

Great Work. Similarly, both *The War at Troy* (2004) and *The Return From Troy* (2005), his prose re-tellings of Homer's epics, use alchemical imagery and language to interpret Odysseus's life; Clarke is much more interested in Odysseus's inner psychology than he is in his military actions, and both novels read like Jungian casebooks for the process of individuation. Similarly, in his most recent novel, *The Water Theatre* (2010), the protagonist embarks on a kind of spirit quest, directed by members of an occult order, wherein he passes through the three stages of the alchemical process—*nigredo*, *albedo* and *rubedo*—to arrive at psychological wholeness. Thus, while this chapter will consider only *The Chymical Wedding* in detail, it would be possible to fit any one of Clarke's novels into a study of literary alchemy. However, in this novel Clarke not only most explicitly engages with, but also deliberately promotes, the alchemical tradition.

ii. Critical Overview

Because Clarke is a relatively recent, and as yet a lesser-known, twentieth-century British novelist, there has obviously been much less critical scholarship devoted to interpreting his work than to the work of either Yeats or Williams. However, likely because of the attention *The Chymical Wedding* received for winning the 1989 Whitbread Prize, of his novels it is the one with which literary critics have most engaged.³⁷ The most notable responses to *The Chymical Wedding*, apart from book reviews, come from three full-length studies, which each include a section on the novel. The first of these, David Meakin's *Hermetic Fictions: Alchemy and Irony*

³⁷ The success of the novel led to a screenplay, written by John Boorman, also entitled *The Chymical Wedding*. However, the screenplay has been rejected by every American studio Boorman has so far approached. Although in "Bright Dreams, Hard Knocks: A Journal for 1991," Boorman comments on his hope to "find a way of financing it without the Americans," the most positive reception he has had in the UK was from Orien's Bill Bernstein; however, while Bernstein had read and enjoyed the novel, he declined the project because he feared its hermetic themes were too far removed from the American movie-goer's experience (7).

in the Novel (1995), aims to explore the nature of the fascination alchemy holds for novelists; one of the novelists he comments on is Clarke, whose use of alchemy he interprets as an attempted corrective to modern materialism and technological culture. Susan Rowland also includes a chapter on *The Chymical Wedding* in *C.G. Jung and Literary Theory* (1999), in which she analyzes Clarke's gender representations using a Jungian hermeneutic. Rowland's chapter is part of a larger debate between feminist and Jungian theory, namely, the question of whether, or to what extent, gender differences are biologically determined or socially constructed; because Jung's feminine archetypes rely on what are biologically fixed categories, they invite constructivist feminist critique. A third critical study to discuss *The Chymical Wedding* is Suzanne Keen's *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), which treats the novel as part of a specifically British genre that plays on post-imperial society's nostalgia for the past, especially for historical periods that are seen to define British heritage. Like Rowland, Keen frames much of her discussion using Jungian theory, and focuses her analysis on the novel's gender dynamics.

As in Yeats scholarship, the reliance on a Jungian hermeneutic means critics such as Rowland and Keen approach Clarke's texts with some problematic assumptions. The most crucial of these is the error of thinking that Jung's interpretation of alchemy is the standard one. This is not to say that Clarke does not draw from Jung, because he clearly does; he begins his Acknowledgments to *The Chymical Wedding*, for instance, by emphasizing Jung's crucial importance in the twentieth-century recovery of alchemy: "If the Stone of the Philosopher's was a stone rejected by the builders of European culture, then no one has worked with greater intellectual courage than C.G. Jung to recover and illuminate the values it represents" (535). He further admits that the influence of Jung's later works on alchemy "is evident everywhere"

throughout the novel (535). However, Clarke also makes it plain that he draws from many other perspectives when it comes to the alchemical tradition. Indeed, he praises Titus Burckhardt's important book *Alchemy* precisely because it provides a necessary "corrective to the Jungians . . . particularly in its insistence on the vanity of trying to describe the essence of alchemy in solely psychological terms" (535).

Much of *The Chymical Wedding* is concerned with the overlap between alchemy and literature, or more specifically, poetry; three of the major characters are poets, and Clarke, like Yeats, frequently portrays the act of writing poetry as a kind of alchemical process. One scholar who has given sustained attention to this aspect of Clarke's work is the Polish critic Liliana Sikorska, whose essay "Alchemy as Writing—Alchemy and Writing: A Study of Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding*" presents a compelling argument that most of the novel's characters seek transmutation through artistic creation, especially literary creation (83). The close connection between alchemy and writing originates, she claims, in the early medieval culture and its runic alphabet, which "had the power to transmute matter into words," as, likewise, words—such as in the verbalizing of spells—could alter reality (81-82). Sikorska's argument rightly points out how vital a role poetry plays in Clarke's work, as it did for many of the medieval alchemists who were not only chemists, but often poets.³⁸

³⁸ Robert M. Schuler points out that the alchemical poetry produced by these writers might be among the most marginalized genres in all of English literature—often regarded today as neither "good poetry" nor "good science," the poetic verse written by medieval and Renaissance alchemists has been largely bypassed by literary scholars and relegated instead to the care of historical biographers, textual scholars, and "antiquarians specializing in the curious" (xvi). Alchemical poets such as George Ripley, whose *Compound of Alchemy* (1471) is among the most important instructional texts in all of medieval alchemy, or Thomas Norton, who wrote a poetic treatise on how to achieve the Philosopher's Stone that was widely circulated among English and European alchemists, entitled *Ordinal of Alchemy* (1477), are foundational figures in both medieval alchemical literature and early scientific literature. For further discussion of the link between alchemy and poetry, see the collection *Alchemical Poetry 1575–1700: From Previously Unpublished Manuscripts*, edited by Robert M. Schuler, and Didier Kahn's "Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis. Part I—Preliminary Survey," *Ambix* 57 (2010), 249-74, and "Part II—Synthesis," *Ambix* 58 (2011), 62-77. For the most comprehensive collection of medieval alchemical poetry, Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, first published in 1652, is an invaluable primary resource.

That the alchemical tradition has always relied not simply upon oral transmission but on literary treatments of both the mysteries and insights of alchemy is especially worth noting, since among the various critical analyses of *The Chymical Wedding* perhaps the most insightful comes from Clarke himself. In his essay “The Alchemy of Imagination,”³⁹ for instance, he describes *The Chymical Wedding* as “a kind of alchemical text for our time presented as fiction,” an attempt to dramatize the process of transmutation using the novel form (7). He also directly identifies himself, along with figures like W. B. Yeats, Ted Hughes, John Cowper Powys, James Joyce, Malcolm Lowry, and Doris Lessing, as a British writer who has intentionally appropriated elements of the alchemical tradition to articulate his experience of the world (1). That Clarke so self-consciously uses alchemy in his literature sets him apart from many of the other writers listed in the Introduction of this thesis, who might draw on alchemical imagery but do not reckon seriously with the worldview in which it is embedded. Clarke notes in this essay that while literary scholars are comfortable enough with Geoffrey Chaucer’s satirical representation of corrupt alchemists or with Ben Jonson’s humorous portrayal of the alchemical art, or even with the Metaphysical Poets’ use of alchemical imagery to enrich their poetic conceits, the same critics “tend to be less happy with the awkward fact” that for some writers, alchemy is “a matter of rather more than just literary importance” (1). Alchemy, for Clarke—and, he claims, for many other British authors—cannot be reduced to anything less than “a dynamic aspect of [our] personal experience and the very ground of the world-view out of which [we write] (1). In *The Chymical Wedding*, Clarke’s deep investment in the alchemical tradition is clearly apparent; he not only displays his extensive reading in alchemical subject areas, but also reveals his own personal interest in the language, imagery, and worldview out of which alchemy arises.

³⁹ This essay this is the unpublished version of a paper Clarke delivered in 2007 at the Literature in English Symposium, held in Poznań, Poland. The page numbers I am using here correspond to the copy he e-mailed to me in November of 2010.

iii. *The Chymical Wedding*

The most important creative source for *The Chymical Wedding* is Mary Anne Atwood's seminal hermetic history, *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (1850). Atwood was a real-life hermetic adept who, in the very early days of the nineteenth-century esoteric revival, published a prose treatise on the alchemical art. At the same time, her father, Thomas South, was working on a poetic treatment of the art. Fully trusting in his daughter's abilities, he paid for the publication of her work without reading it through; however, he later discovered that she had revealed far too much about the secrets of alchemy than he believed was permissible. Although several copies had already been sold, South bought up all the remaining copies of her book he could find and, together with his own unpublished manuscript, burnt them. Historians have put forward several theories both about his motivation for and her response to this extreme action, but the details surrounding the burning of their manuscripts remain a mystery. Through a fictional re-casting of Atwood's life, *The Chymical Wedding* attempts to offer one possible explanation of why South might have destroyed the work, and why Atwood might have acquiesced.

Atwood is an important figure in any discussion about alchemy, because her conceptualization of the alchemical process as a wholly spiritual practice influenced how later hermeticists perceived it. Although her father burned nearly all the surviving manuscripts of her *Suggestive Inquiry*, enough copies remained that, until a second edition was reissued many decades later, Atwood's ideas permeated hermetic culture during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The abandonment of exoteric alchemy after the nineteenth-century occult revival and the embrace of esoteric alchemy was a characteristic not only of Theosophy, but also of the

Golden Dawn and most other hermetic orders. More particularly, A. E. Waite was very impressed and highly influenced by Atwood's book; indeed, reading it likely ignited his own interest in the alchemical tradition and shaped how he later defined it (Webb 178). Waite writes that the questions with which Atwood engaged are "of supreme importance," and that her writings on the alchemical secrets "have considerably influenced the revived occultism of the present day" (*Alchemists* 10). Given Waite's influence on both Yeats and Williams, and on many other literary figures indebted to his explication of the alchemical tradition, Atwood's work thus marks the existence of a kind of continuity in the twentieth-century's appropriation of alchemy—at least for the authors included in this thesis.

In *The Chymical Wedding*, Louisa Agnew is Clarke's fictional portrayal of Mary Anne Atwood, while her father Henry Agnew is a stand-in for Thomas South. There is thus, as Meakin points out, a "wealth of alchemical lore underpinning the fiction" (144-5). Inserted into the text are allusions and references to the alchemical tradition, explanations of the alchemical process, and details about the fictionalized life of one of the nineteenth century's most celebrated alchemical thinkers. Although the novel is a dual setting text, shifting back and forth from a Victorian to a contemporary frame,⁴⁰ Louisa's story arguably functions as the heart of the novel; in terms of Clarke's presentation of alchemy, at least, she is the novel's voice of authority and the character whose perspective on the world most closely aligns to Clarke's own. Both Henry and Louisa received the alchemical secret through a carefully-guarded oral tradition that began with their ancestor Humphrey Agnew, a fictionalized alchemist Clarke casts as a friend of Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and Thomas Vaughan, famous seventeenth-century alchemists. At the end of the novel, like their historical counterparts Mary Anne Atwood and Thomas South, after

⁴⁰ Clarke admits that John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was the inspiration for the combination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century settings ("Alchemy" 2).

labouring many years on their alchemical treatise “while the rest of the world plunged headlong into blind materialism” (163), Louisa and Henry, the last remaining carriers of alchemical wisdom, burn every surviving manuscript they have written. They thus break the *catena aurea*, the golden chain of alchemical knowledge that links every alchemist and preserves the secret for subsequent adepts.

In the contemporary setting, the protagonist, Alex Darkin, has recently divorced after discovering his wife’s affair with a mutual friend. As in many of his novels, Clarke here embeds some of his own personal biography into a fictional context. Alex is the character who most evidently experiences the process of alchemical transmutation. He undergoes this journey with the help of Edward Nesbit, a once-famous English poet, and his young American lover Laura, a student of parapsychology and a kind of clairvoyant with a psychic connection to Louisa. In this timeline, Edward and Laura are busy researching and reconstructing the life of Louisa and Henry Agnew in order to learn what caused the alchemical chain to break. As Edward explains to Alex, “something happened to the Agnew family last century. We’re trying to find out as much as we can about it because we think it matters. We think it has a bearing on things that have gone badly wrong in the world . . . that it might offer some hope of a way through” (157). Edward believes that Louisa held the key to the kind of spiritual regeneration that could “challenge materialism at its very root,” and that could “redeem the century’s debased and debasing perception of the nature of matter” (166). The plot revolves around Edward’s attempt to recover this lost key and thereby to restore an older and, to him, worthier perspective on the world.

As a poet, Edward aligns his alchemical project with literary antecedents. When Alex—in a moment of what Meakin rightly calls “rather forced false ingenuousness” (7)—regrets “that the

emblems of alchemy [are] now too arcane to be of service to modern writers,” Edward angrily defends the relevance of alchemy for contemporary literature:

James Joyce modern enough for you? Or is he old hat already? ‘The first till last alchemist’ [sic.]—that’s what he called himself. . . . Any wiser, you little Cambridge shit? And what about Yeats, for God’s sake? The *Rosa Alchimia*. Haven’t read that either, I suppose?. . . . And then there’s Lowry—sweet, sizzled Malcolm Lowry. (248)

Implicit in Edward’s defence of these alchemical writers is Clarke’s own intention to endorse an existing movement in British fiction of which he considers himself a part. Clarke, along with his close friend Patrick Harpur, hopes to provide “a subversive counterforce to the prevailing scientific positivism of the intellectual mainstream,” and to affirm instead, “a wider and deeper imaginative vision” in his literature (“Re: ‘Imagining’”), a vision that challenges the modernist myth of progress along with its accompanying over-reliance on technological and scientific epistemologies. Together, Clarke and Harpur represent an interestingly self-aware attempt to recover, or reconfigure, medieval alchemy for contemporary literature.

Clarke intentionally places himself in what his essay “Alchemy” construes as a literary movement, aligning his writing with other alchemically-informed texts. This intentionality is reflected in *The Chymical Wedding*, in which characters quote from Yeats repeatedly, drawing a close association between Clarke’s work and Yeats’ own. Most tellingly, Clarke casts Edward as Yeats’ fictional peer; in the novel, characters remember Edward as a famous poet of the ‘30s whose wit, glamour, and talent had assured him a place at the forefront of English poetry. His verse was powerful enough to earn the admiration of his literary contemporaries: “the aged Yeats had listened, and Eliot had respected a talent so different from his own” (46). When Edward

refers to Yeats, it is to “Willie” Yeats, a designation intended to demonstrate his familiarity with the poet (106). Yeats seems to have influenced Edward in turn, since in the novel Clarke most often alludes to or cites from Yeats through Edward’s voice. Given these textual references, it is not a stretch to suggest that Clarke wants his readers to associate Edward, and his alchemical project, with that of Yeats.

Like Yeats, Edward’s personal interest in alchemy originates in his fascination with the idea of transmutation. It is not only his own private transmutation Edward seeks, however, but that of the entirety of Western culture. In one of his longer and more declamatory speeches, Edward defends the enduring significance of alchemical thinking:

Something vital and specific to the health of western man got lost [with the decline of alchemy]. Something that should have been preserved—in secret if need be, but none the less preserved. I know that the mainstream view of reality is corrupt and corrupting. . . . We can’t live that way, not for much longer. And the world can’t live with us—not like this. We have to change. We have to find a fiction that will help us to change. . . . Everyone knows it deep down; but we’re lost, confused, complicit in our own bad dreams. The Agnews were part of another tradition—one that has always seen life whole, however painful the process of holding its contradictions together. . . . The [alchemical] tradition has always offered a vision whereby men and women might recover their experience in its wholeness. It offers a technique for achieving that vision. (174)

Central to Edward’s critique of Western culture is its attitude towards matter. He argues vehemently throughout the novel that the unbridled materialism that has become so mainstream arose, ironically, because we lost respect for the material world. Once “the palace of matter was

laid waste, and a soul allowed only to human existence” (399), as Louisa says, “matter was tormented ever more insensitively for its secrets” (523). One of the questions Edward therefore poses to Alex with particular force is whether or not he understands his own relationship to the material world: “You call yourself a materialist, but do you know, for instance, what matter is? Have you given the matter any thought?” (52). This question (to which Alex cannot, until the end of the novel, offer any kind of answer) undergirds much of the text’s presentation of alchemy; central to the alchemical project, as the novel maintains, is the quest to discover what the constituent parts of material elements are, and, subsequently, what the individual alchemist’s relationship to these elements ought to be. As Edward later explains,

The Alchemists were investigating the structure of matter—not for crude purposes of exploitation, not from mere intellectual curiosity, but as the very stuff of life itself. They knew that terrible energies lay sleeping in matter as in our minds—gunpowder was the direct result of their experiments with sulphur and saltpetre. They knew the dangers of waking those energies because they experienced and contained them. (170)

The language Clarke gives to Edward here, and throughout *The Chymical Wedding*, sounds similar to that articulated by those environmental thinkers who, in Australian environmental philosopher Freya Mathews’ words, call for “a reorientation to materiality” (*Reinhabiting* 8). This reorientation is, Mathews argues, vital if we are to regain a non-exploitative relationship to the natural world. Particularly in her recent works *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism* (2003) and *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (2005), Mathews develops an ecological perspective grounded in the philosophical tradition of panpsychism—the view that mind, or consciousness, is intrinsic to and ubiquitous in

the phenomenal world. The version of panpsychism that Freya promotes offers to reconnect us, she claims, “with a more-than-human material reality that, could we but open ourselves to it, is constantly in communication with us, revealing itself to us, if never fully and rarely unambiguously” (12). Like Louisa, who laments that in a post-Cartesian world too often “soul [is] allowed only to human existence” (399), panpsychists in Mathews’ vein want to give mind back to matter, rather than restricting it exclusively to the human realm. It is worth noting that Mathews is careful to caution readers that “mind” in this sense does not always include intentionality: a physical entity such as a bush or a rock may not purposefully communicate intentions or responses to the beings who encounter them, in the way, for instance, that a wild bird, who flies away from a noisy intruder to its territory, might. However, when we approach a bush or a rock with openness and receptivity, the pansychist would argue that whatever awareness or feeling we walk away from that encounter with is not simply a projection of our own subjectivity, but arises from outside of ourselves.

That we can achieve authentic connection to this degree with material entities is a foundational assumption of alchemical thinking. The medieval alchemists treated what modern Western science has categorized as “inorganic” metals very differently; rather than regard these metals as inert, lifeless, and unresponsive they saw them as extensions of an earth that was alive, and thus full of potential for life. As Mircea Eliade explains in *The Forge and the Crucible*, “If streams, galleries of mines, and caves are compared to the vagina of the Earth-Mother, everything that lies in the belly of the earth is alive, albeit in the state of gestation” (43). For the metallurgists and alchemists of the prescientific era, Eliade says, these ores “gestate” because they are alive: they are born, they “grow ripe” in the womb of the earth, and in the alchemist’s laboratory they are even “married” to other elements (151). As with agricultural labour, the work

of the alchemist takes the raw materials supplied by the physical environment and enters into relationship with them, partnering together to achieve the Great Work.

Thus one of the insights of alchemical thinking that Clarke suggests can be helpfully applied to current environmental discussions is this sense that both the vegetative and mineral materials of the earth are not so other to us, but that we share what he often calls the same “*anima*,” or the same animating principle. Thus what is needed, as he has one character argue in his most recent novel, is a more thoughtful and careful “responsiveness” to the earth, “of which each one of us is a living filament” (*The Water Theatre* 318). Clarke is indebted to cultural historian Richard Tarnas for much of his thinking about the relationship between the physical earth and the people, or “filaments” of it, who depend upon it for survival (Re: Pamphlet Publication). In his essay *Imagining Otherwise* (2003), Clarke references Tarnas’ influential work *The Passion of the Western Mind* (1991) to express his sense of this relationship; like Tarnas, he opposes the kind of dualism that the Cartesian-Kantian paradigm fostered in the post-Enlightenment West, and aligns himself with an epistemological perspective that can be found in the works of thinkers like Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, Emerson and Steiner. While they all had their own distinct take on the nature of the connection between the human and the more-than-human, “common to all was a fundamental conviction that the relation of the human mind to the world was ultimately not dualistic but participatory” (Tarnas 433). Tarnas highlights the influence especially of Kant’s philosophical system on subsequent models of human/non-human interaction, because he reads Kant as drawing out the epistemological consequences of Descartes’ *cogito* premise: if the human mind is essentially distinct from the external world, and if the only reality the human mind has access to is its own experience, then it would follow that the world apprehended by the human mind is simply the mind’s own interpretation of the world.

In other words, our relationship with the material world outside of ourselves is heavily mediated by our own subjectivity, despite the fact that we ourselves are, at least in part, also material beings. Although thinkers in the Romantic tradition, including those listed above, acknowledged to some degree the validity of the Kantian insight that all human knowledge is interpretive, and that our knowledge of the external world is determined by subjective principles,

instead of considering these principles as belonging ultimately to the separate human subject, and therefore not grounded in the world independent of human cognition, this participatory conception held that these subjective principles are in fact an expression of the world's own being, and that the human mind is ultimately the organ of the world's own process of self-revelation. In this view, the essential reality of nature is not separate, self-contained, and complete in itself, so that the human mind can examine it 'objectively' and register it from without. Rather, nature's unfolding truth emerges only with the active participation of the human mind. (434)

Although this position might initially look like anthropocentrism, what both Tarnas and Clarke are attempting to express is a model for human/non-human relations in which *anthopos* and *gaea* participate together in world-building, not one in which humans are given a privileged position of power over the world.

In *The Chymical Wedding*, the primary characters increasingly move towards a participatory model of relationship to the material world. Vital to this journey is their growing understanding of the alchemical process, a process that manifests differently in the Victorian setting than it does in the late twentieth-century setting. In Louisa's timeline, her written treatise of the alchemical art takes the form of her own kind of "literary" alchemy—she undergoes the

first two stages of transmutation, the *nigredo* and *albedo* stages, through the experience of writing her manuscript. Although it is ostensibly her father who is the alchemist, the text in fact presents Louisa as the true practitioner. Her engagement with The Great Work is made possible through her relationship with the village priest, a man tellingly named Edwin Frere who becomes her *mystic frère*, or mystic brother. Clarke innovatively re-genders the alchemical practice of a male alchemist relying upon a female partner to achieve the Great Work; in Susan Rowland's words, Clarke reverses the mystic sister's traditionally subordinate position in an attempt to challenge the gender bias of traditional alchemy (*Jung* 66-7). During the three stages of the alchemical process, sulphur (conceived by the alchemists to be the masculine or solar principle) repeatedly joins and separates with mercury (regarded as the female or lunar principle). The ultimate fusion of sulphur and mercury—or of the Red King and the White Queen—in the *rubedo* stage represents the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) or *conjunctio oppositorum* (union of opposites) that indicates the successful conclusion of the alchemical process. For the medieval alchemists, their own, often sexual, relationship to their *mystic soeur* paralleled this union. As Meakin points out, however, the writings of the medieval alchemists are univocal on the point that this *conjunctio* should not be understood only in a narrowly sexual sense, but as a larger coming together of opposing forces (146). Thus medieval alchemy sees the process of transmutation as a reconciliation of opposites, a site for archetypal polarities like male/female, light/dark, hot/cold, matter/spirit, or above/below to resolve. Only when these dualities unite can movement forward occur.

Clarke follows the alchemists here by portraying Louisa and Frere's love as a meeting of opposites, with the potential for further reconciliation beyond themselves. In a long passage where Louisa critiques ecclesiastical history through an alchemical lens, she states that a "crucial

error in the history of the European soul” occurred when, at the height of Renaissance humanism, Aristotle was chosen to be the cornerstone of Christian philosophy rather than the hermetic master Hermes Trismegistus (*CW* 399). For Louisa, the cost of turning its back on hermetic wisdom was the dualistic split between spirit and matter that has plagued Western consciousness ever since, and resulted in the social and environmental problems characters in the contemporary frame are forced to confront. She believes that “in these rejections lay the crisis of the European spirit. Without the social strength of Christianity, Hermeticism lay in chains; without the regenerative power of Hermetic knowledge, Christianity was moribund. It was vital for the contraries to meet again” (399). Louisa sees her and Edwin’s relationship as an indication that this division can be healed—a process that she applies not just to themselves, but to the world:

And now, in this strange unanticipated love that had brought Louisa and Edwin Frere together, it seemed to her that the reconciliation had at last begun. He was the true spirit of the Christian church; she the handmaiden of the Hermetic mystery. How long had the sad world waited for this union! Yes, it was a seed only; but who knew what might grow from such a seed? (399)

However, although Louisa wants her union with Edwin to perfect the process of internal transmutation that working on her manuscript had begun, and in turn participate in the healing of the external world, this hope fails to materialize.

While both Edwin’s marriage and religious faith, and Louisa’s commitment to the hermetic art, initially prevents their affair from progressing, the conclusion of Louisa’s narrative chronicles their eventual sexual encounter and Edwin’s subsequent self-castration, a guilt-driven act of desperation that effectively ends Louisa’s desire to publish her now-completed manuscript.

Convinced that the embodied reality of their *conjunctio* carries the alchemical secret more than her abstract words ever could, Louisa agrees when her father insists they recall her book and burn it, together with his incomplete manuscript. In Clarke's re-interpretation of Mary Anne Atwood's biography, Louisa is not an unwilling participant in a despotic father's scheme, but a partner to his recognition that the hidden secrets of the occult cannot be stripped from the metaphors and symbolic language that convey their truths; Louisa's mistake, the novel suggests, is that she tried to render alchemical truth in comprehensible, straightforward prose—an attempt that flouted centuries of tradition. As Liliana Sikorska notes, although hermetic mystery without its layers of symbology “becomes knowledge theoretically accessible to all, it remains hardly comprehensible” because any attempt to arrive at a fixed interpretation of its enigmas will not reveal truth, but simply “displace the secret elsewhere,” in a kind of Derridean deferral of meaning (96). Rather, Louisa comes to understand that some truths are better lived than captured in language. She accepts that her work has not been lost, but had “simply become invisible inside her, had taken less palpable and more translucent for that it might endure. . . She had merely followed the alchemists' final advice to destroy the books, which were, in any case, no substitute for experience” (*CW* 523). As her words burn, however, she wonders “what must now become of the world they had sought so long and patiently to address” (523). Although she realizes that people “would never, in any case,” have listened, she also sees that the consequence of blindly continuing to exploit the natural world will be that it might, too, burn, in a final apocalyptic reversal of the alchemical process:

One day, as matter was tormented ever more insensitively for its secrets, and apparent mastery over the elements increased, one day it might also consign itself to flame. And then, on this small planet would be universal suffering, and, in the

Universal Mind, a sadness that one of the great experiments of Nature had failed (523).

While Louisa ultimately fails in her attempt to extend alchemical transmutation to the external world, and therefore participate in the kind of mutual world-building that Tarnas envisions, the novel suggests that Alex may be more successful in this respect. Whereas Louisa tries to capture alchemical truth through prose, it is significant that in the contemporary time frame, Alex's journey is increasingly marked by a rich dream life that gives him insight into the arcane symbols and emblems of alchemy, which he then uses to inspire poetic creation. His growth as a character is closely tied to his maturation as a poet; Clarke first introduces him to the reader as "a man looking for something," something that offers a "promise of renewal" to the poetic imagination (7). Alex calls the "something" he seeks "the Green Man," a figure representing the kind of ecological and spiritual principle so desperately needed by modern culture. Alex comes to see that the hermetic revival Henry and Louisa participated in, and that Edward and Laura are attempting to recover, is not merely nostalgic fancy but "an urgent antidote to materialism" and the post-Industrial Age British machine culture (Meakin 145). As Edward explains to Alex, although we may have once looked to materialism to save us, a simple glance at the history of "this appalling century" reveals we were wrong: "We have seen where materialism has led. Oh yes, it freed us to do many ingenious things, but now the bill is presented. Apart from the manifold horrors we perpetrate upon ourselves, forests die, even the seas are fouled, we can no longer trust the air. As bills go it is, I think you will agree, quite staggering" (*CW* 166-7).

The cost of reductive materialism—environmental degradation—is something Clarke takes very seriously. One of the reasons he also takes alchemy so seriously is because he believes

the worldview it is embedded in offers resources to address our current environmental problems. In the speech cited above, Edward explains to Alex that part of the legacy of modern, post-Enlightenment materialism is that instead of seeing the world whole, as a single ecosystem the way the alchemists did, it divides and parses out its constituent parts; the definition of the *symbolic*, as Louisa came to understand, is “that which holds together,” yet

In our blindness we have preferred its exact etymological opposite—the *diabolic*—that which tears apart. For again, in that strict sense, materialism is a diabolic attitude. By its careful inventory of the multiplicity of things it has succeeded only in creating a schizophrenic world, powerful but fissive. It should be no surprise, therefore, that—unless we wake up—its most characteristic achievement may soon tear the planet apart in a final clash of unreconciled opposites. (167)

An important part of the novel’s background plot is the lingering effect of the atomic bomb on late twentieth-century British culture; determined not to risk another Cold War, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)⁴¹ advocated for unilateral nuclear disarmament and the removal of all American weapons from British land. In the novel, Alex’s neighbour Bob Crossely is a member of his local chapter of the CND, and it is through Bob’s invitation to join him at his town meetings that Alex is able to apply Edward’s beliefs to concrete social realities.

Clarke uses the early 1980’s setting of *The Chymical Wedding* to evoke an era where the danger of an arms race between two major superpowers threatened the entire global community. Alex is consistently anxious about the apocalyptic possibilities inherent in a world containing so many nuclear bombs, and his growing enthusiasm about Edward’s alchemical beliefs is tempered

⁴¹ The CND was formed in 1957, and continues to operate throughout the United Kingdom today. In addition to opposing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, it also campaigns against the production, sale and use of chemical and biological weapons in its attempt to build a less militarized world.

by his doubts that all “this high talk” of alchemy might not matter in the context of a “real world [where] the bombs were still targeted” and the “doomwatch prophecies” were pressing close (168). Bob, too, critiques Edward’s “high talk” as not much more than talk: “He can use words all right, though I didn’t hear much more than words. Nothing solid” (316). The comparisons the text draws between Edward and Yeats are not an accident; Clarke takes the time to ask some of the questions posed by the narrator of “Rosa Alchemica,” namely, how the abstract principles of hermeticism might be applied to concrete, external social realities. When Bob tells Alex to invite Edward along with them to the next Saxburgh CND meeting, Alex says “I don’t think he’d come,” to which Bob simply replies “Neither do I. That’s my whole point” (317). Like the young Yeats, who often struggled to see how his convictions about alchemy could be relevant to Irish political and social life, Edward is a mystic or prophet first and a well-intentioned social activist only second (if at all). Although the novel clearly upholds his perspective on the world, it also suggests that merely talk about it is not enough; against the “ghastly pragmatism” of the CND meeting, “high talk of reconciliation of the opposites” makes “nonsense” of Edward’s days spent poring over the Agnew papers (348).

Alex’s brief involvement with the CND is thus important, because it offers a glimpse at what Clarke suggests a next step could be. Motivated largely by Edward’s teachings, Alex takes what he has learned and begins to consider how he might apply it—first to his own tortuous personal life, and subsequently to the troubled world outside of himself. He tells Bob, near the close of the novel, that some of the insights he gained from Edward had to do with “the contemporary relevance of alchemical symbols to the confusing processes of personal evolution,” while others had to do with “the crisis of our own time” (494); in other words, Alex insists on the significance of alchemical ideas not only to the private, internal life of the

individual, but also to the collective, social life of the human species. For Clarke, as for Williams, these two are always inseparable. Thus when Bob, after listening to Alex explain the need for a re-orientation of perspective *vis a vis* our relationship to the planet, counters with “That’s all very well. . . . but at the end of the day you won’t change anything till you’ve changed the social structures that govern the way people think,” Alex’s response reveals how much he has changed since the beginning of the novel: “And who’s going to do that, Bob? . . . What sort of people are going to do that? And is it just a question of thinking? What about imagination? What about feeling?” (494). That Clarke hopes the “sort of people” who will work towards social and environmental change includes future readers of his novel is part of what makes *The Chymical Wedding* such a self-consciously eco-alchemical text. Alex comes to parallel Clarke in this respect, since the close of the novel depicts his evolution into a writer who understands imaginative creation, rather than reckless consumption, is among the only “serious” answers to the problems of the world (529).

With his return to poetic creation, Alex becomes not only the “man of gold” who has successfully incorporated the ideals of alchemical transmutation into his personal journey towards wholeness, but also the poet whom Edward sees as having “a coppery tinge of green about [him]” (510). Alex becomes associated with the colour green, and with imagery of vitality and rebirth because his poetic awakening is the result of various dreams about the figure of the Green Man—a figure who then becomes the subject of his new poem. Although foliate male heads, usually carved from stone or wood, were common decorations on cathedral architecture since early medieval times, the term “Green Man” was first coined by Lady Raglan, in her 1939 *Folklore* article “The ‘Green Man’ in Church Architecture.” Since Raglan’s publication of this essay, “green man” has persisted as the dominant term by which these figures are known. Clarke

follows other late twentieth-century environmentalists in associating this pre-Christian, Celtic vegetative deity with the contemporary green movement. In William Anderson's *Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth* (1991), for instance, he describes the Green Man as an archetype that evokes our deep embeddedness in the cycles of a living nature. Clarke seems to follow Anderson's suggestion that the Green Man functions as an archetypal bridge between nature and civilization; possessing a human face, but significantly one that is overlaid with vines, weeds, moss, leaves, and other vegetation, the Green Man is an emblem of both humanity and of the natural world to which human culture so often positions itself in opposition.

Although Clarke leaves much of the mythological and anthropological context of the Green Man oblique in *The Chymical Wedding*, what the text's descriptions seem to point to is that the Green Man becomes a kind of tutelary spirit for Alex, guiding him towards the reconciliation between these two realms that he himself embodies. It is the idea of the Green Man which first offers Alex "some rudimentary promise of renewal" at the beginning of the novel, providing him with something tangible to orient his fragmented life around (7). The language Clarke uses to describe Alex's initial connection with the Green Man speaks to the sense of restlessness that characterizes Alex, while also confirming the text's description of Alex as "a man looking for something":

Day after day the figure prowled my imagination. I could sense him there, almost smell him, in his rough green fell; yet whenever I came close he stole from shade to denser shade where the trees packed deep. All I knew about him for sure was that he was a woodland-dweller, so it was inevitable that the search should take me at last through the forbidding perimeter of barbed wire into the Great Wood to the north of the Easternness Estate. . . . it was not that I expected to encounter him

out there—in the flesh, so to speak, this clumsy, feral creature sired sometime in the dark between the Fifth Day and the Sixth, and neither man nor beast. But this, if ever, was the season of the Green Man, and this almost medieval wood was Green Man country. If I looked long and quietly enough he might one day shiver into focus, print himself across the page, and I would know then what kin he was to me, and whether he was likeliest to injure me or aid. (7).

It is significant, then, that what his search through the Norfolk woods for the Green Man eventually leads Alex to is a sunlit clearing, where he first sees Edward and Laura. While Edward comes to function as Alex's alchemical guide, instructing him in the history, traditions, and formal doctrines of the hermetic arts, Laura embodies the lived practice of alchemy; as a potter, she takes on the role of alchemical master in the same way that Louisa, through the art of writing, does in the nineteenth-century narrative.

It is not surprising that it is therefore through his relationship with Laura that Alex begins to resolve the problems posed to him by his experience with the CND. The urgent issue that their meetings present him with—that of the dangerous potential for violence and *disjuncto* on both the macro, political level and the micro, atomic level that the nuclear bomb represents—is an issue that Alex interprets through the symbolic grammar of medieval alchemy. As Rowland explains, Alex comes to see that “it is the unwillingness to explore Otherness” that has created this particular “diabolic” problem: the “horrors of nuclear splitting which the novel marks as the extreme pole of the masculine mode of resisting Otherness” (*Jung* 80). Alex “resolves” this problem by embracing the alchemical idea of *nigredo*. More specifically, he posits that the period of dissolution, putrefaction and calcination that mark this first stage in the alchemical process is (at least metaphorically) necessary to our human experiences; again in Rowland's

words, this allows Alex to establish “an alchemical continuum that can hold the horrors of splitting as *nigredo*, as one stage in the process of transmutation” (80). Allowing this process to occur inside of the self, Alex intuitively with the help of another dream laden with alchemically-rich symbolology, transforms the individual into an alembic—the vessel used by alchemists to perform the Great Work. The forces at work inside an alembic are often volatile and dangerous, and constantly threatening to erupt. However, when the alembic can contain conflict and fission inside of itself, the material elements achieve reconciliation and fusion: “It was about holding together. If we were to find a key to the explosive condition of the world it could only be done by holding contraries together” (*CW* 409). Thus what Alex concludes is that the best protection the planet has against the threat of nuclear disaster is enough people who are prepared to function as these kind of alembics—enough people who can endure within themselves the tension of divisive forces, who neither disown their own violence nor deploy it, but hold the conflict together inside of themselves (409). Because the process of holding these forces together generates change in the interior self, Alex insists that this change extends to the exterior world as well, although he adds “whether it changed enough was another question” (409).

Although the novel does not again pick up this question about whether the world can ever change “enough,” even given a global re-orientation of perspective, Alex’s character trajectory increasingly exemplifies the internal process of transmutation, including the *nigredo* period. In this he is guided by Edward and aided by Laura, who takes Alex on as an alchemical assistant or *mystic frère*, as Louisa did with Edwin. Laura’s hand-crafted pots, which are fired using a wood-burning kiln she made together with Edward, are glazed from vegetable ash she collects herself, resulting in a process the text describes as a “sort of practical alchemy” (220). The novel certainly upholds the significance of this work; as Alex puts it, she is busy with the “earthed and

pragmatic” potter’s craft, busy making something of material substance, while he and Edward “ballooned through the intellectual stratosphere with nothing to show for [their] efforts but an increase of paper” (220). Laura demonstrates the “responsiveness” that Clarke describes elsewhere in his writing towards the material elements she uses in her craft, recognizing, like the alchemists did, that she is not separate from them across a rigid subject-object divide but a participant together with them in the same nature. The text describes her relationship to the raw elements that go into making her pots as an intuitive connection, one mediated by her “feel” for the earth-derived material, which she transmutes into pots by “listening to the kiln” (235). The kiln itself is portrayed as a living, temperamental cube of bricks and iron, one that is capable of “mak[ing] the elements dance” (235).

In the chapter entitled “The Firing,” Laura and Alex together succeed in bringing her clay pots through a process that Alex states “made an alchemist of [him]” (238). The transmutation begins, as with any true alchemical project, with the *nigredo stage*, where the kiln is a mass of “black smoke” and the enterprise begins to feel “dark and dangerous” as the “imprisoned energies” vomit only “carbon-black exhaust” (240), and concludes with the *rubedo stage*, where the pots are successfully fired next to a lake that becomes lit with “golden fire” (241) and the “dense red glow” inside the kiln transforms into “liquid flame” and the pots bend “in obeisance to the blaze” (244). As he works alongside Laura, Alex experiences the exhilaration of meaningful labour, feeling that “this was to be alive” (241). His decision to pursue writing, rather than to return to a teaching job he was stagnating in, is evidence that Alex is changed by the alchemical process he has undergone, as is his subsequent resolve to reconcile with his estranged family. Now “alive” to the world in a new way, Alex “sense[s] the world changing” around him (242), a testament to his new conviction that what he experiences inside

of himself matters to the world outside. The experience of entering into a partnership with raw materials supplied by the phenomenal environment, and achieving together the “Great Work” of a finished pot, allows Alex to indeed become an “alchemist.”

Thus more so than Louisa, Alex comes to embody the participatory model of human-to-non-human relationship that the text represents as intrinsic to the alchemical project. His new responsiveness to the natural world, ignited by his experience with Laura’s kiln and deepened by his poetic connection to the figure of the Green Man, is Clarke’s imaginative rendering of what eco-alchemical openness to the physical environment could look like, even in a modern world. Unlike some novelists who treat ecological issues in their fiction, Clarke is no doomsday prophet. Rather, he consistently points towards a hopeful vision of the future, a vision grounded in what he sees as an already-present emergence of “a wider ecological understanding, by which we are coming to recognize that everything is indissolubly connected and that what we do to the planet we do also to ourselves” (“Imagining” 17). To Clarke, alchemy provides a rich metaphor for this kind of interconnectivity, a metaphor that can be both descriptive and instructive. As he argues in a different essay, “the contemporary relevance” of the alchemical project can be instructive because

the alchemists prefigure the emergence of deep ecological thought in our own time—the kind that recognizes that short-term environmental fixes will not be enough and that what is required for the decent survival of our own and other species is a profound transformation of our relationship to the beautiful planet that sustains our life. And such transformation will not come about without a change in the way we envision the natural world and our place in it. (“Alchemy” 11)

In other words, what Clarke calls for is a cultural re-orientation of vision, not simply bandage solutions to isolated environmental problems. He makes the same point in “Imagining Otherwise” when he cites “[his] friend Patrick Harpur” who argues in *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire* that it is not enough simply to introduce environmental remedies; what is necessary now is that we intentionally cultivate a new perspective on the world (18). The next chapter will look more closely at Patrick Harpur’s writing, and consider how he attempts to cultivate this new, more world-affirming relationship to the physical planet we, as much as the medieval alchemists, depend upon.

CHAPTER V
PATRICK HARPUR AND THE “ABSOLUTELY OTHER”

“In a sense the secret of alchemy is to imagine a world in which it is possible to transmute base metal to gold”

~ Patrick Harpur, *Mercurius*

Like Lindsay Clarke, Patrick Harpur is a contemporary British novelist whose work explicitly engages with the symbology and undergirding assumptions of the alchemical tradition. Although Harpur’s fiction has not (at least so far) sold as successfully as Clarke’s, he has garnered a small but enthusiastic readership. While his focus in recent years has been fiction, Harpur initially made a name for himself primarily as a lay expert in British folklore, Celtic studies, and alchemy; his three works of nonfiction each engage with the Western esoteric tradition, with a special emphasis on those aspects of hermeticism that overlap with the insights of twentieth-century depth psychology. Harpur is included in this project because, like Yeats and Williams, he is a committed advocate of the wisdom tradition embedded in medieval alchemy, and because, like Clarke, he believes alchemy has something to contribute to contemporary discussions about our relationship to our physical environment.

iv. Biographical backgrounds

Patrick Harpur was born in 1950 in Windsor, England. He grew up in Surrey, attended Cranleigh School and travelled for a year in Africa before going to Cambridge to read English, after which he spent five years working in London as a researcher and then an editor (harpur.org). Although little biographical material is available regarding his personal life apart from what he includes in his website biography, Harpur’s intellectual interests are readily

apparent from his non-fictional works, nearly all of which deal with similar subjects: hermeticism, folklore, alchemy, depth psychology, and the relationship between shamanistic traditions and modern science. Through works like *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld*,⁴² *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*,⁴³ and *The Secret Tradition of the Soul*,⁴⁴ Harpur gained enough of an audience that he is able now to run regular courses, entitled "The Mythic Imagination and Neoplatonic Philosophy," which seek to elucidate what his website describes as "a neglected, almost secret, tradition" of thought, one that he believes is worth recovering (mythicimagination.info). The course exists at the nexus of what might seem to be very different fields, but Harpur's aim is to synthesize serious philosophy, folksy mysticism, and esoteric hermeticism together into a coherent whole. An important aspect of Harpur's courses is the rural countryside of West Dorset, where they take place; "fieldtrips" outside and walks through the Dorset landscape are presented as intimately related to the content being taught. Although, unlike Yeats or Williams, Harpur does not claim membership in any kind of hermetic order, the community in which he lives and writes undoubtedly informs his literature, as does his friendship with Lindsay Clarke.

Harpur and Clarke first met in 1995, at a conference Clarke directed at Dartington called "Celebrating the Mysteries" (Re: Imagining Otherwise). Although Clarke's own reading in the alchemical tradition is fairly extensive, as the last chapter suggested, Clarke readily admits that Harpur, who quickly became a close friend, has "a much sounder intellectual grasp of the hermetic tradition" than he does (Re: Imagining Otherwise). Harpur's interest in hermeticism began when he was a student at Cambridge, where he read English under Thomas Rice Henn, a

⁴² Published in the UK and the US by Penguin Viking in 1995 and re-issued in the US by Pine Winds Press in 2003.

⁴³ First published by Penguin in 2002, and in the US by Ivan R. Dee in 2004. Later re-printed in the UK by Squeeze Press in 2009.

⁴⁴ Published in 2011 by Evolver Editions, and in the UK by Rider Books under the title *A Complete Guide to the Soul*.

Yeats scholar who shared with him rare manuscripts from the Golden Dawn, and hermetic texts that ignited what would become a life-long fascination with the sort of questions with which hermetic thinking engages (Interview). In addition to learning from Yeats, Harpur also cites Williams' work as an influence, especially *The Descent of the Dove* and *Descent into Hell*—a text which Harpur calls Williams' "best novel," and a "fascinating piece of writing" that "may have emboldened [him] to write as preposterous a novel as *The Rapture*" ("Questions"). Apart from his own statements, Harpur's non-fictional work demonstrates he is a careful reader of Williams (*The Philosopher's Secret Fire* 225-226), suggesting a network of literary interconnection and influence that appropriately situates Harpur at the end of this project.

v. Critical Overview

As of yet, no substantial literary criticism of Harpur's work exists. Much of this lack of attention is likely due to the fact that such explicitly hermetic writing has a limited appeal, for both popular and academic audiences. Of his six published novels—*The Serpent's Circle* (1985), *The Rapture* (1986), *Mercurius: The Marriage of Heaven and Earth* (1990), *The Savoy Truffle* (2013), *The Good People* (2017), and *The Stormy Petrel* (2017)—it is *Mercurius* that has received the most attention, gaining nearly unanimous praise from reviewers. Not surprisingly, *Mercurius* is also the only one of Harpur's novels to undergo a reprinting, with a second edition released in 2007 and a third in 2008. This chapter will restrict its discussion of Harpur's literature to this novel, since although he touches on the intersection of alchemical thinking and green concerns throughout his body of work, *Mercurius* makes this connection the most evident.

Literary criticism has not yet seriously explored Harpur's contributions as a fiction writer, but the few critics who have reviewed *Mercurius* have touched on both the strengths and weaknesses of the novel. In his review for the *New Statesman*, Robert Irwin says that *Mercurius* does for the "musty scholarship" of alchemy what Edwin Abbot's novel *Flatland* did for mathematics, and Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* did for philosophy (55). Although Irwin praises the "engrossing plot" Harpur weaves, however, he also critiques the "lengthy and cryptic lessons that come close to being sermons on the spiritual dimensions of alchemy," noting that while some of them are interesting they also contribute to what is an "intensely serious didactic novel" (55). Irwin's critique is valid, and probably explains why *Mercurius* is not likely to appeal to a very broad audience; although *The Chymical Wedding* is also a dense (and sometimes overly earnest) novel, *Mercurius* asks much more of its readers. However, reading it carefully—and slowly—is an immensely rewarding experience; Harpur writes in large part to educate, and reading *Mercurius* feels like taking a course in advanced alchemical studies. Peter Marshall, writing for the British environmental magazine *Resurgence*, praises *Mercurius* as a thrilling and profound novel that offers an insightful psychological study of its characters as well as "an erudite and well-informed account of the concepts and practices of alchemy," claiming that "[t]he result is one of the best and most insightful studies of alchemy that I have ever read." Although of the texts discussed here *Mercurius* most closely resembles *The Chymical Wedding* and Clarke's other work, the novel also contains echoes of some of the ideas with which both Yeats and Williams were engaged. It is thus fitting to conclude this project with *Mercurius*, since in many ways Harpur's work is the culmination of what the previous discussions of Yeats, Williams, and Clarke has done: namely, investigate the nature of the relationship between ourselves and the nonmaterial world in twentieth-century eco-alchemical British literature.

vi. *Mercurius*

The opening pages of *Mercurius* declare alchemy “the supreme expression of a world-view which [is] superior in many ways to our own” (xvi), a claim that the novel’s two primary characters both come to share. The text opens with an introduction, penned by a first-person narrator who readers are seemingly meant to take as Harpur himself, stating that in April of 1983 a stack of papers was left on the doorstep of his London flat; these papers, he discovered, were dropped off by an old girlfriend and classmate from his Cambridge days, named Eileen (xi). Half of the pages in this stack were written by Eileen, and the rest by a country vicar calling himself only “Smith,” a name that preserves the anonymity of a man who turns out to be a modern practitioner of the alchemical arts (xi-xii). As he leafed through their writings, Harpur claims, he was fascinated enough by what he read that he decided to publish them as a single book, with only minimal editorial interference; in its finished state this book, the introduction declares, became *Mercurius*. The last fifty-six pages of what is itself a lengthy novel are Harpur’s explanatory notes and commentary on the content of both Eileen’s and Smith’s writing, a narrative technique that allows him to bookend the novel with both an introduction and a coda that invite readers to become willing participants in the illusion of historicity he casts over the text.

The main body of *Mercurius* is made up of alternating chapters written by both Smith and Eileen. Smith’s narrative, which occurs sometime in the early 1950’s, is in the form of a personal journal, while Eileen’s account, which begins in September of 1982 and ends eight months later, is written as a series of letters ostensibly to Patrick Harpur (referred to as “P—” in her chapters)

(xii). In Smith's chapters, he switches between recounting the prosaic events of small-town village life and carefully detailing the results of his alchemical experiments; an Anglican vicar by day, Smith is also a hermetic adept who spends his free time secretly working on achieving the Philosopher's Stone in his cellar laboratory. Harpur's titles for the novel's eight chapters—*Calcination, Solution, Separation, Conjunction, Putrefaction, Congelation, Sublimation and Projection*—parallel each stage of the Great Work that Smith undergoes. In the secondary frame, Eileen is not only renting Smith's old vicarage, but happens upon his private alchemical journal, hidden away in the cellar. Delighted at the idea that she could become a "proper scholar" by publishing her findings, Eileen sees her discovery as a "gift":

It was like digging up the bones of an exotic prehistoric beast. . . . I feel quite evangelical about it, eager to correct the popular misconceptions about alchemy. Why is it still seen as a futile attempt by superstitious crackpots to turn base metals into gold? It never was that; it was always, surely, a spiritual quest—as even a cursory reading of Jung's work makes clear. "Our gold is not common gold," the alchemists never tired of saying. (98)

Much of Eileen's letters therefore take the form of academic investigation into the truth claims and psychological implications of what she reads in Smith's journals. In a novel that at times borders on being overly exposition-heavy, Eileen's scholarly aspirations allow Harpur to insert philosophical ideas into the novel in a relatively smooth way without sounding too heavy-handed. Nevertheless, *Mercurius* is a dense novel, one that is far more interested in the concepts it explores than in its characters.

One of the key ideas that the novel circles around is the nature of the relationship between humans and the world, or between what we have constructed as organic (ourselves) and what we have designated inorganic (that which is other to ourselves). As in *The Chymical*

Wedding, characters in *Mercurius* question the assumptions implicit in this polarity, and search for alternative ways of figuring this relationship. Like Clarke, Harpur is personally invested in the idea that the alchemical tradition offers one such alternative to the prevailing model of human/nonhuman interaction. Thus *Mercurius*, too, is a novel that sits apart, in an unusual but fascinating subgenre of twentieth-century British literature—a subgenre that merits more attention, especially from ecocritics, than it has so far received.

Smith's participation in the Great Work is animated by his conviction as a practicing alchemist that "[n]ever has our Philosophy been more needed" by the world (109). Without using Richard Tarnas' language of filaments, as Clarke does, Smith evokes a similar image when he says that each individual person is "a particular embodiment of the universal Spirit," or a "microcosm of the collective Spirit . . . capable of realizing the Spirit in all its fullness" (108). At other times he uses the name *Anima Mundi* to articulate what he means by this relationship (likely a deliberate word choice on Harpur's part intended to establish a connection to Yeats). For Smith, the same life force, or spirit, or Soul of the World, that animates the human person also animates a physical world we wrongly "suppose spiritless and dead," whether we recognize it as such or not (109). Precisely because this animating force is so often unrecognized, Smith says, the alchemists declared that it "must be sought out in that quarter where it is least expected—in matter" (109).

In one of the last papers Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood wrote before she died, titled "Nature in the Active Voice" (2009), she introduced the term "philosophical animism" because she believed it could help scholars in the humanities more effectively re-orient their thinking when it came to the critical revision of the Western philosophical tradition for which much of her published work called. In this essay, Plumwood defines "philosophical animism" as

a form of materialism capable of expanding the idea of mentality beyond the anthropological boundaries to which it is often restricted; only in this way, she argues, can our thinking begin to escape the spirit/matter or mind/matter binary (124). For Plumwood, the material world—or the “larger biospheric community”—ought not to be seen as separate from or other to the human world, or as simply “dead matter,” to which we have to “add life, organization, intelligence and design” (118). When the human species is designated the sole possessor of mind, or consciousness, the nonhuman is reduced to “‘mere matter,’ emptied of agency, spirit and intelligence”; the language we use to describe the material world matters, she argues, because this kind of vocabulary naturalizes the “treatment of non-humans as slaves or mere tools—making it seem natural that they are available for our unconstrained use and are reduced to that use (are ‘resources’)” (119). It is worth adding that this instrumental treatment of the non-human often carries over onto how humans, too, are treated, as many scholars who work in the environmental humanities have observed.

Although Harpur has stated that he avoids the word “animism” because of the pejorative weight it still carries in contemporary British culture and so prefers to speak of “participation” (Interview), he nevertheless affirms the value of the kind of philosophical animism that Plumwood describes. Harpur is adamant that the instrumentalization of matter, or the reduction of the elements of the physical world to economic resources, is precisely what the alchemical worldview rightly guards against. Thus in *Mercurius* Eileen comes to understand, as she tracks with Smith’s progress through his journal entries, that what alchemy offers is a more helpful way of thinking about our relationship with the material world than reductive materialism has been able to produce. In a passage that sounds as if Eileen has been reading Charles Williams, she records her realization that one of the things modern psychology has taught us is that we must

translate the *other* into terms of ourselves, and vice versa: I put myself in his place as he is put by me in my place. This substitution is primarily an imaginative act. It's the basis of all fellow-feeling—of all compassion. Alchemy requires the ultimate translation: that of the *absolutely* other, the non-human (inorganic matter) into terms of ourselves. (382)

In Nicholas Griffin's assessment of Plumwood's contributions to the field of ecocriticism, he argues that one of her chief insights is that the most promising ecological ethic is one grounded in empathy for the other (including both the human and the nonhuman other); thus while she rejects the absolute boundaries Cartesian dualism erects between the rational self and the "nonrational" other, she also warns against the kind of thinking, common to many deep ecological perspectives, that attempts to dissolve any distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, or between the self and the other. Like Plumwood, Eileen argues in this passage that the point is not to do away with all of the categories that separate the organic from the inorganic, but to recognize that the boundaries that separate them are simply more porous and unfixed than many of us acknowledge; in the language of the novel, they are fluid enough that "translation," or "substitution" between them can and does occur.

What both Eileen and Smith come to discover is that alchemy provides a framework to symbolically represent this translation. The writings of the medieval alchemists that Smith devotedly studies, whenever he is not performing his duties as village rector, testify to a way of thinking wherein the individual alchemist treats the inorganic elements used in his laboratory with care and attention, in a relationship characterized by ethical consideration for the nonhuman other. After Smith begins work in his cellar laboratory, he notices that "the matter warmed to [his] touch," an indication of its responsiveness to his interaction with it; as he continues his

experiments with the material, he writes, tellingly, “I sense I’m getting to *know* it” (127). Smith consistently treats the material substances he works with not simply with respect, but with sensitivity. He does not “use” them, but partners with these inorganic substances. Participating in this kind of relationship allows Smith to perceive the metals in his alembic as responsive and alive; for instance, upon gently working some of the material with a pestle, he notes a subtle change in the elements: “The first springlike hint of *veriditas* [greenness] has begun to tint the shiny earth and from time to time there’s the quick sparkle and wink of a nobler metal” (50). What Smith sees here is the life-force or *anima*—what the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen called “*veriditas*”—within the rocks and stones in his hand. The implication for the reader that Harpur attempts to underscore in these passages is that Smith is modeling a way of thinking, or of being, that, because it is not characterized by wanting to dominate or exploit the material world, allows him to perceive the true nature of matter.

It is therefore fitting that Smith’s explorations in his laboratory develop alongside his growing environmental activism. A significant plot point in Smith’s narrative is his fight to save Nightingale Wood, the forest that borders the village. It is under threat from Mr. Caldwell, a cartoonishly-smug business man determined to “tarmacadaming [sic] every inch of it into car parks” (17). Smith intuitively, rightly Harpur would say, that “[m]ore than [his] personal salvation depends on the Great Work,” but that it is worth doing also “[f]or Nature’s sake and the world’s health” (109). The immediate environmental problem facing Smith is the “criminal folly” that would be destroying Nightingale Wood, a site not only of trees but of “beautiful old English hollies, oaks, thorns and apples and the more recent beeches and copper beaches, elms and ashes. Every sort of flora and fauna are there, from bluebells (which are just beginning now in massed profusion) to badgers and lovers” (46). Although Smith feels that the “argument against

destroying the wood is as self-evident as its trees,” he realizes that there is no argument that would carry weight with Caldwell; thus when the plan is proposed at a town meeting, early in the novel, Smith only poses one question to Caldwell, asking him “Do you have the right?” (46). Although Caldwell interprets this question on the most literal level by asserting his legal ownership of the land, the deeper meaning implicit in Smith’s question is clear to the reader, namely, that there is a serious problem when we begin to believe we have unchallenged “rights” to do what we like with parts of the natural world that we “own.”

Smith’s concern for Nightingale Wood is presented in *Mercurius* as something that fits easily alongside his alchemical experiments. Harpur is careful to show that Smith’s convictions about alchemy are not esoteric, but apply directly to concrete social and ecological realities. In this way, the novel underscores the contemporary relevance of alchemy, insisting that the worldview in which it is embedded can make a twentieth-century Anglican rector both a practitioner of the hermetic arts and enough of an environmental activist that Nora, his housekeeper and closest friend, sees him as being the type of person who is “so keen on Nature and all that” (134). Smith’s attempt to save the wood—by preaching pointed sermons, by appealing to the town mayor, and by sending letters to every member of the village pleading with them to stand up to Caldwell—finally culminates in a sermon which Smith preaches in Nightingale Wood near the end of the novel. Although the sermon is apparently heterodox enough to warrant Smith’s immediate dismissal as village rector, as well as to generate enthusiastic town gossip for years afterwards about what exactly he was up to in his secret basement, it does (indirectly) lead to the wood being saved. The essence of the sermon is that “[t]he time for talking about Heaven and God is past,” and the time for talking about the Earth and the spirit of *Mercurius* is overdue (355). Smith asks his congregation to

Stand very still for a moment. Close your eyes. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Feel beneath the ground. Feel downwards with your whole being. Your souls are rooted in the Earth just as the trees in this wood are. Send down tendrils towards the bedrock. Listen with the soles of your feet. . . . We've lived too long with our heads in the clouds, hankering after some heaven made in our own image. We must come down to Earth. (355)

Smith's plea for the villagers to reconnect with the physical soil beneath them and material reality around them is rooted in his alchemical convictions, but expressed in the language of contemporary environmental activism. As the most developed "eco-alchemist" to appear in Harpur's fiction, Smith also stands out as the most "enlightened" of his characters. It is therefore unsurprising that by the end of the novel, the text implies that Smith has indeed achieved both the Stone and personal transmutation. Although a fire destroys the cellar laboratory, Smith's body is never found; instead, the novel suggests, it was transmuted in the inferno that incinerated his instruments and badly burned Bradley Caldwell, a man who Eileen meets through her relationship with Nora, now an old woman dying of stomach cancer in the secondary time frame. Her unrequited love for Smith haunts Nora throughout Eileen's narrative, causing her to see his face in the crowd when she visits the village: "'but when I get to the spot . . . he's gone.' Crackle. 'Slippery fellow. Doesn't look a day older'" (374).

Although Eileen initially dismisses Nora's claim to have seen Smith alive and unaged simply as the product of her ailing mind, after Nora's death, Bradley passes on to Eileen Nora's most precious possession: a small piece of the Stone that she had kept, for over thirty years, and the source of her mysteriously acquired fortune (408). Holding the Stone is, for Eileen, "a

tremendous moment” that makes her “legs go weak” and changes how she thinks of both Nora and Smith; as Bradley, who was with Smith when the fire destroyed the cellar, explains to her,

‘[Nora] said it was what she foolishly made her fortune with. She said you’d know how to use it more wisely.’

‘John [Smith] gave it to her . . .?’

‘No. She saved it from . . . down there’—he pointed to the floor—‘from the hot ashes . . . the broken glass. God forgive me.’

‘You know what it is?’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know anything. I only knew what Nora told me . . . what she believed. And what I saw with my own eyes.’ He lifted his right arm helplessly and let it drop by his side. ‘It wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen.

And it was alive.’ Abruptly he sank down on the sofa. (408-9)

The “it” that Bradley refers to here is the Stone, the successful result of Smith’s alchemical work. When Bradley enters the cellar, for his first and last time, he sees the Stone, “sitting in its own red glow . . . puls[ing]—like a living thing” (424). Unlike Smith, Bradley’s “eyes are seared” by the sight of it, and he is forced to turn away from “the beauty and terror in the red invagination of matter” (425). The language Harpur uses to describe both the transmutation of the Stone and of Smith himself, here in the last pages of the novel, is highly symbolic and evocative of the language used by the medieval alchemists. Upon Smith’s attainment of the Stone, Mercurius himself, or “the fiery water, the cold fire, who shines in the air above, burns in the earth below” appears to him, as he waits “frozen in white heat, niched between arcs of dancing fire, unconsumed, burnished by beating wings of flame, red streamers flying from his shining head” (425). Although the novel is describing what Bradley perceives as Smith’s death by fire, it also

gives Smith's own perspective on his transmutation; to complicate the end of the novel further, the narration also shifts between Eileen and Smith's voices, as Harpur explains in the final footnote (482-3). It is unclear precisely what happened, down in the cellar the day Smith disappeared, but what the novel hints at is that he has in fact achieved transmutation.

As Eileen delves deeper into Smith's journals, she frequently struggles to make sense of the arcane imagery and paradoxical language that both he, and the medieval alchemists he emulates, use to describe this process of transmutation. For instance, she complains that elements like sulphur differ in meaning from one alchemical text to another, so that it is sometimes a cipher for gold but other times indicates the *prima materia*, that it changes between red and white (and thus between sun and moon), and will at times exude "a corrosive, consuming, diabolical fire and also a gentle, light-bringing warmth" (155). However, Eileen quickly comes to see that "[m]ercury is worse": it is "a 'water'—or, at least, a liquid variously called dew, milk of the virgin, balm, our honey, water of Azoth, etc. It's also *aqua ardens*, a burning water, a corrosive, 'philosophical vinegar,' a 'water that does not wet the hands.'" (155). Despite this frustratingly unstable vocabulary, Eileen nevertheless realizes that mercury is "by all accounts *the* key concept in alchemy," and so it is worth struggling to understand (155).

The reason mercury is central to the alchemical process—and the reason why Harpur therefore chose to title the novel *Mercurius*—cannot be easily explained. However, one important clue as to why the medieval alchemists placed mercury in such an eminent role is the association between the Roman trickster god Mercury (or Mercurius in Latin) and his more familiar, Greek incarnation as Hermes. Given that hermeticism takes its name from Hermes, who first imparted sacred wisdom to humanity in the form of the Emerald Tablet and other writings in the *Hermetica*, it is not surprising that the element named after him would be essential to the

Great Work. Perhaps even more significant, though, is the chemical make-up of mercury itself; as Eileen observes, the alchemists rightly perceived that of the seven metals commonly used in their laboratories—gold, silver, copper, lead, iron, tin, and mercury—only the last appeared as a liquid at room temperature; thus, they naturally assumed that “all metals were formed from a spiritual principle which was most obvious in mercury—what could be more like a spirit than quicksilver, flowing in a silvery stream out of a metal and easily sublimated by heat into an airy vapour or ‘spirit’?” (114). The name “quicksilver,” from the Old English word *cwicseolfor*, translates as “living silver,” a phrase meant to evoke the life-like or organic appearance and behavior of the metal. In his section on quicksilver in “The Economy of Minerals,” the medieval alchemist Paracelsus says that alone of all the metals, mercury is not truly a metal but a “metallic water” that, because of its importance in the Great Work, is properly named “the chief material of the Alchemists” (109). Although modern chemistry would later discover more “liquid” metals (bromine, for instance, is also liquid at standard temperature and pressure), for the medieval alchemists mercury was entirely unique.⁴⁵ No other metal was so vital or “alive” as mercury, and so it was the metal that most captured what the alchemists were trying to do with all of matter: namely, challenge the inflexibility of the boundary lines that divide the organic and the inorganic.

In his non-fiction work *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire* (2002), a text that presents a kind of intellectual history of Western hermeticism, Harpur’s seventeenth chapter, titled “Mercurius,” revisits some of the issues the novel engages with, including the question of why mercury was so central to the alchemical process. Here, Harpur argues that “Mercurius was the essence of alchemy, invisible, unchanging, yet never the same. . . . Often it was called ‘our Mercury’ or

⁴⁵ Interestingly, later chemistry would also discover that when three separate isotopes of mercury (Hg) decay, they produce gold (Au)—a form of radioactive decay that would have thrilled many alchemists, at least for the short time that the half-life of the newly formed element existed.

Mercurius, a personification that indicated both the quicksilver which ran like a volatile spirit through the earth, and also the god-like earth spirit himself” (138). What Harpur is getting at here is the same point Eileen makes in *Mercurius* when she notes that unlike the rest of their culture, which “generally held that spirit ceased to operate below the level of vegetative life,” the medieval alchemists saw spirit, or life, as present in all matter (206). This is an important distinction, because it underscores one of the major peculiarities of the alchemical worldview. While many of the post-medieval intellectual movements that inherited aspects of animistic thinking, such as vitalism, Romanticism, or transcendentalism, make room for spirit in living organisms (those with an “animus,” such as animals or plants), rarely are any of them willing to join the alchemists in extending animation to the inorganic material that make up the stone and soil and minerals under the ground.

Today, the emergence of the contemporary green movement is often associated with the first views of the earth from space, via photographs taken during the 1960’s and shared with a fascinated public. The image of a spherical planet, suspended alone in space, had an emotional impact on both the public and the astronauts and cosmonauts seeing it firsthand; as Aleksandr Aleksandrov memorably stated after his Soyuz T-9 mission in 1983, “And then it struck me that we are all children of our Earth. It does not matter what country you look at. We are all Earth’s children, and we should treat her as our Mother” (Marginson 153). The idea of the earth as a single, fragile biosphere requiring global cooperation to protect owes much to the view-from-space phenomenon. The image of the earth from the outside had another result though: what the photos make clear is that the blue-green planet we inhabit is, in the most basic terms, simply a combination of water (hydrosphere) and rock (lithosphere). Rock, or stone, is defined by petrologists as an aggregate of minerals held together by chemical bonds; in large concentration,

these minerals can form ores, which can be mined for metal. Although the alchemists used a variety of metals in their laboratories, their aim was to produce “The Stone,” or a single rock that was both a combination of minerals, and a whole or complete material entity itself. In this way, the Philosopher’s Stone of the alchemists parallels the earth of the contemporary green movement—both a combination of interdependent spheres and a single, unified geological system. It is not surprising that for the alchemists macrocosm and microcosm would mirror each other this way, or that they would see the earth and the materials it provides as participating in the same life force.

That these minerals and metals which make up the earth are not lifeless or dead is one of the most important presuppositions that Smith relies on to ground his alchemical experiments. When he first begins the Great Work, after happening upon the *prima materia* in the first chapter of *Mercurius*, he “marvel[s] at the subtle striations which thread [the] prima materia like the veins and arteries of a living body” (15), an analogy that he lifts from the writings of the medieval alchemists, who frequently saw correspondences between the materials they used in their laboratories and their own bodies. The elements and metals used in alchemy correspond to the human body because they are both products of the same life force, a life force shared by the earth itself. As Smith writes: “The first man to see gold glittering in the primeval streams or pulsing like life-blood in the veins of some common ore, knew it as a glimpse of the earth-spirit shining in the dark earth as the sun shines in the sky” (10). The image of the earth as a body is one that Harpur, like Williams, gets from the hermetic tradition, which has long insisted that there is an intimate connection between our own enfleshed bodies and the physical world around us. The alchemists, taking their cue from the metallurgists who preceded them, treated the earth

as alive, sensitive, and maternal, as Carolyn Merchant persuasively argues in *The Death of Nature*:

For most traditional cultures, minerals and metals ripened in the uterus of the Earth Mother, mines were compared to her vagina, and metallurgy was the human hastening of the birth of the living metal in the artificial womb of the furnace—an abortion of the metal’s natural growth cycle before its time. Miners offered propitiation to the deities of the soil and subterranean world, performed ceremonial sacrifices, and observed strict cleanliness, sexual abstinence, and fasting before violating the sacredness of the living earth by sinking a mine. Smiths⁴⁶ assumed an awesome responsibility in precipitating the metal’s birth through smelting, fusing, and beating it with an anvil; they were often accorded the status of shaman in tribal rituals and their tools were taught to hold special powers. (3-4)

This analogy between the earth and the human (particularly female) body extended to the springs, rivers and lakes on the surface of the planet; the earth’s springs corresponded to the arteries and veins that circulate blood through the body, the presence of moisture and dew above the ground was the “mucus, saliva, sweat, and other forms of lubrication in the human body,” and earthquakes and wind were seen as the “vapours” inside the human body that need to be released (24). The most commonly used analogy, though, Merchant claims, was between the

⁴⁶ Although in *Mercurius* John Smith acknowledges that the pseudonym he writes under is meant primarily to preserve his anonymity, he also asserts that it has a double meaning: “‘Smith’ signifies both the anonymity of the man-in-the-street and a metal worker. It’s the fate of such craftsmen to be set apart, whether they are humble village blacksmiths carrying the taint of the iron they work, or whether they are immortal like halt Hephaestus” (18). That Harpur has Smith draw this connection suggests he intends the reader to associate Smith’s alchemical work with the kind of work practiced by the metalsmiths Merchant discusses here.

female's reproductive potential and the earth's ability, through "marriage" with the sun, to become pregnant with and give birth to stones and metals (25).

An essential part of the alchemists' belief in the vitality of metals was that they both gestate and are born. Thus the underground places of the earth were truly a womb, where baser metals eventually matured into more noble ones. In a widely-circulated alchemical manuscript from the sixteenth century, Paracelsus scathingly rebukes the ancient Greek philosophers as "lazy men" who were content to "chatter about natural science from eyesight alone," without considering the metaphysical aspect to what they were observing (93). Thus the Greeks did not "see their error when, on the subject of minerals, they wrote that out of the earth grew nothing but wood, leaves, flowers, fruits, and herbs" (93). This was an erroneous assumption, Paracelsus confidently asserts, because minerals too grow out of the earth, and because they change and move toward an end, they have life as a plant does.

Both the source of life and the receiver of the dead, the "womb" of the earth plays a dual role; in many parts of the world, newborn babies have traditionally been placed on the ground, and then picked up again to represent their birth from the womb of the earth, while today "even in modern industrial societies, many people still want to be buried in their native land, to return to their earthly womb" (Sheldrake 13). These contemporary burial practices parallel the importance of caves to early humans—the "cavemen" of the Stone Age, in popular parlance—who for millennia centered their religious life in underground caverns; as Rupert Sheldrake notes, the earliest-known paintings we are aware of were found deep inside caverns in the south of France, while the mystery cults of ancient Greece traditionally practiced their ritual initiations in the darkness of caves, so that descending into the cave was like inhabiting the womb of the earth mother, and re-emerging was like being reborn (14).

In *The Philosopher's Secret Fire*, Harpur argues that this kind of “living relationship” with the earth is the bedrock of the alchemical worldview. When even the inorganic stones and metals under the surface of the earth are assumed to participate with us “in a network of intimate connections,” a very different mindset is operating than the one that undergirds post-enlightenment, modern scientific thinking (67). Although Harpur, like Clarke, does not advocate for the kind of perspective that collapses all subject-object distinctions, he does consistently push back on the extent to which the human and the nonhuman are disconnected from each other in the modern scientific imaginary. As he writes in the same work, we humans are “paradoxical beings—both part of Nature, for example, and yet outside of it” (77). What the alchemists do that makes them helpful voices for us today, Harpur believes, is delve into the nuances of this paradox.

One of the metaphors the medieval and Renaissance alchemists used to examine the nature of their relationship, as human subjects, to the inorganic objects they partnered with in the Great Work was cooking. In Eileen's chapters in *Mercurius*, the novel draws heavily on anthropologist Lévi-Strauss' work, especially the first volume of *Mythologiques*, entitled *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), to explore the ways in which the alchemists' “cooking” of metals resembles the cooking of food. As she writes at the opening of the chapter entitled “Conjunction”:

The Magnum Opus is patently related to what Lévi-Strauss thought of as the central problem of anthropology, viz: *the transition of Nature to Culture*. His contention is that man is preoccupied with his own paradoxical existence: we are *part* of Nature and yet we can't help seeing ourselves as *other* than Nature. At the same time, in order to survive, we have to keep up our relationship with Nature.

The way we meet this contradiction, Claude reckons, is by cooking. We don't *have* to cook but we do so for symbolic, as much for gastronomic, reasons.

Just as there's no human society which doesn't have a spoken language, there's no human society either which doesn't cook in some way. Like language, cooking is a prerequisite of Culture as against Nature; and the key feature of cooking is *its transformation of raw materials by fire*. . . . Fire is the agent by which Nature (raw food) is transformed into Culture (cooked food).

Significantly, the alchemists also describe their Art as one of "cooking."

Their aim is simply to transform the right "raw stuff" into the Stone by means of different degrees of "natural" fire, plus the one "secret fire." (231)

The largest difference between cooking food and cooking metals, Eileen continues, is that the former deals with organic material while the latter uses inorganic material. Thus our relationship with food is the "opposite," in a significant way, from our relationship with metals: "That is, we're in the most direct relationship possible to food because we eat it; the inorganic 'metals' are what we're in *least* relation to" (231). Thus when the alchemists "cooked" metals, they were engaging in an attempt to bridge what Strauss suggests is the largest of all the Nature/Culture divides—not just raw to cooked food, but "raw" elements to what the alchemists believed somehow become transmuted elements, that were no longer separate from the alchemists across the subject-object divide, but intimately connected to them.

Harpur puts Smith in line with this ancient alchemical tradition, by having him, too, speak of his work as a kind of cooking of elements. When Timothy, one of the local village boys, asks Smith what he is up to in his laboratory, Smith articulates his project in what he explains are the simplest terms possible: he is, "in a manner of speaking," busy with "cooking metals in order

to transform them from their raw state to a higher, more durable condition,” a transformation that is possible because of the life-force that “animates all things, down to the basest metal” (266). Smith acknowledges that while the fire in his laboratory can accomplish this transmutation, in “the great pressure-cooker of the Earth” the same thing is constantly occurring on large-scale, so that elements like carbon are changing into coal or graphite or diamond, in the fire of the “dark sun which lies at the centre of the Earth” (266-7). What Smith is expressing here is a sense, common in the writings of the medieval alchemists, that the boundary lines that separate “raw” metals from cooked metals—or the “natural” from the cultural, or the organic from the inorganic—can sometimes be both helpful and necessary, but are also fluid and frequently shifting. Throughout *Mercurius* Harpur frequently underscores the instability of these binaries we erect, binaries that alchemy disrupts in its insistence that transmutation is a fact of existence. In other words, because matter can change form often and unpredictably, under the influence only of fire, the precise substance of matter cannot be pinned down.

In Harpur’s most recently published novel *The Good People* (2017), his protagonist Heather, a character with an increasingly tenuous grasp on reality following an encounter with the paranormal she is unable to make sense of, experiences first-hand the instability of the boundary line that separates the organic from the inorganic. Entering her kitchen intent only on getting something from the fridge, Heather undergoes a radical re-orientation of perspective:

The fridge was old and heavy with rounded edges. It looked more organic than mechanical. It looked animate. Heather told herself she wasn’t afraid of it. . . . She extracted an ice cube from the freezer compartment and put it in her mouth. The icy water melted pleasurably down her throat. She was startled by a sound that broke the bubble of silence which, at that hour, enveloped the flat: the fridge, its

door left open, had woken up and resumed its duties. Its motor hummed; the door trembled under her hand. If she didn't know better, she might have sworn it was speaking to her. With a sense of pistons thudding within, her own engine picked up speed. It began to generate a fraction more energy than she was comfortable with. She closed the fridge door and patted it. Its blank white face purred at her. She sucked hard on the ice, as if to cool down her thudding insides. She listened to their hubbub. Unless she was mistaken, something in the shape of an idea was being manufactured. As it worked upwards through ducts and tubes, it grew more defined, its angles more precise, until it pushed with crystalline clarity into her head: *the world wasn't going to end*. (104)

This passage—typical in Harpur's fiction—evokes the kind of connection between humans and their material environment that political theorist Jane Bennett calls a “vibrant materialism.” In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, she contends that objects, including inorganic objects, have “thing power,” or what she describes as the “curious ability . . . to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). This capacity to act as agents or “forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii) is what Bennett means by vibrant materiality. Similarly, for Harpur, Heather's experience with the fridge in this passage is not an indulgence or an exaggeration: her apartment fridge really does have “thing power” over her, because it produces an effect on her psychological processes. The fridge is an actant, to use a term Bennett borrows from Bruno Latour, or an agent that exerts its presence in the world and impacts the beings whom it encounters.

Bennett's theoretical work helps illuminate much of what Harpur is trying to do in his fiction, especially when it comes to how he consistently represents his character's relationships

with material entities. In the fourth chapter of *Vibrant Matter*, titled “A Life of Metal,” Bennett asks if there such “a thing as a mineral or metallic life,” and concludes that she “think[s] that there is, and that there are good ecological and biotechnological reasons” to believe there is (53). What Bennett means by this is that metals, by definition, are alloys of two or more elements, or complex entanglements of many agencies, whether geological, biological, or (increasingly today) human; for instance, even wrought iron contains some carbon, and nearly all forms of iron are altered by contact with other elements in their environment, such as oxygen or hydrogen. In this respect, metals are no less “pure” or untouched by external interference than organic nature is: metals do not exist independently of other materials, because “metal is always metallurgical,” or always combined or mixed with other elements (60). Our own bodies are composed of numerous different minerals working in combination with each other, including sulfur, iron, and copper—three elements used by the alchemists in the Great Work. Citing Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky’s claim that we are thus “walking, talking minerals” (38), Bennett concludes that there is an “‘it’ inside the ‘I’” (60), a statement that speaks to the fact that though we conceive of ourselves as organic beings, we are nevertheless composed of an amalgamation of “inorganic” elements.

Taking the inorganic composition of the human body seriously requires asking some of the same questions Harpur poses throughout his fiction, and with particular force in *Mercurius*. Smith’s alchemical praxis and Eileen’s theoretical ideas about alchemy and materiality both combine to underscore for the reader the complexity of the human-nonhuman relationship. Although the ambiguity of the novel’s ending might not appear to offer a very hopeful take on humanity’s potential for achieving a more earth-affirming perspective, one of the implied aims of *Mercurius* is that its readers accomplish what all of its characters, apart from Smith, fail to

achieve—namely, an understanding of the material world as active, responsive, and vital. As Bennett writes,

Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest is good for humans. (14)

In an email exchange with Harpur, he expressed a very similar sentiment to me, stating that when there is a “genuine vision of Nature as ensouled . . . it becomes simply impossible to harm the natural world because one is immediately aware that one is harming oneself” (“Questions”).

While Harpur’s perspective, like Clarke’s, might initially sound like anthropocentrism, it is better described as the same kind of holistic thinking that Bennett and others have espoused: wherein appeals to human self-interest sit easily alongside ecological concerns, because the human is seen as inescapably entangled in the same “nature” as the rest of material reality.

For Harpur, as for Clarke, the value of the alchemical tradition—embedded so deeply within Western intellectual culture, and yet ignored for so long—lies in its understanding of matter. As Harpur states, because alchemy’s “great strength is the refusal to allow matter and spirit to become divorced,” what an “alchemical imagining” can produce, if carefully attended to, is “a deeper participation in the material” and a less alienated relationship with the natural world (“Questions”). This relationship is what Harpur’s *Mercurius* and Clarke’s *The Chymical Wedding* help readers envision, and what so much of the writing of Yeats and Williams anticipates. These four twentieth-century writers’ attempt to recover alchemical wisdom for a

new age is admittedly part of only a small literary movement within British literature, but although marginal it is a fascinating current of thought, one that intersects in what might be potentially fruitful ways with much of the current discourse occurring in the environmental humanities.

CONCLUSION

*“Everything comes from nature of which I too am a part”
~ Paracelsus*

We live in a world of mass extinctions and widespread environmental catastrophes, and the future often looks grim. The soil under us, the air above us, and even the oceans around us are now polluted to levels that would have been unthinkable to any generation living before the last century. Even if fossil fuel use ceases and carbon levels can radically decrease in the next decade, there is no guarantee that we will not have already passed what climate scientists have warned us is the “tipping point” of what the warming atmosphere can withstand. The kind of change that is required if we want our own species to endure—to say nothing of the countless other species of animal and plant life also at risk—would necessitate global cooperation on economic and political issues to an extent that has not yet been seen, and which often appears impossible. Although there is a wide spectrum of opinion on what the best course of action is for the future, what scholars working within both the environmental humanities and the sciences generally agree on is that our survival as a species is dependent on the health of the planet. Our life is bound up with what happens “above us and below” us, to invoke the alchemists; in other words, with what happens in the air above the earth and in the ground under our feet.

Since the year 2000, when Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen proposed using the term “Anthropocene” to describe our current geological epoch, it has caught on not only among climate scientists and geologists, but among many scholars in the environmental humanities who use the term to demarcate an era in which the human impact on the earth and its atmosphere is significant enough that it is plausible to argue our species has permanently altered the planet. Since the 1950’s, there is evidence of radiation deep within rock strata, for instance, suggesting that the geological structure of the earth will forever bear the marks of human presence. If, as the

alchemists insist, our relationship to the rock and soil of the earth is a participatory one, where we exist in partnership with the inorganic elements beneath our feet, the Anthropocene calls us to attend closely to the widespread changes in our world.

In Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), he makes a compelling argument that if *homo sapiens* is going to adapt to and survive in a world forever changed by carbon-fuelled capitalism, we are going to need narratives that help us to do this:

In order for us to adapt to this strange new world, we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas. We're going to need new myths and stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality, and a new relationship to the deep polyglot traditions of human culture. . . . Over and against capitalism, we will need a new way of thinking our collective existence. We need a new vision of who "we" are. We need a new humanism—a newly philosophical humanism, undergirded by renewed attention to the humanities.

(19)

For the four authors included in this project, the alchemical tradition offers just such a "new conceptual understanding of reality." Although the source material that inspires each of their work is rooted in an old, and often foreign-feeling culture, the ways in which these writers take the ideas assumed by the medieval and Renaissance alchemists and creatively adapt them to more contemporary contexts is often innovative and compelling, and certainly challenging to many of the most dominant narratives of the modern Western world. What writers and artists of all kinds have often awakened us to is the vital role played by narratives when it comes to shaping our cultural values and re-directing our attention. The special role that fiction and poetry have is to offer narratives that can challenge us to reconsider or "re-see" realities we may have

ignored or rejected. Given the urgency of the ecocidal reality we as a global community are dealing with, every available resource is worth consideration, even resources that may have been prematurely discarded by previous cultures.

Although the alchemists lived in a very different context than the one we find ourselves in today, one of the assumptions each of the authors included in this project share is that aspects of their writing remain relevant even in a contemporary world marked by imaginative disenchantment and ecological dis-ease. In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett explains that the word “enchant” is “linked to the French verb *to sing: chanter*. To ‘en-chant’: to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain” (6). It is this power that is present in language—and perhaps especially poetic language, spoken or chanted aloud—that accounts for the “spell-binding effect of stories” (6). If Bennett is right, then storytelling is one of the most effective means we have to “enchant” the world, or to see the world as alive, vital, and beautiful. What Bennett describes as “the mood of enchantment” is valuable, she insists, because it has implications for our ethical life: we will not care for a disenchanted world, because “[w]hat’s to love about an alienated existence on dead planet?” (3-4). The return of alchemy in contemporary British fiction is part of a larger movement that is attempting to revisit previously discarded ways of seeing the material entities that make up our planet. The writers included in this project offer readers stories that might help us see the external world—both natural and “unnatural,” or organic and “inorganic”—with fresh eyes and new perspectives. As shapers of our worlds, these storytellers have a crucial function to play today, in our twenty-first century context where, as Clarke’s alchemist Louisa remarks, we all understand that things “have gone badly wrong” (157). The idea that both Clarke and Harpur, especially, hold out to readers is that there is a way to live in a more reciprocal and responsive

partnership with the material world, and that the alchemists modelled some of the ways in which this might look.

Although the four writers discussed here might appear on the surface to be only loosely connected, considering their literature together reveals clear parallels between their work. The writing produced by Yeats, Williams, Clarke and Harpur spans the entirety of the twentieth-century and crosses generic boundaries, from poetry and the short story to essay writing and the novel. However, there is a consistency in the underlying themes to which each author returns, and a shared commitment to asking questions about materiality and our complex and intricate connection to the natural world. The legacy of the twentieth century is often regarded in terms of the militaristic devastation it saw, yet it is also a century defined by increasing environmental destruction: wide-spread global deforestation, enormous losses in biodiversity, species extinctions, acidifying oceans, the proliferation of plastics, soil and atmospheric pollution, climate-induced migrations, and water contamination. Although Yeats' poetry and fiction was written in a context when these environmental problems were not yet regarded as pressing, he asks important questions about the nature of material reality that subsequent writers, using the same hermetic and alchemical sources of inspiration, continue to explore. Williams' unique contributions to mid-century British literature work alongside Yeats' vision, while at the same time further developing an ecologically-inflected idea of coinherence that resonates particularly with our increasing sense today that a reorientation to materiality will require a deeper recognition of our interconnectedness with the world in which we are entangled. What Clarke and Harpur do most effectively is apply elements of the same alchemical thinking Yeats and Williams were fascinated by to late twentieth-century and contemporary environmental discourses. Although their literature is influenced by the writing of both Yeats and Williams, it

also moves in new directions, and poses different questions about our connection to the more-than-human worlds around us, including the mineral and metal worlds. My hope is that this project will, by combining these voices together, contribute to the call for renewed attention to the work of Yeats and Williams, and offer an invitation to deeper exploration of the writings of Clarke and Harpur.

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