



BRILL

ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM 22 (2022) 205–230



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Beyond Belief

Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle's The Land of Mist

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Abstract

Over the last decade, esotericism studies has witnessed a distinct literary turn, as more and more of the field's primarily religious studies-based researchers have recognized the value, and indeed, centrality, of imaginative literature to the transmission of occult and new religious ideas. Although welcome, this impetus has sometimes taken an anti-aesthetic shape, reducing the texts it incorporates to little more than empirical evidence of authorial belief or practical occult experience. Accompanying this tendency has been a suspicion of the formalist, post-modern, and/or political forms of interpretation common within contemporary literary studies as being ideologically tainted or even wilfully perverse in their resistance to surface meaning. My article uses a case study of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist* (1926), a seemingly straightforward example of an emic novel whose author's spiritualist belief and conversionist intentions are well known, to demonstrate the limitations of such a biographically reductionist hermeneutic, and to call for a greater diversity of approach within literary esotericism studies.

Keywords

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) – *The Land of Mist* (1925–1926) – spiritualism – Literature and Esotericism Studies – biographical interpretation – Professor Challenger – afterlife writing

1 Originating Literary Esotericism Studies

If there is one point on which scholars in the often productively combative field of esotericism studies have found consensus in recent years, it is that imaginative literature needs more attention. Over the last decade, a surge of new studies have appeared to meet this need, one whose urgency is widely and uncontroversially acknowledged; they include Aren Roukema's *Esotericism and Narrative: The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams* (2018) and essay collections and special issues such as Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford's *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (2018), Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson's *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Film* (2018), and the 2020 issue of *LIR:journal* dedicated to Western Esotericism and Literature, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Dag Hedman. Beyond these explicitly literature-focused outputs, a growing number of historical, sociological, and religious studies-based monographs on Western esotericism have centred the literary in their analyses, recognizing the crucial role of fiction and poetry in disseminating and debating new religious belief.¹ This attention to the aesthetic has proved both energizing and encouraging to canonically-trained literary scholars, especially those, such as myself, who are still relatively new to the field and take its championship of literature as a vital boost in the arm at a time when the arts are being increasingly devalued within the profit calculations of the neo-liberal university. Indeed, with the possible exception of the medical humanities, esotericism studies has in the last two decades arguably worked harder than any other nascent academic field to buttress the specific claims and cultural significance of literature beyond its traditional disciplinary silo. Yet as esotericism studies enters the third decade of its academic institutionalization,² the time is ripe for a careful assessment of the terms on which it has incorporated and instrumentalized literature within its own canons and disciplinary formation. In particular, we must consider not only which texts, interpretive methods and critical genealogies have been enabled by the recent literary turn in esotericism studies, but also which have been occluded and why.

By paying closer attention to such gaps and absences, we have the opportunity to substantially expand the approaches and textual corpora we use to appraise the protean range of connections which link literature to occult prac-

1 See for example Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism* (2017) and Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood Esotericism* (2020).

2 The Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, the first institutional site for the academic study of Western esotericism, was established at the University of Amsterdam in 1999.

tice, belief, and style. This expansion will in turn allow us to better understand why particular narrative gambits might serve or subvert particular religious purposes. Perhaps more importantly, it will allow us to dethrone authorial intention from its role as chief or even exclusive determinative of narrative meaning, a position that, as we will see, it continues to occupy in some veins of esotericism studies long after its displacement in literary studies. My article proceeds through two interlinked halves: first, it surveys the sometimes problematic, if typically laudatory, positioning of the literary in esotericism studies, particularly as it is used to reinforce pre-determined conclusions about authorial belief and biography; second, it uses a case study of Arthur Conan Doyle's landmark spiritualist novel *The Land of Mist* (1926) to test the limitations of such biographical reductionism and model a way of reading that pays greater heed to the generic complexity and ontological unpredictability of occultural fiction. It calls on esotericism studies to recognize literature, not (just) as the polished end point or coherent expression of an externally-verified system of thought,³ but rather as a *process* and *dialogue* whose aesthetic effects can as easily disrupt as confirm the emic experiences and belief professions of its writers. As such, those literary works which have seemed most easy or straightforward to interpret from the perspective of esotericism studies—that is, those composed by publicly-avowed esoteric seekers for the express purposes of propagandistic conversion or knowledge dissemination—might indeed prove far more heterogeneous in their representational work than has hitherto been assumed. Recognitions of such complexity, and sometimes contradiction, within emically-authored works of esoteric fiction must not automatically be dismissed as critically perverse or fey; on the contrary, the potential to productively disrupt and multiply meaning lies at the very heart of literary language.

2 Literature, Esotericism, and the Myth of Critical Silence

There are two commonly offered rationales for the inclusion of literature within esotericism studies: first, and largely uncontroversially, that this medium has proved central to the dissemination of hermetic, occult, and new religious ideas; the second, that the relationship between literature and esoteri-

3 Dirk Johannsen and Anja Kirsch issue a similar call in their 2020 essay collection *Narrative Cultures and the Aesthetics of Religion*, in which they note the tendency of religious studies-based approaches to narrative to focus too much attention on 'the seemingly finished products' and not enough on aesthetic 'discontinuities, gaps ... and ambiguity' (1).

cism has never adequately, or even at all, been considered by scholars—a claim that deserves closer scrutiny. We find it, for example, in Wouter Hanegraaff's *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2013), which states that, 'So far, scholars of literature have seldom noticed the presence of esotericism in modern and contemporary literature, but it is in fact one of its core dimensions.'⁴ Hanegraaff then accuses the apparently few studies of literary esotericism that do exist of insufficient scholarly rigor, a failing that can only be corrected via engagement with the new field of esotericism studies:

To do justice to this esoteric dimension—or even just to recognize it—a hasty perusal of some popular studies or Internet sources is insufficient; to pick up the references for what they are, and to be able to make sense of them, one needs to study the history of Western esotericism seriously and at length, with reference to the best available scholarship.⁵

Echoing this narrative of scholarly neglect and deficiency, Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson declare in their introduction to *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (2018) that

the relationship between occultism, on the one hand, and modernist literature, art, and cinema on the other hand has either been dismissed as inconsequential or insufficiently explored ... disciplines such as literary studies ... have too often considered occultism to be either irrelevant to any analysis of modernist literary texts ... too trivial to devote more than mention to, or simply undeserving of serious inquiry.⁶

Such charges of critical dereliction have so frequently been affirmed within recent esotericism studies scholarship as to seem incontrovertible. But the time seems ripe to ask: are they in fact accurate or fair? Researchers based in religious studies, sociology, and history units do not always have the familiarity with literary-critical precedent that would allow them to defend or interrogate this verdict (the opposite, of course, can be true of literary scholars as they

4 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 152.

5 *Ibid.*, 152.

6 Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, 3. Nor is this neglect imputed to move in a one-way direction; if literary scholars have been slow on the uptake *vis-à-vis* esotericism, so too, writes Per Faxneld, have historians of religion failed to recognize the significant evidentiary value of fictional texts for their own discipline. 'Literature', he writes, '... is a category of texts whose (considerable) influence on religion and attitudes towards religion is understudied, and thus worth investigating closely' (5).

venture overarching claims about esoteric tradition); literary studies-based scholars of esotericism have perhaps been reluctant to question a positioning from which they, after all, stand to gain. In consenting to the characterization of their research area as *terra nullius*, they gain substantial academic capital in an intellectual economy which prioritizes, even fetishizes, innovation above all else. Yet this narrative, as applied to English-language literary criticism at least, seems increasingly unsustainable, and to leave it unchallenged is to risk considerably skewing the direction and impact of literary esotericism studies for years to come. For indeed, far from being a neglected, trivialized, maligned, or *occulted* concern within British literary criticism, those topics now garnered under the aegis of esotericism have received increasing attention since the 1950s, and nowhere more so than in regard to the modernist canon. John Senior's *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (1959) is one of the first major studies on this topic; on its heels came important publications such as David R. Clark's 'Metaphors for Poetry': W.B. Yeats and the Occult' (1965), Robert Lee Wolff's *Strange Stories: Explorations in Victorian Fiction* (1971), Martha Banta's *Henry James and the Occult* (1972), George Mills Harper's *Yeats and the Occult* (1975), Luanne Frank's edited collection, *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature* (1977), Peter B. Messent's similarly-titled *Literature of the Occult: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1981), all of which paved the way for a veritable explosion of occult-focused and modern literature-based criticism in the 1990s—the most important of these studies being Diana Barsham's *The Trial of Woman* (1992), Leon Surette's *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (1993), and, with Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *Literary Modernism and Occult Tradition* (1996).⁷ Whatever view of these works today's generation of esotericism studies scholars might take, they cannot with fairness accuse them of cobbling together their research from an internet whose invention they pre-date, nor of non-existence. In so vehemently insisting on absence in the face of clearly demonstrable preponderance, proponents of the critical silence narrative seem to reproduce the structural principle of esotericism itself as, in Kocku Von Stuckrad's words, a 'dialectic of secrecy and revelation'.⁸ They grant esotericism-focused approaches to literature value precisely because they bring to light that which has hitherto—at least supposedly—been suppressed or marginalized.

7 Beyond the anglophone literary tradition, Howard M. Fraser's *In the Presence of Mystery: Modernist Fiction and the Occult* (1992) is an important 1990s-era study of Mexican literature and occultism.

8 Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 89.

It could be, however, that when scholars reiterate the myth of critical silence, they mean to deny, not the clearly demonstrable *presence* of previous scholarship on literature and what is now called esotericism, but rather to identify defects in its quality, accuracy, and seriousness. Perhaps so, although such a critique would surely be better made through exemplification than erasure. Nonetheless, let us weigh this possibility: is it the case that literary scholars have trivialized, lampooned, or condemned the influence and impact of esotericism on canonical literature, even if they have not wholly ignored it? Here again, this supposition does not withstand scrutiny. For what one finds again and again in some of the earliest studies of esotericism—or, as it is more frequently termed by literary scholars, occultism—and literature is not a series of hostile etic aspersions against a supposedly irrational belief tradition, but rather the repeated declaration that such a negative positioning is no longer acceptable within the modern academy. In other words, they perform—even originate—the *exact same rhetorical move* as the post-2000 esotericism studies publications which insist that now, finally, is the time to treat such topics with academic seriousness. Consider, for example, David R. Clark who, writing in 1965, declares that ‘It is a one-sided approach to Yeats ... to show impatience with his interest in the supernatural and to feel that it intrudes in his poetry.’ He continues with a point which I will exemplify in the second half of this article, ‘But it is a mistake of another kind to read the works as expressions of neoplatonic or Eastern or occult philosophy *without reference to their literary effect*’ (my italics).⁹ Ten years later, Lorna Reynolds and Robert O’Driscoll would introduce their collection *Yeats and the Occult* by deeming anti-occult bias to be utterly passé, writing that ‘The time has passed when it was necessary, in order to preserve intellectual respectability, to express either astonishment or dismay in the nature of Yeats’s intellectual pursuits.’¹⁰ In an essay on Yeats’s occult manuscripts within the same volume, George Mills Harper declares his intention to ‘make it clear to the sceptics that the religious experiments and experiences preserved in these materials were not lightly regarded by Yeats.’¹¹ These are not the pronouncements of scholars who believe their subject to be minor, laughable, or vaguely embarrassing.

Beyond these examples, perhaps the most compelling evidence of the importance which literary scholars have attributed to occultism’s literary influence comes from a critic who quite clearly wishes the situation were otherwise. A pioneering work of occultural modernist scholarship, Leon Surette’s

9 Clark, ‘Metaphors for Poetry’, 38–39.

10 Reynolds and O’Driscoll, ‘Introduction’, xv.

11 Harper, ‘Yeats’s Occult Papers’, 2.

The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult (1993) is pervaded with a sense of palpable distaste for esoteric belief: 'learning more about the occult', he writes '... will not demonstrate that occult speculation is sober and profound—as the occultists and some of their champions maintain. The occult, alas, is full of ideas to which few educated men and women could subscribe.'¹² 'Scholarly ignorance of the occult,' he concludes, 'results from a largely justifiable contempt for the set of beliefs it represents.'¹³ Clearly no fan of occultism, Surette nonetheless cannot countenance its historical elision, no matter the danger or foolishness he attributes to its associated beliefs. Instead, he devotes an entire monograph, not to debunking, but to demonstrating its influence, his analysis demonstrating far less scorn than this initial polemic positioning might lead us to expect. His definition of modern occultism is one to which few esotericism studies scholars could object: rejecting its characterization as a 'pathological form of religion' or a coherent institutionalized movement, he describes it instead as syncretic and loosely organized system of cultural currents bound together by a shared belief in spiritual monadism and metaphysical speculation.¹⁴ Published six years before the establishment of the University of Amsterdam's HHP Center, Surette's study can hardly be charged with being behind the curve of esotericism studies in its conviction that occult ideas were both significant and central to modernist writers.

My point in highlighting such routinely and perplexingly overlooked precedents for literary esotericism studies is not to chide contemporary scholars for failing to do their homework. Rather it is to ask what disciplinary conditions, methodological procedures, and interpretive assumptions have made longstanding discourses of literary-occultural criticism so difficult for esotericism studies to see, acknowledge, or use? In his review of *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Cinema*, Roger Luckhurst reads this critical amnesia as a symptom of the status anxiety common to all new disciplines as they seek to establish their authority and boundaries. Bauduin's and Johnsson's 'censorious tone about previous studies', he notes, is 'over-anxious in staking out new territory, and oddly risks setting the editors on occasions at odds with their own contributors.'¹⁵ I want to suggest another possible explanation, one which derives not from the hubris or nerves attendant on all new projects of disciplinary formation, but in and with the complexity of form that literary scholars are uniquely trained to both recognize and prize. This quality does not always sit

¹² Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, 10–11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ Luckhurst, 'The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema', 296.

well with the attempt of some scholars of esotericism to use literature as empirical evidence of coherent authorial belief or of practice tradition. Indeed, it has been easier for some of the latter to dismiss the literary-critical recognition of ideological ambivalence or aesthetic complexity as a projection of capricious postmodernism or activist misreading than as a fundamental quality of literary language. Undeniably, the tendency of some post-structuralist literary critics to read literary representations of occult ideas, or of supernaturalism in general, as *only ever metaphoric*, as simple substitutes for otherwise inexpressible political or psychological longings that bear no relation to actual belief, is both frustrating and historically inaccurate; I have repeatedly critiqued this move in my own work on modern spiritualist writing.¹⁶ As Aren Roukema observes, ‘significant problems occur when we delimit ... occult involvement to an imaginative realm of mythopoeia, hermetically sealed from actual belief structure.’¹⁷ But there is a real risk that, in prioritizing evidence of authorial belief and intention over all other factors, we might over-correct in the other direction, stripping occult fiction of its aesthetic complexity, generic innovation, or even interpretive difficulty in the drive to establish it as an empirical benchmark of direct, coherent, or even unmediated religious meaning—a move implicitly intended to legitimate the academic capital of esotericism studies.

This potential is suggested, if thankfully never realized, in one of the most important works of literary-based esotericism studies scholarship to emerge in the last decade, Per Faxneld’s *Satanic Feminism* (2018). A ground-breaking analysis of the appropriation of Satan by modern feminists and *avant garde* writers alike, it predicated its textual analysis on a targeted rebuttal of Roland Barthes’s influential ‘Death of the Author’ thesis.¹⁸ Arguing for the importance of authorial biography to literary interpretation, he states ‘no matter how much we would like to depose him or her, the author is undead and inevitably comes back to haunt us—at the very least as an intertext determining the reception of the works, but reasonably also if we are interested in how and why texts were written.’¹⁹ With this sentiment, I could not agree more; Faxneld is entirely right to state that we jettison any consideration of authorial biography or intention at our peril. He oversteps the mark, however, when he moves from defending the legitimacy of certain interpretive contexts—e.g. those which acknowledge authorial intention—to attacking what he characterizes as politicized ‘counter-

16 Ferguson, *Determined Spirits*, 1–3.

17 Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative*, 15.

18 Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, 142–148.

19 Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 10.

readings.²⁰ Discussing the massive critical industry around Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in particular, he condemns those 'highly politicized professors' who 'interpret, or rather counter-read, clearly patriarchal, misogynist works (that they too agree have this attitude) as subversive manifestos.'²¹

While I am sympathetic to Faxneld's impatience with the knee-jerk subversivism that has long dominated Gothic Studies, I find his distinction between 'politicized' (and hence inaccurate) and presumably non-politicized, biographically-based (and hence objective) critical readings to be highly questionable. The history and ideological function of objectivity as a concept requires more care than it receives here. So too does the assumption that there exists for any novel, never mind one so polyphonic as *Dracula*, an overt, explicit and singular meaning, one attainable via knowledge of authorial intention and basic plot alone, and on which we can all ultimately agree. 'The important thing', he writes, 'is always to respect the integrity of the sources and resist any temptation to remake what one finds displeasing. A scholar must naturally never intentionally misrepresent ... the content of the source material in order to make it a tool for political struggle.'²² Does 'respecting the integrity' of sources simply mean confirming what their authors have said about them, or aligning them *a priori* with their documented spiritual-political beliefs? Who gets to police this criterion of judgment, and sort the ideologically skewed interpretations from the allegedly pure and true ones? Is ideology, as Terry Eagleton has so memorably asked, 'like halitosis ... what the other person has'?²³ Canon formation, as any literary scholar who lived through the culture wars of the 80s and 90s can vouch, is anything but a neutral activity. And is it really fair to assume that feminist literary critics who read texts against the weight of established opinion are doing so disingenuously, motivated by a politically instrumentalist agenda apparently absent from more traditional hermeneutics? Is it not possible that texts as febrile in sexual-social content and aesthetically complex in style as *Dracula* might generate a legitimate difference of opinion? The greatest risk of Faxneld's position here is not (only) that it could foster a tenuous distinction between pure (e.g. objectively non-ideological) and contaminated (e.g. politically calculating) forms of literary criticism, but also that it might encourage superficial or naïvely biographical forms of interpretation. While Faxneld's own sophisticated analysis cannot be so characterized, he seems to vouch for the latter approach when he condemns those critics who, like Nina Auerbach

20 Ibid., 19.

21 Ibid., 19.

22 Ibid., 22.

23 Eagleton, *On Ideology*, 2.

and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, 'carry out counter-readings that interpret literary texts in a *way contrary to their surface meaning* as well as the authorial intent and historical context (emphasis mine):'²⁴

In response, I offer two observations that lie at the heart of literary studies as a disciplinary enterprise: one, surfaces are rarely straightforward, and second, they are never a wholly conclusive guide to literary meaning or reception. If the enterprise of literary-based esotericism studies is to flourish and grow—if it is to be more than simple plot description or biographical reductionism—it cannot champion superficiality, or unreflexively defer to publicized authorial intention. Henrik Bogdan is surely right to argue that occult fiction might and can be mined as an index to the initiatory experiences of its authors. But something is lost if it is *only* read in this way, as if the fictional page is a textual content delivery vehicle like any other, indistinguishable from a diary entry or ritual record. In his introduction to the recent special issue of *LIR:journal* on esotericism and literature, Bogdan cites a lengthy passage of more than 300 words from Crowley's *Moonchild* (1917) only to dispense with its effects in a single sentence: the prose, he concludes, demonstrates that 'the reference to sleep, death, and the effect of drugs in describing Iliel's state of mind when having her visions has its parallel in ... Dion Fortune's ... *The Sea Priestess*.'²⁵ Yes, this similarity exists, but there is so, so much more that could be said about this passage; about its focalization and use of free indirect discourse, its figurative language, its deployment of Christian intertext, and perhaps most of all, about Crowley's decision to couch real-life magical experience—if indeed this was his intention—within the form of a popular war thriller. No scholar can or should be expected to exhaust the interpretive possibilities of any text, but there is certainly room for more ambition in our approach to the emically-authored fiction of the West's occult revival. Further expansion is needed if we aim to discover how literature reflects, not simply the confident conclusion, but the ongoing process of, esoteric belief adoption.

These tensions are nowhere more apparent than in the text to which I will now turn, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*. Published in 1926 by the world's then most famous Spiritualist convert, the novel can easily be read as the apogee of its author's clearly and repeatedly stated proselytizing intentions, a book intended, as he wrote to psychical researcher Harry Price, 'to cover the whole present day state of the movement.'²⁶ Yet its own representational strategies, as we shall see, repeatedly undo the very ontological certainty and totality

24 Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 185.

25 Bogdan, 'Introduction', 7.

26 Doyle to Harry Price.

it aims to impart. As such, it offers the perfect staging ground for a complex model of occultural literary interpretation, one that acknowledges authorial intention and biography without reifying either as interpretive master-key.

3 Scoping the Summerland in *The Land of Mist*

Given its topic and authorship, Doyle's *The Land of Mist* represents a crucial source for scholars of modern literary occulture. The novel first ran as an illustrated serial in *The Strand Magazine* between July 1925–March 1926; soon after, Hutchinson & Co (U.K.) and George H. Doran (U.S.A.) published it in single-volume form. Composed some four decades after its author first began attending séances in Portsmouth and nearly ten years after his public declaration of spiritualist faith, it represents the culmination of a lifetime of otherworldly investigation pursued across spiritualist, Theosophical, and New Thought circles.²⁷ More so, it marks the zenith of Doyle's career as a literary propagandist, in which he redirects the energy previously expended in defence of Britain in the Transvaal and the Allies in Europe to stump for the Spiritualist cause.²⁸ There can be little doubt that Doyle hoped to imbue the text with what Markus Altena Davidsen deems 'religious affordance', namely those 'textual features' which 'make it possible for certain pieces of supernatural fiction to afford religious use.'²⁹ Chief among those are so-called 'P.S.T coordinates'—references to actual places, spaces, and a recognizable historical time, all of which anchor the text in a real, knowable world and credential its supernatural phenomena.³⁰ Set amidst identifiable spiritualist institutions and practitioners of 1920s London and Paris, the novel evidences none of the tricky metaphoric slippage or ersatz supernaturalism that might repel scholarly prospectors in search of a viable canon of literary esotericism. Indeed, it should surely deserve primacy of place in such a corpus, given its status as the most explicitly spiritualist novel penned by that movement's most famous twentieth-century believer, also then one of Britain's most internationally popular and widely-translated authors. Yet the book remains virtually unknown beyond the subfield of Doyle studies, and has

27 Doyle recounts the various stages in his investigation, and then public embrace, of spiritualism in his 1924 autobiography *Memories and Adventures*. For more on the sequence and literary impact of Doyle's conversion, see Kerr, *Conan Doyle* and Wingett, *Conan Doyle and the Mysterious World of Light*.

28 The continuities between Doyle's imperial and spiritualist propaganda writing are examined in Diana Barsham's *Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity* (2000).

29 Davidsen, 'The Religious Affordance of Fiction', 523.

30 Petersen, 'The Difference Between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature', 511.

virtually no presence whatsoever in esotericism studies. This neglect no doubt owes something to the uncertain status of spiritualism within an esotericism studies research field which has largely if never exclusively focused itself on initiatory and learned traditions of magic. Another reason, I suspect, lies in its stubborn irreconcilability with the empirical interpretive methods thus far favoured within the field. Seemingly a straightforward example of occultural fiction, designed, as *The Strand* proclaimed, to ‘thro[w] some of [Doyle’s] experiences into narrative form,’ and ‘pain[t]’ the spiritualist scene, ‘... with a relentless accuracy’,³¹ the novel’s documentary and propagandistic ambitions ultimately come a cropper through the aesthetic choices which frame them. This is nowhere more apparent than in *The Land of Mist’s* inability—or refusal—to deliver the visuo-spatial evidence of spiritual existence promised by its title, and initially established as the privileged mechanism of realist representation and ontological verification alike.

This culminating obscurity, both visual and ontological, does not seem to have been part of Doyle’s original narrative design. Indeed, *The Land of Mist* was clearly conceived as an exercise in literary branding, one that would exploit both the public’s familiarity with Doyle’s previous literary creations and the author’s reputation as the established and respectable bourgeois voice of modern spiritualism. It was the third of his popular Professor Challenger series, all five of which, from 1912’s *The Lost World* through to ‘The Disintegration Machine’ (1929), made their debut in *The Strand Magazine*, and share the same arrogant and pugnacious scientific He-Man of a protagonist. In his previous fictional forays, Challenger had always evidenced at least some spiritualist sympathies, most notably, for our current discussion, in *The Poison Belt* (1913), when, facing a sudden global extinction event, he urges his fellow investigators to keep their eyes peeled as they feel themselves start to die. ‘Granting the continuity of life,’ he asserts, ‘none of us can predicate what opportunities of observation one may have from what we call the spirit plane to the plane of matter ... by keeping alive for these few extra hours ... we can hope to carry on with us to some future existence a clear conception of the most stupendous event in the world, or the universe so far as we know it, has ever encountered.’³² Here at least, Challenger has absolute confidence in the possibility and necessity of subjecting the afterlife to empirical visual description. Doyle would subsequently strip Challenger of all such metaphysical tendencies, having him condemn spiritualists to be a breed of *Homo idi-*

31 Doyle, ‘The Land of Mist,’ *The Strand Magazine* (July 1925), 1.

32 Doyle, *The Poison Belt*, 204.

oticus' in *The Land of Mist*'s first serial instalment.³³ This move allowed the author to perform the kind of high-stakes conversionist wish-fulfilment common to many contemporary spiritualist tracts which conjured up the spirits of dead sceptics—Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, John Tyndall—to have them announce their post-death adoption of spiritualist belief. Also in line with his literary co-believers, Doyle here adopts the afterlife travelogue genre popularized by the likes of Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1722) and American harmonialist Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), one in which the reality of the Summerland was attested, not by faith, but through the imaginative presentation of a precise geographic *space* for disincarnate beings to explore. Indeed, in his non-fiction, Doyle would assert that the precision, and with it, splendour of such afterlife descriptions formed a central source of the movement's evidentiary and affective appeal. Writing to sister Ida Foley in 1917, he states, 'I may be very limited but I can imagine nothing more beautiful and satisfying than the life beyond as drawn by many who have experienced it ... Our bodies are at their best. We are free from physical pain. The place is beautiful. What is there so dreadfully depressing in all this?'³⁴

Such representational confidence is promised, but progressively withdrawn, across *The Land of Mist*'s nine-month serial run. Its exploration of the contemporary spiritualist scene is performed, not by Challenger, but by his journalistic colleague Edward Malone, whose journey is foregrounded in the novel's now routinely-dropped sub-title ('The Quest of Edward Malone'). Challenger is suddenly and spontaneously converted in the novel's finale after he hears his daughter Enid channel a message of exculpation from the two patients he believed himself to have accidentally killed during a covert drug trial. Malone, by contrast, needs far more evidence before he reaches his conclusion. Most of the plot is devoted to the séance observations and investigations that he and Enid conduct on behalf of the London *Daily Gazette*. Ultimately convinced, the two marry, and in the serial's final instalment honeymoon on the English channel, where they ponder the impending upheaval of the new millennium prophesized by Dalston medium Mr Miromar.

Doyle's decision to focalize the plot through Malone was as crucial to his documentarian and proselytizing ambitions as it was to the novel's serial form—indeed, all three are crucially interlinked. *The Land of Mist* was designed to be read both by subscribers to and occasional readers of *The Strand* who might be won for the cause even if they only read one or two of its nine monthly

33 Doyle, 'The Land of Mist', *The Strand Magazine*, July 1925, 6.

34 Doyle, 'Letter to Ida Foley', 629.

instalments. What better figure to drive this episodic structure than a jobbing reporter assigned in each issue to investigate a new spiritualist site, with the resulting phenomena accumulating and gaining evidentiary momentum across the serialization? As a reviewer for the *Quarterly Transactions of the British College of Psychic Science*, the latter one of several real-life venues featured in the novel, points out, the serialization was ‘a notable achievement in itself’ which allowed the instalments to be ‘read by thousands who would probably never handle the complete book.’³⁵ The result is an evangelical picaresque which did not win much critical favour beyond niche spiritualist review cultures. *The Sunday Times* called it a novel of ‘propaganda, and little else’ which would ‘sadly disappoint[er]’ readers looking for ‘another first-rate story’;³⁶ the *Dundee Courier* declared it to be ‘not really a novel at all’, but simply ‘a study of Spiritualism as it appears to Sir Arthur.’³⁷ Its world is smaller and action less sensational than that of the British black magic stories—John Buchan’s *The Dancing Floor*, Selwyn Jepson’s *Snaggletooth*, and Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowses*—published in the same year. As a wandering city novel in which disembodied minds interact and war-dead soldiers occasionally manifest to their traumatized loved ones, it much more closely approximates the impressionistic cityscapes of Virginia Woolf than the exotic and bizarre crime settings of the famous Sherlock Holmes stories through which Doyle had made his name.

The novel’s leisurely and episodic structure, in combination with its primarily urban domestic settings, prevents its easy assimilation within the imperial romance genre to which some critics have assigned it.³⁸ From the perspective of religious studies, this generic disjuncture might seem trivial, but is in fact crucial to what we might term the novel’s representational coherence and hence its legibility as a spiritualist text. For when literary critics have read *The Land of Mist* as an imperial adventure story, akin to far-flung romances of H. Rider Haggard and R.L. Stevenson, they have done so on the assumption that it shares with the latter two qualities: first, an impulse to colonize a hitherto unknown territory (in this case, the Summerland), and, second, a conviction that this form of domination might best be accomplished, not simply through physical might, but also by exhaustive acts of cataloguing, visual description, and classification, the epistemological techniques famously positioned at the very

35 Others include Paris’s Institut Métaphysique, the Albert Hall, and Westminster Abbey. See ‘The Land of Mist by Arthur Conan Doyle’, 155.

36 ‘New Fiction’, 9.

37 ‘Books and their Writers’, 7.

38 Kerr, *Conan Doyle*, 224.

heart of the western imperialist project by Edward Said.³⁹ Conor Reid makes this equation when he claims that *The Land of Mist*

follows other Challenger texts in its 'endeavour to explore, record, verify, and ultimately conquer lost worlds, both geographical and spiritual.'⁴⁰ If such a characterization were true, we might expect in the novel's finale a culminating act of clarification and domination in which the unseen world finally gives itself up to the enquiring eye. Yet no such unveiling occurs, even though, as we will see, much of the novel's conversionist gambit has been staked on it. Instead, Doyle anticipates but ultimately fails—or refuses—to deliver the scopical and classificatory triumph that the quest romance requires; here there is no return to the happy place, no conquest of love and land. On the contrary, the narrative's few glimpses into the spirit land seem to mock the cartographic imagination and territorial ambitions that drive the rest of the plot. While the geographies of the living and the dead may sometimes intersect in *The Land of Mist*, they never merge into a shared space or visual plane. Despite Doyle's emic position and ardent conversionist intentions, the mist shrouding his afterlife only intensifies as the serial reaches its apocalyptic finale.

In its representational strategy, then, *The Land of Mist* engages in a bait-and-switch process in which the promise of elucidation and presence ultimately gives way to obscurity and absence. This shift plays out through the representational disjunction between the novel's two central spaces: that of the living and that of the dead. Only in the former do we find the P.S.T. coordinates that Davidsen and Petersen view as key to the religious affordance of text. Their abundance here, while serving an evidentiary function, also renders their absence in Doyle's supposedly mundane afterlife all the more startling and discomfiting. Let us consider the extent and effect of these real-world anchors. *The Land of Mist* paints London's occultural milieu with almost documentary precision, populating it with the actual practices, people, and places in which Doyle had forged his long-standing spiritualist convictions. Thus the narrative abounds with dropped names and thinly-disguised cameo appearances of characters whose non-fictional basis would have been evident to any London spiritualist reader in the know. Consider Delicia Freeman, the bird-like middle-aged activist who introduces Challenger to the spirit healer Dr Felkin in the novel's penultimate instalment; she is a clear portrait of Felicia Scatcherd (1862–1927), the socialist and pacifist spiritualist who collaborated with W.T. Stead on his 'Julia's Bureau' afterlife correspondence enterprise. The

39 Said, *Orientalism* (1978).

40 Reid, 'The Lost Worlds', 273.

railway porter-cum-trance medium John Terbane, who appears in the November 1925 issue alongside his renowned Asiatic spirit guide Mr Chang, bears more than a passing resemblance to the working-class medium J.J. Morse (1848–1919) and his control Tien-Sien-Tie. Occult periodical *Dawn*, whose editor Mr Marvin meets Malone in the August issue, is clearly aligned through its synonymic title to London's longest-running, real-life spiritualist paper *Light*, in operation since 1882; the subsequent description of its editorial purview as covering 'every phase of the occult, from the lore of the Rosicrucians to the strange religions of the students of the Great Pyramid' also aligns it with Ralph Shirley's more recently-established *Occult Review*.⁴¹ At every turn, Doyle smuggles into the mainstream and avowedly secular pages of *The Strand* the fringe religious figures and periodicals who might never otherwise have penetrated its fold.

The Land of Mist's P.S.T. coordinates are not restricted to London's spiritualist milieu. As we might expect from a novel which so desperately wanted to win common men and women for the cause, it also works hard to reproduce the familiar, every day, and decidedly (or seemingly) non-occultural world of a London in which 'post-war conditions and new world problems had left their mark.'⁴² As such, it is relentlessly timely, signposting recent traumas such as the post-war influenza pandemic, in which Challenger's beloved wife had died, and the Battle of Ypres, in which two policewomen—

posing as bereaved mother and daughter to entrap honest medium Tom Linden—claim to have lost a loved one. The very presence of these two professional women, alongside Challenger's own independent career woman of a daughter Enid, further documents the gendered conditions of 1920s modernity. When Doyle's characters wish to commune with spirits, ancient or modern, they travel in electrical elevators and motor-powered taxis; they are as likely to call each other on the telephone as they are to summon up the dead via raps or channelled speech.

Of all these P.S.T coordinates, there are, however, none so potent or frequent as the locational and geographic ones. The novel's plot is easily transposable onto a map of London's centre-west zones, spanning from Challenger's lodgings in Victoria to Westminster Abbey, which Malone and Enid visit before attending a spiritualist society meeting on Edgware Road; its president Mr Bolsover runs a grocery business and holds séances in Hammersmith. In its cartographic fixation, the novel reads like a spiritualist London A–Z guide. We only occasionally leave this tight metropolitan milieu for excursions to Dryfont, Paris,

41 Doyle, 'The Land of Mist', *The Strand Magazine*, August 1925, 112.

42 Doyle, 'The Land of Mist', *The Strand Magazine*, July 1925, 4.

and, finally, the English channel. While the serial's spirit visitants do sometimes hail from or refer to more distant locations—India, the American Great Plains, Atlantis—we never visit them there. Doyle sticks instead to a limited, clearly demarcated geography with which his metropolitan readers would have been intimately familiar.

In these references and signposts, Doyle clearly participates in the 'onomastic anchoring' that Davidsen view as key to the religious affordance of supernatural and fantasy fiction.⁴³ While useful as an evidentiary technique, helping to authorize and verify fantastical events by locating them in a real world, this technique can also be aesthetically risky, even self-defeating. For, as Anders Petersen points out, 'readers are likely to underestimate the literary nature of the narrative in question by conceiving of it as a direct reflection of their own world.'⁴⁴ As an example of this phenomenon, Petersen offers the readers who regularly wrote to Doyle in search of assistance from his fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. There is some evidence to suggest that *The Land of Mist* produced a similar effect. A 1926 review of *The Land of Mist* in the *Quarterly Transaction of the British College of Psychic Science* noted with bemusement that 'so literally do some readers from abroad and elsewhere take Sir Arthur's vivid sketches, that the College has had several requests to make appointments with "Mr Linden of Tullis Street".'⁴⁵ This outcome surely must be read as a kind of pyrrhic victory: after years of non-fictional spiritualist testimonials—*The New Revelation* (1918), *The Vital Message* (1919), *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921)—Doyle turned to fiction to try to reach wider audiences, only to have his realist technique cause (some) readers to assume they were reading yet another work of first-person reportage. Fiction turns back into (false) fact.

Doyle's compulsive, sometimes clumsy, veracity mechanisms do more than just threaten the fictional status of the text. They also leave readers utterly unprepared for the narrative's vertiginous shifts into a hazy world of spirit unreachable through the representational strategies hitherto cultivated. In the context of a novel in which the everything is viewable, mappable, and nameable—and of a writing career which would elsewhere lavish extensive description on supernatural entities and worlds⁴⁶—the decision to introduce a

43 Davidsen, 'The Religious Affordance of Fiction', 530.

44 Petersen, 'The Difference Between Religious Narrative and Fictional Literature', 511.

45 'The Land of Mist by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle', 155.

46 Nowhere else, in either his twentieth-century fiction or non-fiction, is Doyle as reticent in his description of supernatural entities as he is here. Indeed, works such as 'Playing with Fire' (1900), in which séance attendees accidentally summon a unicorn, are positively flamboyant in their staging of the magical; in the reincarnationist plot line of 'Through the

deliberately opaque spiritual realm is dangerous, even chaotic. It risks suggesting not that this world is ineffable—there is no room for ineffability in Doyle's inexorably descriptive realist milieu—but, worse, that there might simply be nothing to see. And the text offers us little leeway to treat such representations as simply metaphoric, given its wider rejection of figurative language and symbolic potential in the mundane descriptions it offers of its lower middle-class urban milieu, one populated, writes Douglas Kerr, by 'the constituency of H.G. Wells's and Arnold Bennett's novels, a prosaic world of class-betraying accents and low-brow culture; bourgeois aspirations, self-improvement, and board-school manners.'⁴⁷ *The Land of Mist* evidences the confusion that ensues when one tries to fuse, not just two diametrically opposed ontologies, but also two antithetical representational strategies, within a single literary work whose stated goal is coherence.

In the serial's brief excursions into the spirit world, Doyle's careful, cartographic world-building is undone by blurred vision, myopia, and absence. Although everywhere accessible, the Summerland is in *The Land of Mist* nowhere clearly perceptible, differing from Doyle's previous Challenger novels in its evasion of the documentary eye.

Readers are only ever permitted to peer into this space in half light, the dim conditions of the séance room preparing the spectator for the even murkier grayness of the spectral figures who loom out of the spirit cabinet. This obfuscation is apparent from the very first séance attended by Enid and Malone on the homely premises of the Bolsover grocery shop. After they 'threa[d] their way amid boxes of dried fruits and piles of cheese', they sit in a room whose 'inky darkness' is 'only broken by the last red glow of a dying fire' and listen to disembodied voices which do not seem to come from any specific individual.⁴⁸ A Swedenborgian spirit lectures on the nature of spiritual affinities; a Native American guide of generic type and name—Red Cloud—materializes lights and a hand; and a lost soul from the 'outer darkness',⁴⁹ unaware of his

Veil' (1911), for example, a couple are transported back to the scene of their former lives and violent deaths in ancient Britain. Similarly, *Pheneas Speaks* (1927), the book of spirit communications received in the Doyle family circle, contains ample descriptions of after-life geography: one spirit explains that this world is made up of 'beautiful forests. Full of everything that is lovely in the way of flowers, trees, animals, and birds ... a reproduction of the New Forest, but without any ugly elements. You could find Bolderwood, or the Queen's Beeches.' (*Pheneas Speaks*).

47 Kerr, *Conan Doyle*, 225.

48 Doyle, 'The Land of Mist', *The Strand Magazine*, August 1925, 116, 118.

49 *Ibid.*, 119.

own moribund condition, is guided towards the light. ‘He doesn’t understand’, explains Mr Bolsover. ‘They come over here and when they find the real thing is quite different from anything they have been taught by the Churches they are helpless.’⁵⁰ After the séance, a bewildered Malone questions Bolsover about the suspicious need for dark conditions during the séance. The grocer is well-prepared with a typically scientific answer. Physical mediumship, he explains, ‘is the only branch of the subject which needs darkness. It is purely chemical, like the darkness of the photographic room. It preserves the delicate physical substance which, drawn from the human body, is the basis of these phenomena ... Am I clear?’⁵¹ To this Malone tentatively assents, his burgeoning belief growing gaining strength when Red Cloud levitates a wooden platter in full light as a closing flourish. This unique type of illuminated manifestation is unrepeatable in the novel, as Doyle, perhaps hesitant to venture down the road of supernatural fantasy, shows us only those things that in his estimation the regular séance goer might reasonably expect to see. And what they might expect to see, it emerges, is not very much at all, as the space of London and of the spirit realm remain visually incompatible.

The Bolsover gathering strikes the keynote for all the other séances subsequently described in the narrative, their phenomena obscured not only by the lighting conditions required for mediumship or the moral obloquy of the fallen spirits they invoke, but most importantly by the mode of Doyle’s narration. While the former might simply be a feature of the novel’s verisimilitude—it seeks to reproduce a typical séance as realistically as possible—the latter is more difficult to justify on this basis. The narrative’s occluded point of view is nowhere more apparent than in the haunted house episode featured in the October 1925 instalment, in which Malone, alongside his *Lost World* companion Sir John Roxton and the spiritualist missionary Reverend Charles Mason, cleanse the notorious Villa Maggiore of the spirit of the evil colonial doctor who formerly owned it. The most conventionally Gothic of all the instalments, the chapter seems poised to offer the visual horror effects absent from the previous domestic séance scenes. Yet no such spectacle appears. As the men set up camp for the night, they find themselves accosted by a formless, murky nothingness, terrifying precisely because it cannot be seen.

What was it? They could not tell themselves. They only knew that the black shadows at the top of the staircase had thickened, had coalesced,

50 Ibid., 119.

51 Ibid., 120.

had taken a definitely bat-like shape. Great God! They were moving! ... Black, black as night, huge, ill-defined, semi-human, and altogether evil and damnable.⁵²

From this initial encounter with amorphous obscurity, Doyle then somehow finds a way to show us even less, deftly avoiding the Lovecraftian representational paradox in which, as Mark Fisher, following China Miéville explains, ‘typically Lovecraft no sooner calls an entity “indescribable” than he begins to describe it.’⁵³ Doyle’s unseen, by contrast, only becomes less visible as the episode ensues. The narrative eye stays with Malone and Roxton as they run outside, and from that vantage watch the stalwart Mason through the ‘great slit where the letter-box had been’ as he conducts his exorcism in the dark.⁵⁴ An hour later, Mason emerges, declaring the house to be clean and inviting his investigators to pray for the lost souls inside, so that they ‘[may] ... from to-night move up towards that glorious light which sooner or later shines upon even the lowest.’⁵⁵ If such illumination does exist in the upper realms, readers will need to take it on trust; no light guides the path even of the higher spirit contactees in *The Land of Mist*, most of whom have been disoriented and blinded by the experience of death. Thus when asked to describe his surroundings in the following month’s issue, another lost spirit, this time channelled through the guidance of Mr Chang, says only that ‘it is all—all grey. That is the awful part of it. One’s surroundings are so horrible.’⁵⁶

Rolled out slowly over the serial’s nine-month run, these repeated encounters with the unseeable—or, more damningly, with the possibility that there might simply be nothing at all to see in the spirit realm—only make the failed promise of its concluding chapter, teasingly titled ‘When the Mists Clear Away,’ all the more pointed. In the place of elucidation, Doyle shows us newlyweds Enid and Edward Malone as they gaze out towards France from the shore at their honeymoon hotel. As in ‘Dover Beach’ (1867), Matthew Arnold’s epoch-defining poem of spiritual crisis, the scene is pure anti-aubade; night falls as they forge their love into a protective device against the coming darkness. Enid considers the ‘great purple tentacles’ of cloud which augur something ‘unseen and unknown beyond the horizon,’ and reflects on the apocalyptic prophecies of millenarian medium Mr Miromar encountered in the novel’s first instal-

52 Doyle, ‘The Land of Mist’, *The Strand Magazine*, (October 1925), 332.

53 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 23.

54 *Ibid.*, 332.

55 *Ibid.*, 334.

56 Doyle, ‘The Land of Mist’, *The Strand Magazine* (November 1925), 442.

ment.⁵⁷ The end of the world, he had warned, was imminent. ‘But you don’t take it seriously, Ned, do you?’, she asks. ‘Look at the solid old earth of England. Look at the great hotel and the people of the Leas, and the stodgy morning papers, and all the settled order of a civilized land. Do you really think that anything could come to destroy it all?’⁵⁸ Here as elsewhere, the tangibility of the workaday world which Doyle has laboured so hard to establish is no salve against the great void that lies ahead and around the current moment.

A fascinating manuscript deletion suggests that Doyle himself had concerns about the potentially nihilistic implications of this ominously obscure scene. Malone, although inclined to credit Miromar’s dire predictions of ‘war, famine, pestilence, earthquake, flood, tidal waves—all ending in peace and glory unutterable’,⁵⁹ remains confident in the novel’s finale that his romantic bond with Enid will inoculate them against its tribulations. Enid, however, seems less convinced, and as she watches ‘a lurid, angry glow’ on the horizon, she shudders.⁶⁰ The novel’s print version follows this moment with Malone’s immediate reassurance: ‘One thing we have learned is that two souls, where real love exists, go on and on without a break throughout the spheres. Why, then, should you and I fear death, or anything which life and death can bring?’⁶¹ Yet in the manuscript, it is Enid who speaks first, and her sentiments are far from comforting. ‘I am frightened’, she says.⁶² Doyle subsequently crossed out this line in bold stroke, perhaps sensing that Enid’s closing rhetorical response to Malone’s question—‘Why indeed?’—was not sufficient to tame the horror augured here.⁶³ The spiritualist future which Doyle had touted as beautiful and satisfying, as countering the grinding despair of post-War, post-pandemic life, here terrifies even one of its most gifted percipients. How much more unsettling might it have been for those readers outside of Enid and Edward’s protective erotic ménage who had, quite literally, been shown nothing to inspire them

57 Miromar’s visions seems to have some basis the Doyle family’s own home seances, in which their spirit channel Pheneas had on March 8, 1923 announced: ‘I fear the world is hopeless. Even after the fearful war, humanity is no better. It must change, and a new world be built up on real Christianity.’ See Doyle, *Pheneas Speaks* (1927).

58 Doyle, ‘The Land of Mist’, *The Strand Magazine* (March 1926), 294.

59 *Ibid.*, 294.

60 *Ibid.*, 294.

61 *Ibid.*, 294.

62 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Land of Mist*, (unpublished manuscript, 1925), holograph. Now held in private collection, this manuscript was auctioned by Christie’s in London in July 2020. The author of this article was able to view and photograph the manuscript there prior to its sale.

63 *Ibid.*, 294.

with similar hope? Here are no Swedenborgian celestial mansions, no afterlife maps, regions, and interplanetary zones of the type so favoured by American spiritualists such as Hudson Tuttle and Andrew Jackson Davis. Instead, Doyle replaces the visual certainty, realist verisimilitude, and urban cartographic style on which his fictional project is premised with a vacant grey space from which the dead never fully emerge, or perhaps do not exist; with Lovecraftian purple tentacles of apocalyptic import.

4 Conclusion: Biography, Belief, and the Aesthetic

The reading I have just offered of Doyle's *The Land of Mist*, as a novel that simultaneously installs and undoes the realist representational mechanisms on which its explicit conversion project relies, is not intended to, nor could be, definitive. Other critics will read it through different hermeneutic lenses and against other contexts. Nor is it designed to be wilfully perverse, desperately seeking to work against the grain of Doyle's well-established spiritualist belief to further the agenda of a contemporary literary-critical sensibility that favours dissonance over coherence. Rather, it suggests that belief, biography, and aesthetic expression are not always or necessarily synchronized within the context of literary occulture. For that reason, it would also be premature to attribute the representational tension within *The Land of Mist* to an actual and hitherto undetected crisis of faith of Doyle's part, although such a possibility cannot be ruled out. Seemingly straightforward in its emic position and popularizing ambitions, the narrative reveals on closer inspection complexities that would be lost to a wholly biographical approach.

There can be little doubt that Doyle wanted his novel to be read through the same emphasis on authorial experience and belief now dominant within literary esotericism studies, that he self-consciously framed the serial's episodes as only lightly fictionalized version of real experiences and beliefs formed beyond the periodical page, and verified by outside witnesses. Yet there can also be little question that the formal and generic strategies he adopts here, whether intentionally or not, contradict this aspiration to testimonial transparency. Even in its most popular and commercial forms, literature, as *The Land of Mist* reveals, is always more than just a passive receptacle for achieved conviction, never just a predictable effect of discernible biographical cause.

As scholars of western esotericism continue to recognize, and even celebrate, the role of fiction in transmitting, hybridizing, and originating the traditions they study, they must keep this flexibility and unpredictability of aesthetic forms, whether popular or *avant garde*, in mind. To say this is not to call

for an end to biographical criticism, but rather for a more nuanced deployment of it, one that rigorously defends rather than assumes the applicability of direct authorial experience to the literary output of even the most stalwart and confirmed of occult believers. An excellent example of this care can be found in Aren Roukema's recent *Esotericism and Narrative* (2018), a groundbreaking study which takes seriously and recognizes for the first time the significant influence of British author Charles Williams' esoteric experience on his fantastical fiction. Rather than treating this transmission from practice to page as automatic, given, or universal, Roukema first establishes through historical contextualization that 'the likelihood of revealing crucial aspects of biography and personal philosophy via ... the products of authorship are perhaps more enhanced in Williams's case than in that of most any other writer of fiction.'⁶⁴ As such, the 'clear danger of authorial fallacy' which Roukema recognizes as a risk of exclusively biographical interpretation is offset or at least acknowledged;⁶⁵ here is no one-size-fits-all model which suggests that modern occultists, playful, ambivalent, and changeable in their public professions of heterodox identity, suddenly and *en masse* fall into deadly earnest as they encode their numinous experience into fiction. In many ways contrasting cases, Doyle and Williams are valuable for esotericism studies scholars in their indication of the vastly divergent ways in which emic belief and occultural practice can inform literary expression, and with outcomes that a naïve recourse to authorial intention or assumption of ideological neutrality will not help us to see. Our understanding of the complexity of esotericism's literary face will only grow as we amplify the canons, authors, and, most importantly, interpretive methods through we approach it.

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64 Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative*, 24.

65 *Ibid.*, 23.

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